

Times and Dreams Past: *Form and Fancy* at fordPROJECT April 17th – June 1st

By Grant Pooke, FRSA

Form and Fancy is Valentina Battler's first major solo-exhibition in the US featuring a range of ink on paper and watercolour compositions on Xuan and Yupo paper. The selection of work is ambitious in scope, spanning genre scenes, vignettes (contemporary and more historical), meditations, portraits and fantasy images. As the exhibition's title suggests, Battler's aesthetic deploys metaphor, association and allusion to signify a range of expressive and imaginative states. As the artist has recently noted of her working practice:

It does not matter *what* I paint, mostly it is my feeling at the moment, which is expressed through "real" images. Romanticism reflects my nature; that's how I live day-by-day. An impressionistic appearance gives me chance not to finish a painting.ⁱ

Similarly, several of the images on display have a 'gestalt' feel to them – suggesting an engagement with a state of mind or emotion. As Battler has noted, her compositions are responses conceived 'through the looking glass' – the working out of a personal or emotional state. Whilst some of these images use genre subjects or landscape as the originating motifs, others are more specific in their historical and social referencing. But throughout the selection of exhibited work, the style and iconography signatures a highly distinctive and recognisable *oeuvre*.

For example, the composition on Xuan paper, *Pink and Blue Paris* (2006) depicts an elegant and fashionably attired woman seated at a cafe table with a cigarette holder, lengthened perhaps to evoke a palette brush. In this image, the implicit references are culturally specific, although distinct in time. One reading might suggest a moment of urban reverie associated, perhaps, with Manet's paintings of Baron Haussmann's Paris. This connection is more explicitly evoked by two further works: the ink and watercolour composition *In a Theater* (2001) and *In the Tuileries Garden* (2012), formerly titled *Promenade*. Both the milieu and title of these examples suggests a backward glance to the work of the French Impressionists, and particularly, with the second example, two urban vistas recorded by the style's most well known exponent, Claude Monet.

The first, *The Garden of the Princess* (1867), now in the collection of Ohio's Oberlin College, adopts a vantage point later used by commercial photographers, with the neo-classical vista of the Paris Pantheon in the background.ⁱⁱ Less remarked, on the extreme left margin of the canvas, however, are the buildings associated with Haussmann's remodelling of the French capital which the artist painted from the windows of the Louvre in 1876. The second painting which Battler's example appears to reference in title is Monet's *The Tuileries Gardens* (1876). Now held in the Musée Marmottan, Paris, the painting features a middle-distance view of the formal pleasure grounds in which aerial perspective is used to suggest the vague delineation of motifs in the further distance. In Battler's example, however, the emphasis is on the figure and the background is abstract with only the title indicating the art historical connection.

The other recognisable period references of *Pink and Blue Paris* and *In the Tuileries Garden* look forward to a recognisably twentieth century milieu shared by other works on display such as *In a Theater* and *Flamenco* (2011). These are more distinctly modern in feel and dress, suggesting perhaps the inter-war lifestyles of the European demi-monde or a decadent bohemia that we glimpse in the pages of *The Great Gatsby* or in the novels of Thomas Mann. But whether the vista is that of French Impressionism or a more recent cultural setting, implicit is the foregrounding of a motif, idea or recollection.

In *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (1983), the American art historian, critic and painter, Svetlana Alpers, asserted a fundamental identity and distinction for Dutch genre painting. For Alpers, the defining quality of the latter was descriptive with images capturing a mood, moment or the particularity of a lived experience. This was to be contrasted with the work of painters associated with the Italian Renaissance who emphasised narrative action and ‘istoria’ as the defining attributes of their work. Although Battler’s aesthetic implies a narrative (often stated in the chosen title of a piece), it is as emotional and felt responses to chosen subjects that her practice can be more clearly understood and situated. In a previous review of Battler’s practice, I’ve used the term ‘cadence’ to describe her approach to motif, and the characterisation holds true in this selection of work.

Battler’s background as a classically trained pianist, instructor and graduate of the St Petersburg State Conservatory is in evidence in various ways throughout this selection of images. The most explicit references are in exhibited works *Mozart* (2011), *Swan Lake* (2010) and the portrait of the early nineteenth century Italian composer and virtuoso violinist (Nicolo) *Paganini* (2012), famous for his final *Caprice No. 24 in A minor*. In this and other examples, the angling of the composition and the choreography of lines deliberately suggest the force of the musical score and the physical passion of its delivery. As Battler notes, ‘Paganini has so many ‘faces’ in his music that the theme is endless’ enabling the ‘emotional appearance of the musician (to be suggested) through technique.’ This device is used more indirectly in other compositions such as *War and Peace of a Samurai* (2011) and *Fight* (2012). In the latter, the motif which gives the fighting birds definition and implied threat, is not the act of aggression itself or even the predatory pre-contact stalking, but the trailing vectors and arabesques of the tail feathers which, together with the accented crests and claws, are really the principal focus of the composition.

The artist’s Russian background and heritage is hybridised with Japanese cultural influences to provide the title of *War and Peace of a Samurai*, whilst other compositions depict daily life and ancient customs including *Games* (2011), *The First Snow* (2011) and *Japanese Garden* (2012). But some of the most emotive works are the simply conceived compositions which touch upon themes of stoicism and endurance. *Old Bones* (2012) depicts the dis-embodied heads and hands of an elderly couple, one of whom illuminates the gloom with a single tallow candle. Whether they are sharing vigil for a long awaited homecoming or their own passing is unclear. A *memento mori* theme also underpins *Autumn Apple* (2012) in which an elderly man plucks, with both wonderment and reverence, a single fruit from a tree.

In these works what is envisioned is a universal and almost abstract state of hope, stoicism and in-exact preparedness experienced as part of the human condition. But stoicism was, and perhaps remains in part, that most supremely Russian of all attributes. In modern history, it was experienced in particular intensity by the soldiers and civilians of the Great Patriotic War 1941-45. Given Battler's heritage, one is left wondering whether the hinterland for some of these meditative and spectral images is Konstantin Simonov's famous prose poem of the Stalingradskaya, *Wait For Me* (1941). A short verse extract runs:

Wait for me, and I'll come back!
 ...When they tell you off by heart
 That you should forget.../
 Wait! And do not drink with them!
 Wait until the end!

In the composition, *Moonlight* (2011), a peasant, bent and straining with the effort, hauls a heavily laden handcart to an unknown destination. Simply observed and composed, it recalls some of the socially-based genre scenes associated with earlier Russian painters like Ilya Repin and Konstantin Savitsky. The former is well known for his painting of back-breaking toil, *The Barge Haulers on the Volga* (1870-3). There is a deliberate, vernacular feel to several of these symbolic images which recall even earlier native and non-western Russian art forms. For example, the shallow pictorial space and linear design of *Ennui* (2012) recalls the simple techniques of the *lubok* or peasant woodcut. The figure itself suggests some of the stylised and elongated forms painted by Pavel Filonov, one of the distinctive members of the post-Revolutionary Russian avant-garde. These associations are, however, indirect and allusive. It might be fairer to suggest that they are 'felt' rather than articulated.

The themes of remembrance and resurrection are also recognisable in *Tulips* (2012), *Parrot Tulips* (2012), *Orchid* (2012), *Poppies* (2012) and *Chrysanthemum, chrysanthemum, chrysanthemum* (2011). The white version of this flower is variously associated in Japanese culture with lamentation, the Imperial seal and the Supreme Order of the Chrysanthemum which is a personal Japanese honour awarded by the Emperor. Tulips also have a range of ceremonial connotations as the Persian symbol of perfect love and the dual emblem of Holland and the Turkish House of Osman.ⁱⁱⁱ The recurrent motif of the flower arrangement underlines the sense of close observation and a meticulous regard for the formal configurations of nature which we see in *Waterfall* (2011) and *Heaven on Earth* (2011).

A range of Battler's compositions use the high quality synthetic paper with the trade name Yupo. Fashioned from smooth, waterproof and stain-resistant polypropylene, within contemporary art practice it is widely employed with silkscreen, acrylic and watercolour media. Commercially available in translucent and high white forms, its non-porous surface is designed to assist the clarity and precise outlines of printed ink so that the printed medium appears to sit 'on' the surface rather than soak 'into' it. Accidentally discovered by Battler, she has customised its use to develop new techniques with a brush only used for fine lines. As she notes:

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I use the same technique as I invented in "my touch" Chinese method...using a chemical reaction to make ink alive and reach an impressionistic effect. I paint by fingers, palm and some clusters and practically do not use a brush.

Yupo paper is typically light but quite rigid, although the compositions are framed and placed behind UV proof matt coating with space bars used to provide air between the acrylic and image. The process of making – the use of sudden impulse and imagination can be ‘unpredictable.’ For Battler, these images ‘lend themselves – technically and emotionally.’ In these works, tempo and cultural influence are determined not just by the expressiveness of the subject matter but through the choice of material – whether Xuan or Yupo paper:

Chinese painting is very classical ‘music’ for me – with its phrases, articulation, accentuation, legato, staccato..., but painting on Yupo looks like Jazz with theme and expression in it.

It is perhaps then, through the cadence and rhythms of a musical score that this exhibition might be more attentively viewed; from *fugue* to *caprice*, from free form jazz to *fantasia*. But whilst these images convey the impressionistic and the improvised, they also speak to a profound and deliberate cultural identity – and distinctness.

ⁱ All artist quotes are taken from email correspondence with the author, April 2nd 2012.

ⁱⁱ See: *Impressionism*, James H. Rubin, Phaidon, 2004, p98.

ⁱⁱⁱ See: *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*, J.C. Cooper, Thames & Hudson, 1979, p182.