

SMART OBJECTS is pleased to present *Agony / Serendipity*, a two-person exhibition by Nicholas Campbell and Zoe Koke.

The four fundamental bodily humors of Medieval medicine—blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm—if imbalanced, were said to cause correlated temperaments; sanguine (blind optimism), choleric (irritability), melancholic (pensive sadness), and phlegmatic (weak expression). Divided on a hot/cold wet/dry matrix, Humoralism further connected bodily fluids and emotional temperament to the four elements of air (blood), fire (yellow bile), earth (black bile), and water (phlegm).

In a conversation between paintings by Nicholas Campbell and Zoe Koke, Agony / Serendipity readily flexes such cleaving hinges that join the material and the metaphysical; specific and abstracted; personal and political. The paintings antagonize. Alternating between sensitive and rugged, gentle and gritty, verdant elements are viewed through teary-eyed reflections. Shadowy bruises develop across celestial twilight. Grimacing features emerge from tarnished darkness. Stumbling into sublime surrender, the works court exquisite catastrophe, discovering delight in their own annihilation.

Marie Heilich: Your painting practices share inclinations to hang out in awkward, disagreeable, or inefficient places, obliquely arriving at beauty. They transgress, degenerate, linger in terror, get to know it. They're not looking for a formula. What's at stake making work in a culture of rampant self-enforced positivity and optimization?

Nicholas Campbell: What's at stake is human fidelity and closure. The inability to find rootedness in time, the self, with objects, and with others. These are all aspects of art making that are discarded by compulsive optimization. When everything must adhere to the regime of positivity, or what is optimal, we lose the negativity that forces us to linger, to form rooted bonds with objects, time, and people.

Zoe Koke: The growing negative pressures of optimization or capitalism seem to make transgressive expression more urgent. Making objects to replace one's body, images that serve to reflect back into the abyss, these are exorcisms of the soul, self and the collective, representing a purging of lived consequences, the rejection of normative societal values, a connection to something greater than the self. It's this terrifying sacrifice of time, space, body and psyche that gives rise to the undoing and unveiling of making, the tumbling toward oblivion that transpires in subtle transformation. In the process, douses of resonance and ecstasy live within the drudgery. Interestingly, a painting may be self-optimizing, but like the evolution of the soul, a painting does so on its own terms.

MH: Byung-Chul Han outlines threats to love in *The Agony of Eros* as contemporary individualism, efforts to determine the market value of everything, and monetary interests that govern conduct. How do these conditions affect why and how you make paintings?

NC: When the self becomes its own means of production we lose fidelity. In the past, society was more categorically divided between bourgeois/proletariat, master/slave, ect. Dialectics used to be a legitimate way of understanding the world. Dialectics reinforced fidelity and love among its comrades. Today, individualism and narcissism destroy these ideas. The self is now divided and waging war on itself. The

compulsion to achieve, optimize, and be “authentic” is a kind of violence the self exerts on itself that cuts it off from the experience of dissolution or devastation through love. Love is a life threatening virus to the self that the narcissist is immune to. To be an artist you must be free and willing to fall in love with ideas, objects, and others. The experience should be devastating. The power lies in the return of the self. When the self is reflected back it is changed in an experience of eternal serendipity. Painting should feel like falling in love and losing everything.

ZK: Love is ungovernable, powerful, unknown and all knowing, while economics continues to infiltrate and demand every aspect of life. I find peace however in the fact that contemporary individualism can squash our senses but can't steal them. Making art then becomes a powerful project in defense of love and sensory knowledge. I believe this kind of work chooses you.

MH: While your works develop over time spent looking, for one of you the pictures lurch forward like fragrant balmy gusts of light while for the other, traces develop from somewhere darker, beyond muddy and patina layers. The line between abstraction and recognition is a moving target. Gesture and chance drift along a rim of recollection, alternating between triggering rewards and squandering gains. Abstraction flirts with landscapes and portraits, or maybe its the other way around. How do you navigate, provoke, or stir delineations between composition and the dissolution of an image?

ZK: I like this discussion of the line between abstraction and recognition acting as a moving target. I have a background making dark room photography and I am curious about how an image settles and is conjured and the instability there, the time between steps. I like the development process and the stilling of a situation, and the wondering if it will ever amount to the feeling of what was witnessed when an image was gathered from a lived experience. It's this unstable space of looking, feeling and perceiving that moves me. Painting allows for less controlled considerations than photography and a full bodied intervention that involves a lot of movement. When I'm working, I have a feeling or a memory of an image, something entirely ordinary, but something that over the course of days or years continues to haunt me. The fact of a forest fire, a bloom of wildflowers, and so on. Why are these memories stored in my body, why do they need to come through me? The answers are worked out in the paintings.

NC: I always like to think of abstraction as moving towards the figure not away from it. When I see abstract works I'm always drawn towards the gestalt aspects. The brain wants to find rootedness or at least mine does. Ultimately the image is not being dissolved, it is being built through muddy excess and brash removal. These paintings are inefficient to me. I navigate painting like a clueless carpenter who barely knows what his tools mean or what they are capable of. I release the desire to be proficient. I could barely explain the process but I'm really just seeking a moment of serendipity from the painting. When the painting comes alive with negativity and demands my attention I know I have been successful.

MH: Can aesthetics be a tool to disrupt or evade symptoms of self-exploitation, willingness, achievement, performance, overproduction? Or is everything, including essential qualities of freedom, love, and art, eventually victim to and absorbed by economic flows?

ZK: I think aesthetics can disrupt, but in our current age, with more artists and more capital than ever flowing towards art production, I feel art is increasingly categorized and understood as self-exploitation,

achievement, performance and overproduction. Many artists, after initial professional success, become subsumed by their own production, and struggle with the pressures of optimizing their production. What obviously makes art confusing as far as economic flows go, is that the value of art is unstable/unfixed. So freedom, love and art may mingle more ruthlessly in this type of economic performance when economic realities are at stake or outside of it. I think if you are taking risks as an artist, you will always negate the economic status quo... but in more capitalist economies of art, you see more aesthetic decisions driven by capital, less ephemerality, more rigidity, more safety, more repetition of a move or an artist's mark that doesn't shift - paintings become seasons of fashion textiles, they become repeated gestures. And unlike Andy Warhol's oeuvre, they aren't trying to comment per say on the ubiquity of imagery, they are merely responding to a branding economy as they swirl and proliferate to fulfill the consumers' want for a particular artist's brand. The weight of 'myth of genius' mixes with contemporary individualism to put new demands on artists to prove their worthiness in the market. I look forward to more discourse about collective consciousness in art making.

NC: True love is the opposite of exploitation or economic functionality. True love dissolves the self. The self is annihilated by love and then a new self is reflected back by the other person. It corrupts the logic of the flow because it is so devastating to the self yet so affirming. It disrupts achievement and production because it holds within it a kind of negativity. Economies function via efficiency and positivity. There is no room for the negative. The artist should be free to be devastated or at least linger in the negative. Art contains the essential lack that economic flows have no space for. Aesthetics can disrupt the acceleration of life by evoking a sense of painful rest that requires our deep attention.

MH: Why and how might paintings negate, obscure, or contradict themselves?

ZK: They always want to, and they always succeed. I don't know why or how they do it, there's a fight and also a process of submission. Spirits are involved, I'm sure.

NC: I think I play with competing desires. The desire to be expressive and honest and also to relinquish those desires. I want to find and I want to be found. To be the rescuer and to be rescued. This is the contradiction and the drama of the final image. The hope is for a new symbolic potency to emerge and make itself known to myself and the viewer.

MH: Returning to *The Agony of Eros*, Han describes eros as a phenomenon that "emanates spiritual buoyancy" and "seeks to translate the wordless". Set in contrast to narcissistic gains where meaning exists "only when it somehow catches sight of itself. It wallows in its own shadow everywhere until it drowns in itself." Eros on the other hand, "makes possible experience of the Other's otherness, which leads the One out of a narcissistic inferno. [...] This feeling is not the achievement of the One, but the gift of the Other."¹ How might eros be harnessed or privileged over narcissistic compulsions in art making?

ZK: I think this question connects to the idea of losing control. Narcissism has structure and requires maintenance. We are losing eros and love in our society because everything is rendered commodity, but also because we have decided we are completely apart from each other within these optimizing terms.

¹ Han, Byung-Chul, et al. *The Agony of Eros*. MIT Press, 2017.

We leak into each other less. I believe eros can be harnessed and privileged if we let ourselves go, if we trust our bodies, if we look to each other and the unknown for intimacy, connection, equality, if we ask for the negation, the opposite pole of what society prescribes. What if we committed to unraveling in our personal lives, in our art practices? I believe this is the space where good art comes from and where freedom can exist.

NC: A good art object is an experience of the other's otherness as a gift. The artist is channeling the self-reflective narcissist and the Other. In a successful artwork, otherness is absorbed by the viewer and the artist's self centeredness is relieved. It's the opening of a space for the Other to enter into. Painting is a sort of emptying of the self until a limit is reached. The Other then steps in.

MH: There are elliptical references to bodies in both your works. Most of the canvases could fit a body inside them. The paintings range between depicting bodies and extensions of the experience of being in a body—where Roland Barthes' notion of figures comes to mind; “[T]he figures are non-syntagmatic, non-narrative; they are Erinyes; they stir, collide, subside, return, vanish with no more order than the flight of mosquitoes”² Viewers might find familiar the chaotic orderlessness that passes through work at a distance from the event of mark making. How would you describe the sensation of making external abstracted sensations stored in the body?

ZK: Most of my paintings are created to hold a body inside them to allow you to submerge. The mark-making is the product of a hungry bodily trance, with long periods of waiting, a type of emptying of self that refutes narratives even as they spill out. To get the marks down, to move the canvas, and the paint, flesh in and of itself, onto the surface, is physical, while conjuring something that barely pushes and pulls into view. I like that people find figures or ghosts in abstract paintings because that's precisely the spiritual space I believe we are working with.

NC: It is a magnanimous gesture. It poses the greatest risk to the artist. Concepts are born out of the event of feeling and feeling is a process of objective realization. In the body there is objective pain. In the narcissistic mind these painful feelings are distorted into identities, narratives, and emotions. Emotions are subjective and commodifiable. Emotional capitalism presents the subject with emotions that they can consume and be infected by. A feeling's objectiveness is what makes it negative. It is situational and thus rooted in time and relationships. It is not digestible, just present at a fixed point. Revolution comes from a place of shared feeling. When painting from this standpoint one can fix feeling to a moment and thus produce narrative and meaning, possibly fidelity.

MH: Can painting lend closure through ritualized contemplation?

NC: For me it does, the painting is a process of self emptying. Once the self is exhausted enough, the Other is let in. This experience of the other is a symbol of reflection. When I am painting I am looking for the composition that forces me to stop painting. I am required to abandon my plans and rest with the image. Once this is possible, once I can linger with what I have created, I am satisfied.

² Barthes, Roland, and Richard Howard. *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*. Hill and Wang, 1995.

ZK: Yes! Paintings have beginnings and ends, and then perhaps they live through a never ending loop, they are durational. For me, when I approach stillness or a vibration, I'm experiencing closure in the painting. However, the hum approaching this space is often hard to hear, making the process more about listening and waiting then acting. In a way, a painting for me, is a project of perfect closure. I am at the mercy of its demands on me, but there is a point where all is quenched, fed and finished. My contemplation in relation to it is physical, trance-like, as I bury and uncover signs from memory, as I drain myself, while it continues to swallow me all throughout its making. Then one day, the painting mysteriously exposes itself as itself and is satisfied.

MH: On the topic of translating bodily somatics to semiotic signs, scrawled or carved glyphs that are almost symbols—utterances, not letters or words, but residues of the sublimation processes. Can these types of marks provide a starting point for a ritual of meaning making? How would you describe their origin and nature?

NC: The symbolic is what contemporary society lacks. The digital age has replaced meaning with information. Symbols used to hold attention because of their rooted significance, now they are simulacra. I do not deal in symbols overtly because it would be lazy to paint a known symbol and proclaim any sense of meaning from it. The logos have been subverted. The point of painting for me is to overcome this past symbology and create new sensations rooted in sublimation and sensations around a particular feeling. What we are dealing with in the late modern age is a crisis of feeling. Marxists were able to tap into the spirit of revolution because there was a shared feeling of exploitation that was symbolized through class war. There was fidelity in the struggle. This is gone now. Information has created an infarction that renders past symbols meaningless. The narcissistic subject cannot agree on a feeling. The feeling is privatized and psychologized. We do not share our feelings, we share our emotions which do not foster fidelity. Emotions subjugate and manipulate. They are consumed, not shared. Painting should function to symbolize the feeling of time that can be grasped by others. I believe that feeling is one of deep alienation and even deeper depression. When anything is possible nothing is possible.

MH: How would you describe the difference between a digitally mediated encounter with a painting and viewing in the flesh?

ZK: I think it's a question of a compressed surface in a photograph, or a textural surface in real life. A lot of paintings look better on screens. A lot of artists now paint to privilege photography, not necessarily a real encounter with their artwork. I think this is often subconscious but I think a focus on technical rigor that photographs well, as opposed to surfaces exposing themselves and unraveling (which feels pre iPhone) is evidence of this. I think artists are also responding to how art is more than ever before bought and sold via screens. What I do love about paintings however is that they will always be more truthful in person, their grit, their eyelashes, their phlegm, their blood. Translation of spirit is felt in a real interaction, while in a photo, only a glossy ghostly residue remains.

NC: In the digital sphere the painting is merely a piece of information among trillions of others. It is not rooted or stable like objects are in reality, nor sacred. I like to think that art objects can be sacred. In the

digital realm, “like” is used as a means of signification. “Like” means value and thus the information is given a particular status. It is analyzed via mediation with the screen. It is simply not dealt with on a level of meaning that forces any sense of romantic permanence or bodily closure. To really look at a painting in the flesh requires deep attention which the digital sphere does not allow for. In the digital realm we are all scrollers and jolted by addictive aesthetics and profanities.

What would be the show’s musical score or soundtrack?

ZK: Drone or classical. Something that vibrates. Upward bass played slowly or harshly. Slow melodic metal music. Neverending scores.

Nicholas Campbell (b.1995) lives and works in Los Angeles. Group exhibitions include Inaugural Group Show, Imperial Gallery, Los Angeles (2022); Salon at Amor Corp, Venice, CA (2022); Coyote Principal, Lupercal, Los Angeles (2021); Siren Fort, Final Hot Desert Ogden, Utah (2021); and Crabs, From the Desk of Lucy Bull, Malibu, CA (2021). He holds a BFA from Pitzer College (2018).

Zoe Koke (b. 1989) lives and works in Los Angeles. Past group exhibitions include Re/flex, Patel Brown Gallery, Toronto (2022); Fever Dream, One Trick Pony, Los Angeles (2021); Doesn’t whine by blue moon, Ochi Projects, Los Angeles (2021), among others. Selected two person exhibits include Made to Look Natural (with Ben Borden); Smart Objects, Landers, CA (2018) and Forced air: les ventilateurs (with Carolyne Scenna) at Les Territoires, Montréal (2015). She holds an MFA from University of California, Los Angeles (2019) and a BFA from Concordia University, Montréal (2013).

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