

Peter Zokosky

at LOUIS STERN, 2 May–20 June

As a hobby, the famous comedian Red Skelton painted clowns. Often, these portraits were of the sad-faced variety. When asked why this was so, Skelton said he didn't know. After a pause, he admitted that he knew the reason—he just didn't want to remind himself. The entertainer who makes other people laugh as a way of relieving his own misery is a common story, from Leoncavallo's nineteenth-century opera *I Pagliacci* to Lenny Bruce. This psychological territory is still as rich as ever, but the aesthetic ground has become hackneyed. It's not just that clown paintings are often a mindlessly clichéd form, it's that clown paintings have become the symbol of mindlessly clichéd forms. For Peter Zokosky, though, that's a risk worth taking. A literary painter with an eye for grand narratives about the human condition, Zokosky seems to believe that a good subject can survive the worst representation.

As a character, the clown is a cipher, an entirely externalized creature with no personal, private dimension. In many historical manifestations, he didn't need to speak, because his story was written on his face and in his actions; there was no inside to speak from. The clown as a performer, however, is a man with a private life that he must eventually encounter within his role. Accordingly, each of the characters in Zokosky's twenty-six small portraits seems to have a secret, a thread of melancholy or a hidden hope that animates his psyche, regardless of what expression is painted on his face. Because there are so many pictures, the show serves as a veritable anthology of human temperaments sublimated or effaced behind a wide range of masks. Some are all too familiar, some look totally new. There are Gilbert and François, the victims of their own inchoate yearning; Casper and Madras, who enjoy nursing an unspeakable hurt; Billy and

Nit and Xylo, the human whirlwinds who are probably insane, and possibly dangerous.

Nevertheless, the clown, no matter how interesting, still serves as a clichéd representation of all these conditions, and that's the burden Zokosky can't ignore. It's immediately apparent that the artist is not one to investigate the subject as cliché, an approach made respectable by the way that advertising, mass media, and pop culture have invested so much power in otherwise trite ideas. But while the painter (mercifully) doesn't take this opportunity to diagnose the rhetoric of clichés, he does build a critical scaffolding through some very subtle, yet pointed, stage management. He engineers how each painting will work not just as a picture, but also as an object.

Zokosky begins by bringing a calculated and almost funereal moroseness to his work through wide, dark frames that he designed himself, sometimes with a character's name or even a tomblike inscription carved directly into them. As for the thickly painted surfaces that form the images, each isn't so much an impasto as a scabbed crust out of which gouged, pockmarked, and lumpy faces sometimes barely materialize. An elegiac quality seems to memorialize the costumed, white-faced clown as something lost to our culture, which he basically is. He's still around, of course, but as a throwback to an earlier epoch, the same way *I Love Lucy* reruns are still around. This sort of clown was a product of the traveling circus, an institution that succumbed long ago to radio, movies, and television. Even before Emmett Kelly had performed one final routine on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, he was an anachronism.

So Zokosky's pictures are not just portraits of clowns, they are icons from

a bygone era. They are not just characters, each one is also an historical index, and Zokosky uses that index in a variety of ways, some more successful than others. Occasionally, the character makes the past come to life, giving depth, specificity, and presence to a stereotype. At other times, the past is just a hazy field inhabited by the performer, a neutral purgatory that keeps him at arm's length, where, regrettably, he can do no harm. But in a few sparkling cases, the paintings do more. They allow the clowns to take residence in the past the way myths do: transhistorically, magnified by the collective mind, all the more ominous for being disembodied, and haunting the way only a memory can be.

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Peter Zokosky
Oxo, 1997
Oil on panel
12" x 9"

