

Painting history

Sarah Suzuki

Gideon Rubin is a painter of history – a complex and multivalent history that draws in equal measure on the past and the present, the known and the unknowable, the personal and the universal. It is shaped by chance, by place, by family, by beauty, by the masters who came before; it is formed by the artist's childhood in Israel, global travels, studies at the School of Visual Arts in New York and the Slade School of Fine Art in London, the galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Prado, and the pages of the *Daily Mail* and *Hello!*

During his student years, Rubin transitioned from painting models and self-portraits resolved over long studio sessions to making quick oil sketches of abandoned toys, forlorn specimens that he collected from sidewalks and thrift stores. The trajectory of his practice was altered in 2006 by a chance discovery: a collection of Victorian photo albums he found in a used bookstore in Hampstead. The amassing of vintage photographs quickly became an obsession. He bid for them on eBay, bought them from second-hand shops, and collected them at flea markets. Driving the acquisition of this material was the inherent potential that these pictures possessed. As artefacts of anonymous personal pasts, unnamed and unclaimed, they could conceivably fill the gaps in one's own incomplete history. Rubin has inherited such a legacy: the photographic record of his family of two generations earlier comprises only a few snapshots that survived the Second World War. Thus, this new archive of images offered him an act of reclamation, a possibility for completion, and the materials for reconstruction.

While Rubin's version of history draws on multiple sources, it is steadfastly centred on the human figure. His depictions, beautifully rendered and modelled, are notable for what they lack: faces. Where the visage should be, his forms have instead a blank screen, one that allows us to project our own ideas, memories, and histories onto them.

The point of origin for these pictures continues to expand, and now encompasses not only found vintage snapshots, but also reproductions in art-history textbooks and red-carpet pictures from gossip magazines. In translating the source and reconstructing the figure, an act of omission occurs: the purposeful decision to leave the facial features blank and undefined. In other instances, printed pages taken from Cultural Revolution-era Chinese film magazines, collected by the artist during a residency in China, form the substratum, a ready-made layer on which he paints, choosing what to highlight, what to keep, what to discard. Here, facelessness is an act of erasure, not omission, as he opts to eliminate or elide over the figures. These actions suggest our inability ever to capture a fully truthful account of the past. For many of the film stars depicted in these pages, celebrity was followed by 're-education' – that is, long stints at heavy labour or menial work in the countryside, designed to give them time to realign their thinking with that of Mao. In Rubin's semi-undone portraits, the incompleteness of this erased generation is acknowledged.

This trove of photographic and mass-media material has become the basis for Rubin's oeuvre, as he transfers and transcribes these fleeting images into sumptuous, enduring oil paintings, ensuring their longevity and creating documents for posterity. The landmark works of painting's great masters are retranslated into quick sketches. Ingres's 1856 *Madame Moitessier* appears in one (page 136), the intricate floral patterning of her gown reduced to quick flashes of red, blue, and yellow, but unmistakable in her languid posture. In an abbreviation of Velázquez's 1650 portrait of Pope Innocent X, the figure's watchful gaze has been effaced, but the wispy beard, the luscious red hat and vestment, and enthroned posture make the work immediately identifiable, even atop the corporate logo printed on the scrap of cardboard onto which the image has been painted.

Like these masters, Rubin understands that history is comprised not just of the events of the past, but also of the places, figures, and happenings of the present. For earlier artists, paintings of their own milieu offered the chance to comment on the events of their time. Similarly, among Rubin's small cardboards, one might recognize a 2012 image of Dominique Strauss-Kahn, former chief of the International Monetary Fund, strolling with his suit jacket hooked casually over one shoulder, perfectly relaxed despite constant blaring headlines about his insatiable sexual appetite. Or an abstracted version of another heavily circulated image of the previous year: a young Libyan rebel brandishing a golden pistol he had taken off the dead body of fallen dictator Muammar Gaddafi. With the contextual details omitted, one sees only a solitary figure in an undefined space; the crowd and the nearly cloudless blue sky are gone.

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In lieu of powerful popes, Rubin gives us fallen financial titans, and instead of society matrons and infantas, he offers contemporary celebrities like Amy Winehouse and George Clooney, captured in paparazzi snaps and on magazine covers. The artist's ability to distill an image to its essence is uncanny. Even with the features invisible, we are often struck by recognition, as a posture, a gesture, a hairstyle, a garment offer enough information to reveal an identity. He is perhaps unique among his contemporaries in his fluency in the languages of both art history and popular culture, which are woven seamlessly together in his work without a sense of hierarchy. Images from the seventeenth century and the twenty-first are rendered in the same visual language and the same elegant brushwork, creating a sense of universality and timelessness.

But there is a certain temporal shift at play, as the mechanically reproduced image is translated by the hand. The instantaneous click of the shutter becomes the deliberate movement of the brush. The disposable image becomes an eternal one, heavily weighed and carefully considered. The universe presented here is one in which time has slowed down and flattened out. Executed on greying canvas, well-thumbed magazine pages, and battered squares of second-hand cardboard, Miss 1946, a Rembrandt bather, and Tinie Tempah all seem to occupy the same temporal space. And in fact, they do. Whether from a photograph taken last week or a portrait painted three hundred years ago, all of these works are set in the past and are thus the stuff of history.

The material conditions of the work also offer different kinds of collapse. For Rubin, figuration and abstraction exist on a continuum, and while he is unquestionably focused on the figure, large areas of fluid brushwork reveal an almost meditative exercise on the abstract. Take, for example, *Untitled (snow landscape)* from 2014 (page 125), in which both the top and the bottom halves of the canvas are covered with subtle tonal washes of white in varying densities. Here, only a thin horizon across the middle marked by peaked, snow-covered roofs of cabins and punctuated by evergreens, evidences a human presence. The surrounding passages are composed with as much subtlety and nuance as any wholly non-objective work.

The creation of these beautiful small oil paintings on scuffed cardboard or worn magazine pages also effects a kind of disjuncture. The rupture between the roughness of the surface and the elegance of the brushwork creates a push-pull tension between the present and the past, the disposable and the lasting, high art and commerce, the casual sketch and the minutely executed painting. The surfaces offer prepared spaces for further conflation and chance interactions, as Madame Moitessier appears to be invaded by an errant Malevich triangle, and Goya's priest tries to ward off not the ghouls and spectres of death but the remnants of a commercial logo (page 151).

Rubin is a precociously talented painter, one who offers the too-rare combination of conceptual rigour and a wholehearted embrace of the world around him. While his sources are those of an artist with a deep knowledge of art history and a profound respect for masters like Manet and Velázquez, he is also a citizen of the twenty-first century whose eyes are open to pop culture, mass-media sources, and glossy weeklies. The result is a body of work that is compelling, aesthetically elegant, and speaks across audiences, suggesting the lacunae of history, the development of art through the ages, and the multifaceted nature of contemporary culture's present to create his own personal record of the past.