Why Paintings Work

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Jorge Queiroz, *Different Trains #1* (2016), oil and acrylic on canvas, 180×160 cm

In an art materials shop, you can buy canvases in portrait or landscape formats. The portrait format is oriented vertically, like *Homo erectus*, while the landscape format has the horizon as its natural axis. Even before the canvases leave the shop, before an artist applies the first brushstroke, the vocabulary used to describe them seems to predetermine how the canvases will be used. The terminology relies on the coordinates of looking and on the central perspective that we are used to. However, not every artist will follow its directions and turn a portrait-format canvas into a portrait.

Jorge Queiroz's *Different Trains* series redefines the portrait format through further subdivisions; each work is divided into different sections that are square, round or rectangular. In one painting in the series, a horizontally painted yellow field gives a sense of landscape, separating a green patch of earth from dark 'clouds'. In another painting, a green circular shape creates a perspective that draws the viewer's eye to a vanishing point like an opening in the painting.

Based in Lisbon, Queiroz produces paintings that usually feature a single figure. For example, a man who is bent over a table and appears to be working on a painting or drawing. The square room where he works is depicted in the bottom right corner of the painting. Maybe this person is the one who created the scenes we are looking at, or maybe he forms a figurative signature added by the artist.

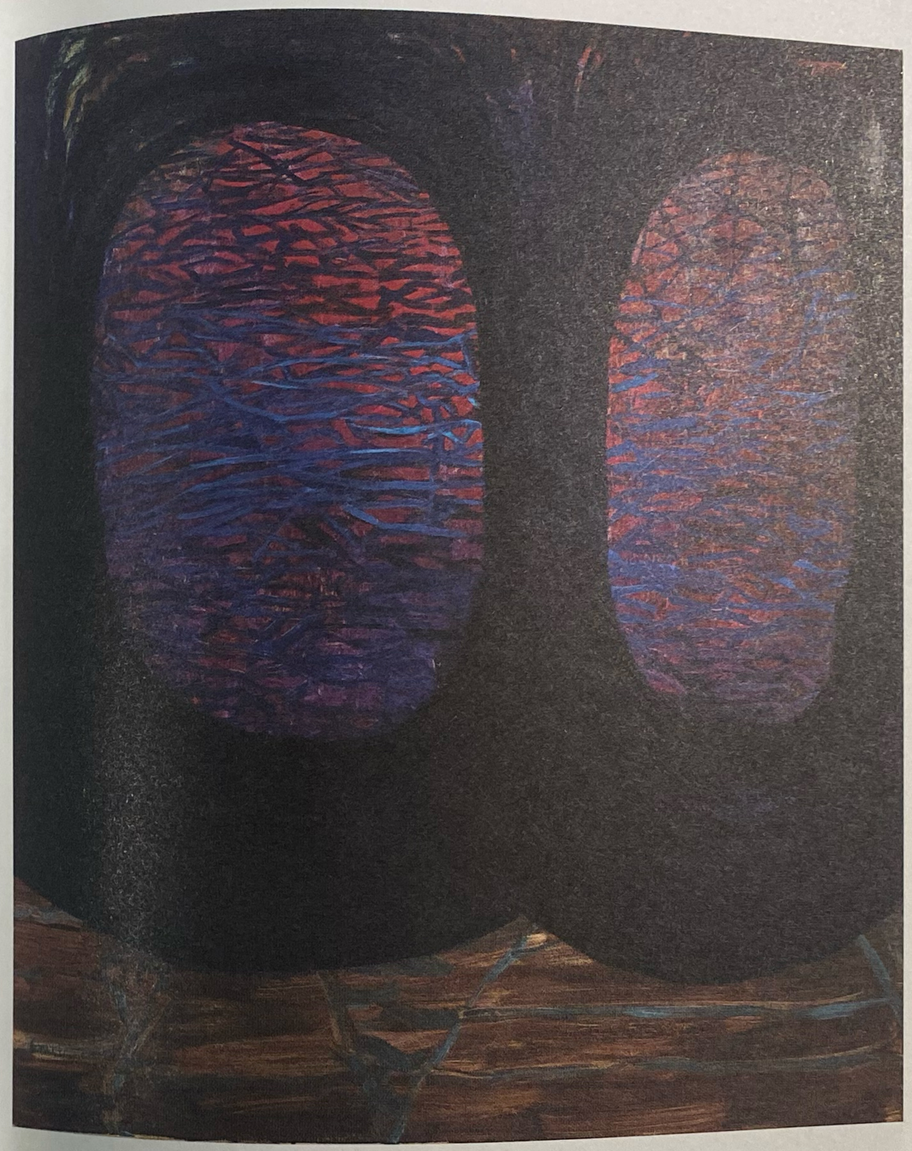
In Queiroz's paintings, elements from the outer world are connected to inner experiences. And in creating these connections, the construction of spaces within the painting plays an important role. The perspective in these works may seem improbable at times, but we can see it in the different worlds created within a single painting. If you take a few steps back, away from the works, you get the impression that the landscapes coincide with what could be called inner states. In their own free way, these paintings are landscapes and portraits of the psyche.

Veronika Hilger, a painter who works in Munich and is discussed in a later chapter, doesn't know Jorge Queiroz. She is part of a younger

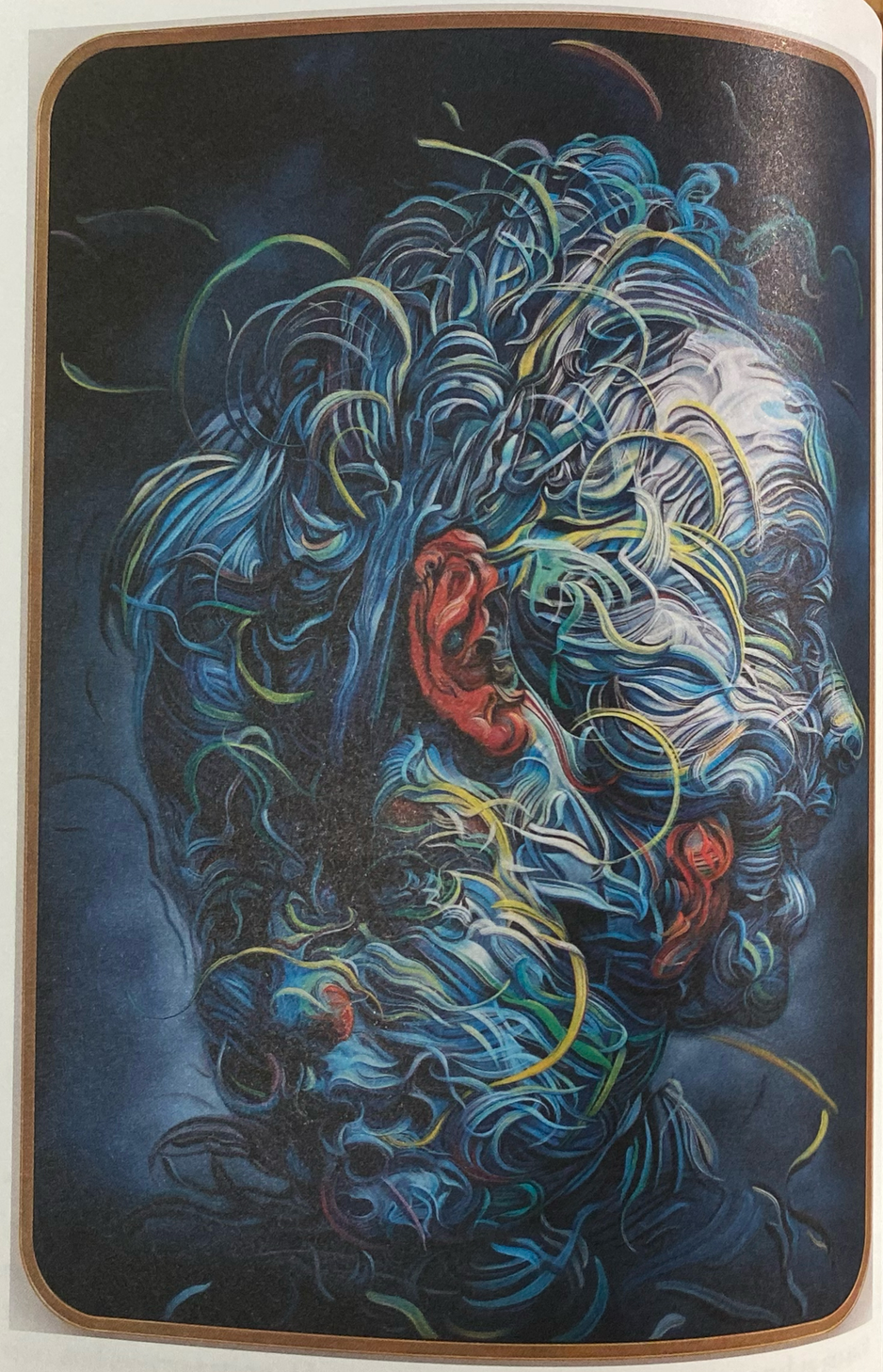
generation, but the figuration in her work is similarly dynamic. She, too, works with windows within the frames of her paintings. In Hilger's case, this means that there are various ways to interpret the pictorial motifs in her work. They are ambiguous. And she, too, mixes portraits and landscapes, although her mixes are mostly of landscapes and still lifes. In Hilger's work, landscapes are often set up vertically, but they are landscapes—or something similar—nonetheless.

There are many artists, including some discussed in this book, who do similar things. Such as Fiona Rae, whose work balances between something very specific, recognisable, and something that remains open. The same is true for Rezi van Lankveld from Amsterdam. Both are artists who use different methods to invoke the unconscious, creating work that features fluid connections and activates the viewer's capacity for association. Both create paintings that provide a rich projection screen for the viewer. They take us to the edge of what is still recognisable and remind us of the world as we know it, to the point where something else begins, where another space opens up. It is a pivotal point in looking, a springboard for associations. The work of the painters mentioned here is diverse, but based on a similar principle. It features suggestive figuration that wants to do justice to the mobile nature of life, and to how the world is perceived. While illustrations aim to be unambiguous, depicting a meaning that many people will understand, ambivalent figuration tries to achieve the opposite; it aims for as much room for interpretation and implicit content as possible.

Another artist who can be added to this list is Glenn Brown. Since his appearance on the London art stage in the 1990s, he has been engaged in a constant and imaginary conversation with his predecessors—travelling through (and at home in) art history. In doing so, he seems unafraid to scrutinise what is known and respected, and to treat it with a pinch of salt. His repertoire includes stylistic deviation and exaggeration. He is a contemporary mannerist and is so out of conviction. 'Actually, the classic image of man is still dominant, even in contemporary art,' Brown remarked when I met him at an opening. He seemed to be trying to convey that he doesn't take this



Veronika Hilger, *Untitled* (2016), oil on canvas, 150×130 cm



Glenn Brown, *Lactate* (*Midwinter*) (2020), oil and acrylic on panel in frame, 206×146.8×5 cm, courtesy of the artist and Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin / Paris / London © Glenn Brown. Photograph: def image

for granted, and that he found a niche for his work in deviance. His art does depict the classical ideal of beauty, but does so provocatively, manifesting itself as an exaggeration or excrescence of it. His is a kind of figuration that proliferates.

Looking at a painting by Brown is like watching a peacock unfurl its tail. It is full of proud beauty, carefully orchestrated colours and, within the repeating patterns, the swirling lines, there are many small eyes hidden in the paint. Sometimes, Brown's shapes are meant to represent eyes, but they are often just shiny curves that briefly demand attention within the dense figuration, establishing anchor points in the excessive play of lines and colours.

The primarily green *Bring on the Headless Horses*, which depicts a nude woman seated atop a Herculean figure, is an example of how various art-historical sources often come together in one work. The figures are intertwined as basically everything in Brown's work is entangled, is a tangle. The painting is based on works by two seventeenth- and eighteenth-century artists but also refers to Brown's own earlier work. Everything curls and swirls, making figures occasionally take shape in the viewer's perception to then disappear again; the image never comes to rest. The same is true for *Lactate* (*Midwinter*). It is interesting to see how Brown's works vary, ranging from light and airy to melancholic or tormented, while sharing the same restless compositional principles. Brown manages to evoke a restless dynamism in a medium that is often considered stagnant and static. The many hours of painstaking labour invested in achieving this result have their counterpart in the time it takes to fully 'read' and experience the painting. There is no single image; there are many brought together in one painting, under the pretext of depicting a single figure. This is what makes Brown's figuration ambivalent. It leads to paintings that work because they absorb the ambiguity of the world and give it a place.