

ARTFORUM



Ella Kruglyanskaya, *Lemon, Peel, Milk*, 2019, tempera and oil stick on panel, 19 3/4 × 25 5/8"

Ella Kruglyanskaya
THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Painting, one paints oneself into the world. Every mark, motion, or gesture is, in a sense, an extension of whomever had the audacity to make it. But such acts can be a cruel burden, for while painters are afforded the luxury of limitless reinvention, their painted doubles have a stubborn tendency to remain fixed. Painting oneself into the world, one paints an image that holds.

Ella Kruglyanskaya, by contrast, is painting herself out—or at least painting out the approximation of herself that has taken shape throughout her career. The Latvian-born, Los Angeles-based artist is known primarily for her feisty portraits of buxom women enacting the various small inanities of femininity as they play out in society, on-screen, or in the annals of visual history. In one of the two spaces of Kruglyanskaya's current exhibition, "This Is a Robbery," many of these jocular emblems for the enduring crisis of womanhood move in pairs: strutting in vintage coats and shades, prowling on all fours, asses aloft, or unwittingly starring in a spaghetti western. Hiking up their dresses to reveal delicate slips, the women of *Spilling Over*, 2020, obscure their faces entirely.

A press release cruelly labels this joyous troupe "Kruglyanskaya's expected female figures." As if to counter this charge of prosaic expectation, Kruglyanskaya has used Thomas Dane's other space for a nimble display of painterly erasure. Here, Kruglyanskaya's women have been cast off by their creator: rolled, folded, relegated to the corners of delicate trompe l'oeil still lifes. The subject of one of these pictures in pictures gathers dust behind a teapot (*The Arrangement*, 2019); another collects spilled milk (*Lemon, Peel, Milk*, 2019); another has her vision obscured by an obtrusive stroke of thick yellow paint (*Brushing*, 2020). What were once held up as artworks in and of themselves are now meager components of them, powerless casualties in a dramatic process of painting over—of painting to get over what came before.

It should be no surprise, then, that Kruglyanskaya describes herself as wary of, or frustrated by, the prospect of developing a personal style, of becoming comfortable with, thus trapped within, her own production—of complacency. “It means that all you care about is the look of something,” she told me, “and it’s superficiality.” For this reason, her recent still lifes, or the process of existential self-reflection they betray, remind me of the Dutch *vanitas* paintings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in which inanimate cyphers for mortality visualize the transience of life. There are no clocks, of course, but in the folding-in of discarded past works we have the slow passage of time: no skulls, but women with their eyes symbolically removed. In *Cut Flowers*, 2020, paper petals rest upon a woman’s eyes; a knife teeters on the bridge of her nose.

Vanitas paintings served as both maudlin advertisements for the inevitability of death and consolatory reminders to those who gazed upon them that they were still very much alive. With this deft exhibition of painting about painting (the term deployed here as both a noun and a verb), Kruglyanskaya issues a similar aide-mémoire about the necessity of self-criticality and endless reinvention; of rejecting the banality of stasis, even if it means painting over all that came before. *LA Mugs*, 2019, depicts two mugs in front of a gray wall. One is empty; the other holds paintbrushes. A single brush, its handle blue, lies in the foreground. Nothing else is shown.