

Art Review: Jan De Vlieghe: Layering Abstraction on Realism, or the Other Way Around

December 20, 2013

by James Croak

He has the hands of Claude Monet. Such were my early thoughts upon viewing the exhibition of Jan De Vlieghe's painterly works of *nishikigoi*, commonly known as koi, at Mike Weiss Gallery in Chelsea.

At this spot on the calendar, every art critic is obliged to issue a summary of the demise of civilization evidenced by the fogging over of the "mirror of history," as historians are fond of denoting the art world. As pop art reigns and the falcon strays further from the falconer, the task gets easier every year.

My own thoughts on the drifting wreckage lead me to Gertrude Stein's despairing judgment of Oakland, California, where she was raised: "There's no there there."

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“Untitled 8” by Jan De Vliegher, 2013. Oil on canvas, 79 x 79 inches.

Appropriately, New York City saw three simultaneous California museum shows this year: CA artist James Turrell lighting up the Guggenheim; CA artist Mike Kelly whining about his childhood throughout his 20s and 30s and 40s and 50s at MoMA PS1; and CA performance artist Chris Burden at the New Museum illustrating F. Scott Fitzgerald’s observation that “there are no second acts in American lives.” Decency requires a mention that Kelly killed himself in January of 2012 at the age of 57.

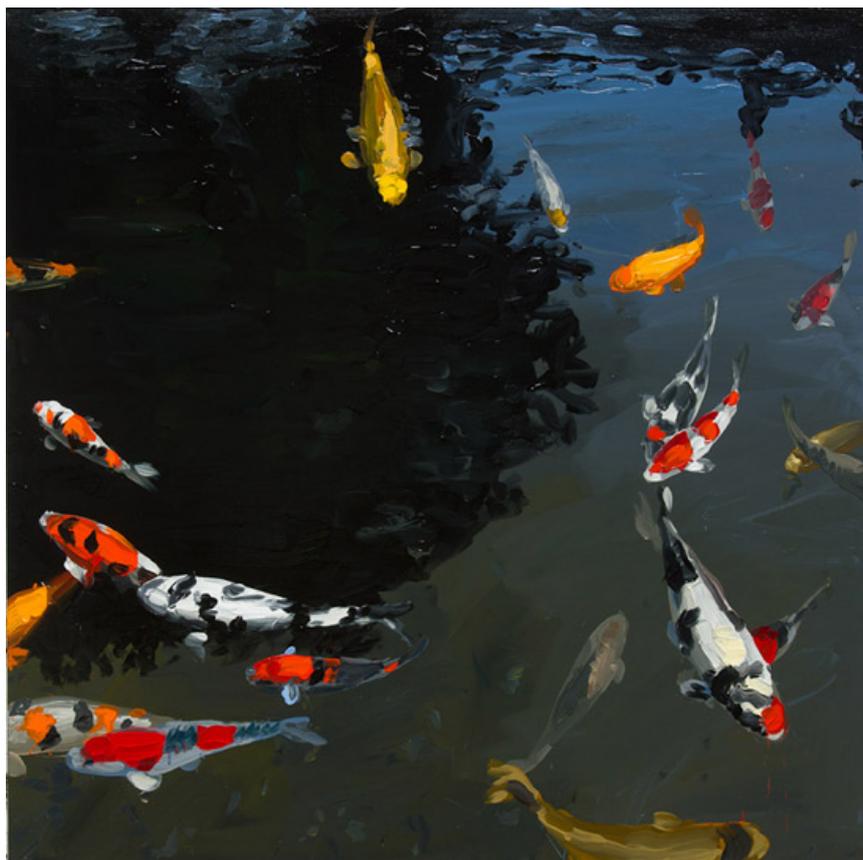
The music world flotsam kept floating on the muddy waters of the art world with Jeff Koons producing a remarkably ugly cover for Lady Gaga’s “Artpop” album. Huh? Koons’s eyesore and Gaga’s \$25 million publicity machine could not save her from her first public failure.

Koons had a good year otherwise, setting an auction record for highest price ever paid for the work of a living artist: \$58.4 million for “Balloon Dog (Orange).” Note to art students: Skip graduate school and go trade cotton for Clayton Brokerage Co. for a few years to learn about money. That’s what Koons did, and your teachers haven’t a clue.

Koons posed next to Kim Kardashian’s baby with Kanye West, giving the infant “art lessons,” according to newspaper captions. West released a trashy video entitled “Bound 2” of himself riding at once a motorcycle and a topless Kardashian whose nipples were inexplicably Photoshopped away. It was filmed on a sound stage with faked Valley of the Gods outcrops moving in the background. I’m certain an art director is snickering somewhere; if West had actually ridden

through the Valley of the Gods he would know they are in Bluff, UT. I could bluff my way through an entire dissertation on that one.

Obligatory winter solstice/year's end kvetch complete, what a pleasure to wander into the perfect painting show of Jan De Vliegheer. There is a there there. There it was, there. I had noted his colorful renderings of carp at Art Southampton and looked forward to having the experience extended in a refined context sans the aisles and din.



"Untitled 9" by Jan De Vliegheer, 2013. Oil on canvas, 52 x 79 inches.

De Vliegheer hails from Bruges, Belgium, a canal city often referred to as the Venice of the North for its serpentine canals that crisscross the metropolis. Tourist brochures describe it as an angler's paradise; it's a small leap to see why De Vliegheer paints water creatures, albeit ones I doubt they would find in their canals. Still, it is almost certainly the silver slivers of fish in Bruges that led him to near-perfect abstract painting.



“Untitled 11” by Jan De Vlieghe, 2013. Oil on canvas, 47 x 94 inches.

Nishikigoi, or koi, are a “brocaded” carp that appeared in about 1820 as the Japanese cross-bred fish developed as a food source in ancient aquaculture. The brightly colored sort were set aside and formed a separate breed to populate decorative ponds. Their electric colors in different patterns are widely used in decoration on trays, wallpaper, and other forms of applied arts.

So what has De Vlieghe accomplished? He does them better, much better. His thick impasto layers of skilled strokes layer over the coal black ground, or liquid depth, a recognizable form of the koi that is simultaneously a riveting abstract painting. The paint has a sculptural physicality and is so lush that one feels it can be grabbed and kneaded.



“Untitled 17” by Jan De Vlieghe, 2013. Oil on canvas, 43 x 65 inches.

For decades we debated different questions: What is the subject of abstract painting? Does it have a subject? Does it reveal an underlying reality? The 20th century closed with a thumbs down on all counts.

By anchoring his lush abstraction in moving fish and figuration, De Vliegheer has created an interesting problem for this supposedly already settled area of art history: It's at once realism *and* abstraction and can be enjoyed as both. This is a big deal.



Detail of "Untitled 3" by Jan Se Vliegheer, 2013.

BASIC FACTS: "Jan De Vliegheer: New Works" remains on view through Jan. 18, 2014. Mike Weiss Gallery is located at 520 W 24th street, New York, NY 10011. www.mikeweissgallery.com.

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