

Will Heinrich. "A Portrait of the Artist at Work: Nicola Tyson at Friedrich Petzel Gallery," *The Observer*, September 13, 2011.

A Portrait of the Artist at Work

Nicola Tyson at Friedrich Petzel Gallery

By Will Heinrich 9/13 8:12pm



A painting by Nicola Tyson. (Photo: Friedrich Petzel Gallery)

The characters that Nicola Tyson paints begin as quick sketchbook drawings and look like soap figurines who've taken too many baths. Their extremities are reduced to basic indications and look like the ovals from a drawing class. But while drawing-class ovals support the exploration of some particular model's anatomy, Ms. Tyson's ovals are bent primarily on exploring themselves, their own curves and crossings. There is an anatomy being portrayed, but it's the artist's own, the force of her tendons, her arm's range of motion. The mystery of cognition takes the place of ex nihilo creation.

Ms. Tyson's new show consists of eight large, strikingly bright, apparently flat paintings, as well as nine small sculptures in Petzel Gallery's second space next door. The paintings' first impression of flatness

—created by duotone backgrounds like bicolor flags and large, unmixed planes of color—is a feint, but a double one, because the careful modeling that slowly reveals itself is so clearly motivated by the sensual pleasures of the brush. Illusions of depth are secondary: it's all in the moving line.

Figure Creeping, a nearly life-size dwarf with one swollen and one emaciated leg, in a pale blue housedress and oversize forest-green yarmulke, wearing tiny red driving gloves, a mahogany wig and a face like over-chewed bubble gum, is limping in green loafers down a tilted pink street. The exaggerated perspective of the tilt serves to emphasize that this creep has been put on stage: the painting is a razor-thin cross section of the process of its own making.

Every other painting in the show has two figures (although all the figures were originally drawn separately). *Figure With a Sphinx* shows a Medieval sensorium in the form of a preternaturally old little boy with receding blond hair and a disembodied head, played by a chihuahua, on an

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upthrusting tongue of an obelisk. The boy has one occluded blue eye and the indication of a sideways little red mouth with flesh-colored teeth. His arms hang too long, and if he does have hands, we can't see them. Standing in front of a yellow wall, the boy with a rakish turquoise shirt, the sphinx with a bulldog's swagger, they're Body and Mind as New Wave gangsters. But who are they fighting—each other, or the artist?

Two Figures Touching are not. The one on the left has a face, but the sleeves of his green sweater have no openings, and therefore no hands. The one on the right does have hands, but the purple stocking pulled over them is also covering his head. The one has pants with checks and dots; the other a shirt with vertical stripes. This is the method, but what can it do if the player is handless and the referee is blind? It can only follow the line.

Figure With Tree alone shows figures that haven't been frozen by the viewer's eyes. The mushroom-headed, spindly-armed, giant-legged maniac on the left is moving; the multiply pink, venous tree on the right, which performs the incredible trick of looking equally like both male and female sexual organs, is moving; even the ground and the deep green sky are moving. The false dichotomies of *Figure Creeping* and *Two Figures Touching* are fused into mystical unities.

In *Two Figures on Orange*, a figure in marine-blue shirt and green hip boots, with a wedge-shape hand made from fingers moving too fast to see, thrusts its pelvis to the viewer's left. Its head, like an exposed brain, demonstrates the exponential power of crossing lines. One line is practically nothing; one crossing makes only a point. But multiple crossing loops make form, just as moments make time and gestures life. The other figure, a roosterlike red heart with a catcher's mitt face and plump calves in green and pink hose, turns to the right. They pose like rock stars in front of a rosy, Dutch-orange wall. *Figure With Tree*, by contrast, looks overheated; and Ms. Tyson's painting does sometimes risk looking like a decoration rather than elaboration of its underlying drawing; but *Two Figures on Orange* brings everything together. We see the simple beauty of the gesture, moving like an artery through the center of the work, sustaining the flesh around it without being diluted or reduced.

The sculptures next door sit at about working height, each the size of two fists. With one black bronze exception, they're all made from white Crayola Model Magic and air dried. Loosely jointed and coiling, they follow the same method as Ms. Tyson's drawings: ostensibly modeling birds, they really depict hands making things that look like hands making things. Interaction with the medium is the subject of the interaction; the pressure of fingers leaves bumps like knuckles.

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While the motionlessness of her painted figures serves to emphasize their artificiality—that is, to draw attention to the primacy of depiction over what is depicted—the birds' poses are more innocent. *Baby Bird* looks like a duck with a new inheritance sailing happily into Bloomingdale's; you can almost see the artist shaping the unfinished fold of her beak. *Veiled Bird*, a serpentine swan with separately affixed nipples and a washcloth over her eyes, wears its art history lightly. Like a lover posing in the bathroom, it says, "Look, I'm Leda *and* the swan."

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