



Conor Backman: The Other Real Nudashank, Baltimore

Narcissus, probably the best-known character in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, was cursed to gaze at the surface of a pool where, mesmerized by his own reflection in the water, he died. Although other mythological references abound in Brooklyn-based Conor Backman's recent solo exhibition *The Other Real* [Nudashank; March 23–April 28, 2013], my thoughts kept returning to Narcissus. Inherent in Narcissus' demise is the obsessive act of looking upon his own presence as a mimetic gesture, a representation that is both indistinguishable from the self and an ideal image.

Backman addresses the tension between social media, commercial imagery, and original paintings, and he has gained attention for pseudo-catalogs that offer his paintings in a consumerist format. *Reblooming* (2012) is a comprehensive reference of more than a thousand Pinterest "likes" of Backman's brightly colored painting of the same name, and each page of the catalog is a printed copy of the account-holder's page featuring the work. As a thumbnail simulation, the piece is a minute shadow of the original despite its sensational status, juxtaposed alongside a wide range of varying images. Consumed as a digital image, *Reblooming* signifies the media apparatus but is a separate, and perhaps more complicated, phenomenon than that described in Walter Benjamin's prescient essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." The Internet image references an unknown origin or context, and it may or may not be recognized as a painting by its viewers.

Within the more traditional space of the gallery, Backman interrogates the art object and the role of the painter. *Zeuxis and Parrhasius* (2012) is an installation of various grape soda cans that Backman painstakingly created in the mode of "diversion safes," a new security technology. The thin aluminum veneer encases a plastic storage jar that mimics both the weight and feel of a real soda can, but protects valuables inside. Backman chose grape soda, connecting to the painting of grapes that the Greek artists Zeuxis and Parrhasius were instructed to produce in a competition for best artist. Zeuxis' grapes looked so real they tricked the birds into pecking at them; Parrhasius painted the curtain that conceals the painting, fooling the human eye instead. In content as well as technical/conceptual processes, Backman's labor as an artist is an act of self-realization that seems to struggle with the relevancy of painterly illusion.

In an obvious reference to the position of the artist, *Positive Feedback Loop* (2012) reproduces the famous *Las Meninas* by Diego Velázquez in a faithful but painterly manner. The surface consists of sheets upon sheets of pliable steel that were then painted, giving the effect of a soft-cover book. As with *Zeuxis and Parrhasius*, Backman used another strikingly laborious yet transparent process, here an analogy for the academicism that once guided

painters. The solidity of the finished object emphasizes the lasting impact of Velázquez's statement, the most iconic art-historical reference to the centrality of the artist. The tiny, hand-painted line beneath the image identifies the painting, but it's written backward, underscoring the viewer's position in relation to the mysterious perspectival points of the viewing experience of *Las Meninas*. Placed on a worn, wooden table that could have easily come from an artist's studio, *Positive Feedback Loop* becomes a monument to the indissoluble relationship between perspective and subjectivity.

Surrounding this object were *Untitled (Brown Window Paper Paintings)* (2013) and *I's and Other I* (2012). As paintings that reference materials in an artist's studio and seem to indicate the equal importance of process and product, the trompe l'oeil paintings of paper offered no meaning except to persuasively achieve the mimesis of the studio. The subject of the *I's and Other I*, the Pink Panther, gazes at himself in a mirror. Part animal, part human, he is a reproduction of his cartoon original, drawn by Backman in pen, ink, and colored pencil, looking upon his reflection with a further, conscious gesture to his own eye. From a ripped envelope, the facsimiles emerge next to their diptych twin, the "other I," a painted MDF panel that replicates commercial foam core packaging on which the Pink Panther has been "branded" as a marketing image. In this corner of the gallery were references to the mundane activities of the artist, such as packing and shipping; as mundane activities will do, they imply something more existential. Although breaking free of his security envelope, and contemplating what he sees and *how* he sees, the Pink Panther is also bound to how he is seen by others. The artist's own subjectivity as a creator, ever conscious of the mechanics of visual perception, has often been essential to the artist's inquiry. Today, the painter stands on an unenviable stage, dissolving like Parrhasius' curtain into the backdrop of social media and images for consumption.

—Erin Devine

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: **Conor Backman**, *I's and Other I*, 2012, pen and ink on paper, colored pencil, acetate, MDF panel, acrylic paint, drawing, drawing: 13 x 23 inches, panel: 25 x 15 inches; **Conor Backman**, *Positive Feedback Loop*, 2012, oil and ink on steel, 11.25 x 10 inches [courtesy of the artist and Nudashank, Baltimore]