

# Tightrope Walk: the show that sums up art in 67 paintings

As De Keyser's last works brood at the David Zwirner, a sweeping account of modern painting from Chris Ofili's sexual fireworks to Lucian Freud's meaty closeups lights up London's White Cube

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They are small things, clustered in an order that is like an interrupted thought. Hung just as they were in his studio, Raoul De Keyser's last paintings now occupy a wall at David Zwirner gallery in London. De Keyser died in 2012 at the age of 82. A few marks, some strange bent shapes; some are barely paintings at all.

One has a small piece of thinly painted canvas wrapped round a bit of board. The canvas stops before the bottom, like the hem of a dress. It is called Underskirt. Desultory monochromes, a pallid beach and water, lines like furrows hurrying across empty spaces - all hang together in a jostling group. One shows a bottle of the painter's solvent. Another is a schematic drawing (the sort you might make on a restaurant napkin) of the route over the Rialto Bridge in Venice. It might equally be a figure.

These paintings appear in a state of suspension, between impetuous beginnings and a deferred conclusion. Whatever De Keyser began with - the art he admired, his environment, the sky, the track of the brush from one place to another (like the walks he took around the village where he lived for most of his life) - he took it somewhere else.

The rest of the exhibition comprises key paintings from the last decade of the painter's life. Some stare back at you, emphatic and unreasonable. Every little stab of the brush, like a kind of quiet violence, has its place. Occasionally we find direct references to the place where De Keyser lived and worked: the banisters on his staircase, the window locks and the monkey puzzle tree in the garden. His paintings become like a membrane through which the world ebbs and flows, a permeable skin between the exterior and the mind.

It seems a long time since distinctions between the figurative and the abstract presented us with confusion and difficulty. Nowadays, we take such differences in our stride. Figurative painting has been changed by abstraction, unavoidably and irretrievably, just as it has by photography and cinema, by advertising, the internet and other kinds of art-making. We think about images, and about abstractions, differently now. You might say things have got richer, not poorer. They've certainly become more complicated.

There is a lot of complication in Tightrope Walk, a painting show curated by the US critic

and poet Barry Schwabsky at White Cube Bermondsey in London. Tightrope Walk is about figurative painting in the light of abstraction. It is filled with dancers and lovers, symbolic gatherings in the woods, beach scenes, old men masturbating, still lifes, portraits, the funny and the sinister. Once you have overcome the arresting imagery, the jumps in scale and shifting tempos, the painting takes over. Interspersed among better- and lesser-known artists hang a 1917 portrait by Matisse, two minor late Picassos, a couple of Lucian Freud paintings and a reproduction of Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*, reworked in watercolour by Duchamp himself. I take them as reminders of a different time, different values.

The exhibition could be a lesson in coexistence between different ways of making paintings, however antithetical they might once have appeared. There are no entirely abstract paintings here (though all paintings are abstractions, however concrete their subject matter). Comprising 67 paintings by 48 artists living and dead, arranged in groupings, Tightrope Walk is a kind of visual essay, with each chapter denoted by a pithy observation printed high on the walls.

All the paintings present us with images of one sort or another: paintings made directly from life and invented scenes; the direct, the contrived and the imagined. Sometimes there are arresting juxtapositions - a small 1943 still life of a gnarly shell and a pot by Giorgio Morandi, hung between two late Philip Guston paintings which might be taken as still-lifes as much as occurrences in a brooding wasteland - but the sheer number of works sweeps you along too swiftly to take much account of the niceties.

Somewhere in the exhibition's development, the title "Reinventing Presence" was changed to the snappier Tightrope Walk - which comes from an observation by Francis Bacon about his "tightrope walk between what is called figurative painting and abstraction". Now, this high-wire act seems to be taking place just a few inches above the safety net.

You could pick a million artists for a show like this, but in the end it all looks a bit arbitrary. In any case, there is no information on individual artists, some of whom, like the wonderful Bob Thompson - an African American painter and jazz musician who died of a heroin overdose in 1966 - really deserve to be better known. We first see Thompson seated in his chair in a gloomy room in 1960. It looks like he's waiting. He went on to paint gatherings of spooky figures and animals, their intense colour and silhouetted forms recalling both Arshile Gorky and the early renaissance. His paintings look relaxed and real, in their shuffling between figuration and abstraction, in a way that some more recent artists here don't.

There are some very odd things here, including Italian painter and stage designer Domenico Gnoli's fetishistic images of women's collars and braided hair, Rosa Loy's strange psycho-sexual images featuring pairs of female protagonists, the perspectively challenging works of 75-year-old Florida painter Mernet Larsen, and the chilly - and chilling - paintings of Michael Simpson. Simpson's paintings have the air of a medical or ophthalmology consultation room, and conflate eye tests with the leper's squint-holes built into medieval churches. There are no figures in his pared-down images. You have to

imagine yourself, or someone else, there. Their staged emptiness made me feel excluded, which I think is the point.

Chris Ofili's madly ambitious *It's All Over Your Body* is a floating world in which panthers circle a flaming cosmic egg, within which a man ejaculates over a woman. With its fecund, delicate bespatterings and swooning figures, this painting really stops you in your tracks and holds you. You don't so much look at it as watch it unfold. Unlike many works here, it would have been impossible without the possibilities abstraction has opened up. Georg Baselitz's solitary, ageing onanists ejaculate too. Are his two wearily bombastic paintings metaphors for the creative act, or of the artist as a spent force? They might have been called *It's All Over Your Trousers*.

Schwabsky believes that "fragmentation and the quasi-photographic closeup abstract the body". It would be difficult to describe Leigh Bowery's penis as an abstraction in Lucian Freud's 1992 image of his belly and loins. It is an unavoidable thing. But as much as Freud's brushwork cleaves to its objects, it cleaves them apart. That's where Freud's abstraction lies. It is the abstraction of someone in a room, painting. And that is where it is in De Keyser too - crossing and recrossing the border between abstraction and figuration, and between the process of making a painting and the invention of an image.

● **Tightrope Walk: Painted Images After Abstraction** is at the White Cube Bermondsey, London, until 24 January 2016. The Raoul De Keyser show *Drift* is at David Zwirner gallery, London, until 23 January.

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