

frieze



VICTOR MAN
Gladstone Gallery,
New York, USA

'The contemporary', wrote philosopher Giorgio Agamben in a 2007 essay, 'is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but [...] its darkness.' For the Romanian painter Victor Man, such atemporal darkness is a signature style. Like other artists hailing from Cluj – Adrian Ghenie and Serban Savu among them – Man foregrounds a melancholic vision tinted by his country's totalitarian history. Yet, unlike them, Man's sensibility displays a more otherworldly, and at times psychoanalytic, dimension coursing with subterranean energies. His show 'Flowering Ego' at Gladstone Gallery delves into these dark waters with the artist's characteristically enigmatic aplomb.

Inspired by Rainer Maria Rilke's first and second *Duino Elegies* (1923), the exhibition brings together eight allusive works. *R with Turtle* (2018) pictures the artist's infant daughter; the painting's delicately scumbled surface vibrates with jade greens and snowy-white textures. While the turtle in front of the swathed newborn lays on its back, the child holds a ring, conjuring regal depictions of the infant Christ. *Welfinnenraum* (2017), Rilke's term for the space of inner emotion, shows a young woman emerging from an architectonic

background painted in subtly variegated shades. Behind her, a decorous symbol pierces the work's planes with resonant ultramarine and viridian, as foliage and the profile of a fox inscribe its right edge. Confronting us from within the frame, the woman is at once familiar and forever removed, hovering indeterminately between past and present, portrait and allegory, likeness and memory.

Like Rilke, Man blurs the line between external phenomena and internal impressions, transforming his figures into haunting ciphers. Among these, a trio of *Flowering Ego* paintings (all 2017) depicts a black-clad, crow-headed creature evoking a medieval masque. Is it the Freudian Superego garbed in the robes of religious persecution? The angel from Rilke's *Elegies* or a carnivalesque spectre from an occult pageant? Echoes of Pieter Bruegel the Elder and Hieronymus Bosch abound here; the splintered arcs of one painting and the sprouting flowers in another resemble a hallucinatory church fresco.

Much recent art has revisited the canon with nostalgic longing, satisfying the art world's appetite for hagiography. In this context, however, by eschewing an identifiable painterly style and collapsing references from different eras, Man's work can also be read as a gesture of refusal – an attempt to break out of step with time, and art history, in a kind of reverie. His extensive output, imbued with a surreal, woozy atmosphere, recalls artists as varied as Balthus, Paul Gauguin, Edvard Munch and Franz von Stuck – whose echoes reverberate in *Red and Dark Haired Sisters* (2017), for example. Sumptuously painted in dusky greens, blues and vibrant orange, the work depicts two girls, one clasping the other from behind. Though the scene may show an embrace, it also doubles uncannily. Is the occluded figure a ghost? The Unconscious as a shadowy Other? As always in Man's work, the answers recede elusively, refracted within a dazzling display of painterly prowess and art-historical ricochet.

Still, Man offers something of a denouement in *Moonlight (All Nations Flag)* (2018), in which a woman appears to give birth to a small skull. Like much of Man's *oeuvre*, the painting is rife with art-historical allusions, most notably Gustave Courbet's *The Origin of the World* (1866). However, unlike Courbet, Man conflates this evocation of birth with life's inevitable conclusion, aligning him with Sigmund Freud, who argued that Eros worked in tandem with Thanatos – the death drive directing all life back to an inorganic state. Life's ultimate goal, in other words, is to die; the trick is to do it on our own terms. This, Man suggests, is the darkness that settles over every age – past, future and contemporary.

David Geers