



HENRY MATISSE A COOL LIFE

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Philip Gerald

Philip Gerald and the joy of living

In the tale of 20th century art, Henri Matisse occupied a mythical place: in 1905 he starred, along with Derain, Vlaminck and company, in a sonorous scandal with an exhibition held at the Paris Salon d'Automne. His paintings were wild in the eyes of an audience that was still digesting the abandonment of traditional academic standards. An art critic baptized them with the term *les fauves* (the wild beasts) for their exalted and autonomous use of colour. However, as historian John Elderfield has pointed out, "the naming of beasts is the most unfortunate description of these artists we have had to make." In reality, Fauvism was a movement that, far from establishing a new paradigm, tried to encompass and synthesize recent post-impressionist methods. Furthermore, Matisse never wanted to problematize art as the later *avant-gardes* did and, from 1907, his work detached itself from the excessive to adopt a more classical form. This continuous tension between *avant-garde* and conservatism is precisely one of the most interesting contributions to the French painter's career.

Philip Gerald's new works point directly to the figure of Matisse, although we are not facing a tribute, nor an ironic rereading. Gerald is interested in the capabilities of new technological tools to transform our ways of seeing, and how these tools operate when applied to emblematic works of high culture. This gesture, which seems like a mere irreverent game, actually hides a lucid reflection: if art has always been a "virtual reality", that is, a production of possible worlds. Is not the digital field the perfect territory for a current conception of the plastic image? In fact, Gerald problematizes this issue when he transfers his digital compositions to the traditional pictorial support: his figures seem to have been digitally elaborated through a precarious image editor; however, his transfer to the canvas seems to consequently deal with a legitimization of his work as an undeniable work of art.

Just as Matisse established a game of tensions between tradition and the *avant-garde*, Gerald proposes a constant tug-of-war between two extremes: on the one hand, the pictorial heritage that the image places on a tangible support and, on the other, the overflowing irruption of a digital universe distributed through the new connectivity devices. But it is not necessary that we take this dialectic too seriously: the artist himself has pointed out that his artistic project has a great deal of playful strategy and that, above high theoretical interpretations, there is a claim in the work of the useless. But this should not be read as a mere gesture of disaffection or disenchantment; on the contrary, the artist connects with the idea that Nuccio Ordine raised in his essay *The Usefulness of the Useless*, where he pointed out the urgent need for a rebellion against the productivist imagery that today dominate all areas of culture and education.

On View: 25 Sept - 6 November
Opening Reception: Friday 25 Sept. 17:00 / 23:00h
Opening Times: Tuesday - Friday 17:00 - 20:30h



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What then remains from Matisse in Gerald's current work? Only a starting point to continue thinking about an image capable of generating an aesthetic emotion, but no longer protected by that deeply normative "joy of living" that the Frenchman developed in his paintings. Gerald transforms the characters into ambiguous figures in his genre, changes the smile on their faces for exaggerated gestures of sadness, and modifies the exquisite fauvist colour temperature through fluorescent tones. Because today, the joy of living can only be thought of as one more cliché than the many that today's entertainment society offers us.

Carlos Delgado Mayordomo
Art Critic.

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