

Art in America



Ella Kruglyanskaya: *Fruit Picnic*, 2011, Oil on linen, 74 by 55 inches. Courtesy Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York.

For a window presentation at Barneys New York last year, Ella Kruglyanskaya's large paintings were suspended from the ceiling by cables, like exotic performers lowered into an arena. Each panel featured colorful, fleshy, dressed-up women fighting or being humiliated—having a tug of war, wagging their fingers, getting slimed. These women were observed by actual, rail-thin female mannequins in white designer clothes, with matching white skin and hair (by Dennis Freedman). The scene-within-a-scene suggested passive bourgeois women regarding people of a lower class as fascinating cases – as others, as loudly attired women who dress to impress but succeed for the wrong reasons.

The installation took major risks, and might at any point have slipped into cliché: art as functionless fashion, as complicit satire of the art market or, worse, as an example of condescending spectatorship. Yet here, as with all her work, Kruglyanskaya's theater implicates the artist. If these painted women anticipate an audience, so does she. Consider the vinyl text on the window promoting her New York shows at the nonprofit White Columns and the gallery Salon 94. Kruglyanskaya's depictions of women suggest a gaze that permeates everyday behavior, in various and mutating ways.

The New York-based artist's aspiring subjects, with their gaudy accessories, are liberated by capitalism only to be flattened, as in *Cat Fight* (2010), in which two women expertly model their pumps while one, depicted in profile like a hieroglyph, raises her hand to the other, who is Janus-faced. All of Kruglyanskaya's surfaces are fastidiously carefree, spontaneous-looking, following the logic of studio photography or Hollywood, or even the perfect housewife – busy preparation and then, *ta-da*. Shadows that look like cutouts suggest movement while locking the women in shallow depth like that of a vitrine.

The gaze is a fundamentally theatrical experience for Kruglyanskaya, and she depicts it literally. In many of her paintings, women's clothing features alter egos, oversized at the center of the composition. In *Fruit Picnic* (2011), two women enjoy a civilized *déjeuner*. We hover above, taking in a peekaboo of ass cheeks on the left, noting the weight of the breasts on the right. It's all so inviting, until you notice the belt buckle that doubles as a mouth full of teeth.

Yet Kruglyanskaya's pictures riff on the presumption of a male-oriented gaze – for film theorist Laura Mulvey, the female form “speaks castration and nothing else” – while suggesting efforts to expand its definition. The body of the woman on the left of *Moustache Beach* (2010) slips and falls off the canvas, its edge cropping her legs to look like a cock and balls. These organs approach the picture's other woman, whose dress has a pair of funny spectacles and a moustache, which respond to the homosocial advance curiously.

With their bounty of movement, glamour and allusion, Kruglyanskaya's paintings possess an aura of cinema. Their retro patina eludes specific reference, although Ivan Zolotarev's cartoonish posters for Pedro Almodóvar's first two films come to mind. These movies happen to feature adventurous, erratic, independent and gender-bending characters who twist the erotics of exoticism. For better and for worse, their spectres haunt Kruglyanskaya.