

MATTHEW BROWN LOS ANGELES

Kent O'Connor

Close the Door Behind You

June 12 — July 13, 2021

There's friction between the joke (the punchline) and the sincerity (the laborious, beautiful rendering) of Kent O'Connor's paintings. It's as though there are two people at work: the capricious, droll, and very cool stage manager, and then the fevered, desperately earnest, eager-to-please laborer.

The paintings might risk coming off as sullen or aloof, except for that O'Connor's obsessive observation constantly undercuts any attempt to play it cool. Even still, the paintings sometimes imply an off-stage foil: the viewer feels conscripted to play the part of a "Disappointed Daddy" or "Scoffing Critic," and the painting is here to shut those voices up once and for all (which would be an easy project to support if one didn't have to play the villain). Although it's antagonistic, there's something so sympathetic and recognizable about this defensive attitude—the little heartbreak of at once bristling and also nuzzling up for attention, like a teenager.

More often, Kent's paintings simply delight. The joke of it all, whatever it is, balloons outwards, becoming more wordless and mysterious, giving viewers permission to enjoy themselves and have a laugh. One feels taken-care-of because he's already done so much looking, and brought out so much lovely light. All the edges of all the shapes have something special going on, and an inner glow is barely contained by the people's thin skin. Moreover, nothing is perfectly resolved, no matter how finely detailed the image may be. The paintings all still have something sketchy and evident about them, which is generous, like leaving the door ajar.

The large still life is the most slapstick of all the works in this show: the alien mug alongside those gorgeous orchids. The five lemons and one reflected lemon, and the distorted wash bucket with the rainbow that matches its handle. The "Trashed" foam hand. The specificity and absurdity of the collection of objects, each obsessively rendered in its own private space, provokes viewers to search for some symbolic or referential meaning that likely just isn't there, delivering the artist (one imagines) the satisfying "gotcha" moment he sometimes seems to crave. In this way, the objects are held together first by their relation to the artist in his role as the trolling set director, a truculent cartoonist tossing off comic sketches. But the set is further unified simply because each object, whatever it might be, has been illuminated by the high-beam of tender and intense attention that O'Connor turns on anything he paints. However twisted, dumb, or blasé the still life was when laid out as a drawing, the painting wrestles it back towards sincerity and reality. Like the wormy, stretched-out rusty nail that can be more than just a gag because of its methodically matched color and the little bursts of light that shoot out beneath its bottom edge. One wonders, however, about the cost of wrapping such exuberance under so much restraint: the tiny self portrait of the artist hiding or maybe crushed underneath the table is a vulnerable and forthright expression of some kind of suffering or at least exhaustion.

The discrepancy between the paintings' dry comedy and their devotional execution is clearest in the still lifes. But there's something similar, though more emotional, in the portraits. For instance, there's a feeling of death in the portrait of Chase Wilson: the room is filled with a leaden light, and it opens out to a somber brown sky and setting sun. The few bedraggled leaves of the plant next to him are browning and withering at the edges. And the sitter's tender forearm seems horribly exposed, as though he's resigned to wait for some coming violence. At the same time, the portrait has an irrepressible vitality: the light shining through his skin wherever it's in shadow, the iridescent crystal, the bunched muscles and swollen veins. And

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the space itself is lively, wrapping around O'Connor's eye to let a viewer see a little more than should be possible.

The portrait of Antonia Kuo also struggles to contain contradictory energy. The eerily lifeless marionette of a figure shows the effects of being situated in a scene that is almost toxic with concentrated attention. Kuo has been fossilized by the intense pressure coming off the building behind her, buried alive by the thousands of individually colored bricks that surround her. It seems like she's being tugged by outside forces into an approximation of a human gesture that, although evocative, somehow doesn't quite exist in real life. But despite all this, the painting as a whole still gives off the sharp liveliness that is found in different forms throughout the show. Here, the vitality comes from the paint itself and from the little off-hand jokes that litter the scene. The acid green of the absurd alien socks, the violet sheen on the floor. The way the light spills off the top of the heater, and how the foot of the small table evaporates into the floor. A sketchy black cat stares mutely across from the brick building, a little too aware of the viewer, almost an avatar for Kuo. Despite the fascistic detail that is the default setting in this piece, there is an irrepressible joie de vivre poking out here and there, breaking the frozen surface with a yelling, hanging-on-by-your-fingernails kind of energy.

These portraits and self portraits express sadness or maybe an uncomfortable boredom, the figures held in suspension by the process and their relation to the artist. But these images also record and respond to the reverential attention O'Connor gives to everything he paints. Because what remains basically true is that paying very close attention is a caring thing to do. Has there ever been another foam hand lavished with so much attention, to the point that it becomes sort of sanctified, a kind of relic? And what happens to a person when that kind of attention is turned on them, when they're framed by that kind of care?

Text by Harper Keehn

Kent O'Connor lives and works in Los Angeles, CA. The artist earned his BFA from Maryland Institute of College of Art, Baltimore, MD and MFA from Yale University School of Art, New Haven, CT. Recent solo and two-person exhibitions include *New Paintings*, Diane Rosenstein, Los Angeles, CA (2018); *Flower Paintings, The Study*, New Haven, CT (2017). Selected group exhibitions include *Open Air*, Tong Art Advisory, The Hamptons, NY (2020); *It Seems So Long Ago*, Matthew Brown Los Angeles, CA (2020); *Seven Year Itch*, Diane Rosenstein, Los Angeles, CA (2019); *Way Out Now*, Diane Rosenstein, Los Angeles, CA (2018); *Oily Doily*, BBQ LA, Los Angeles, CA (2016).