

T.F.T. MÜLLENBACH AVERY SINGER

KUNSTHALLE ZÜRICH

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LIMMATSTRASSE 270
CH-8005 ZÜRICH
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An explanation

Written for Pictures Punish Words: Avery Singer at Kunsthalle Zurich



By Carmen Winant

1. When looking at Avery's paintings, I like to imagine that she is colorblind. I mean to use that word in its truest sense, rather than its applied one: to describe a total lack of access to color rather than a vision deficiency in which a person cannot perceive primary colors like red and green. I imagine, then, that Avery sees my face like a solarized photograph, or her own blood as a kind of pale black. I imagine Avery now in her studio in the Bronx, painting grey for flesh and light instead of color.

2. These are the paintings of someone who has been in psychoanalysis for many years, maybe a lifetime. They betray all of the signs: mirrors reflect back the doubled self, masks are worn as faces, and projected shadows dominate interior space. Clumsy, stilted, and boxy robotic bodies flounder through rooms, often appearing fixed to the ground and rarely if ever come in contact with one another (the one notable exception is *Happening* in which one figure grasps another from behind). In *Sad Woman Projecting Libidinal Thoughts*, a lone figure – overcast by

graphic patterns of shadow – sits nude on the floor with her slab-thighs open. “Loneliness does not come from having no people about one, but from being unable to communicate the things that seem important to oneself,” I underlined as a teenager in Carl Jung’s *Memories, Dreams and Reflections*. These paintings are sexual but friendless and isolated; no one is actually fucking.

3. I've heard other people describe Avery's paintings as reminding them of children's puppet-theater, Avant-gardism and Russian Constructivist fashion, perverted geometries, sketch-up and illustrator suites, vintage animation, bohemian lifestyles, post-Capitalism, and the flatness of the Internet. Avery asked me not to write about these things, which is for the best.

4. Avery's father is a projectionist and she once told me that with his bald head and round glasses he looked like a projection himself, which I took to mean as white beam of light. For years he screened films at the MoMA in New York like *Rear Window*, *Dead Reckoning* and *This Reckless Moment* and Avery watched the black and white pictures go by and perhaps more importantly was imprinted by their large frames, false depth, fragmentary narratives, intentional and often heavy-handed staging, lighting and blocking. The beam of light – her father's head – threw scenes and the shadows of those scenes onto the wall.

5. In Jungian psychology, the shadow figures as an unconscious aspect our personalities where disowned feelings are irrationally repressed. This dark side isn't always negative, just primitive and sometimes shameful. While they generally evade us, we may come into contact with our shadows in dreams (represented by figures of the same gender) or through means of artistic expression. Jung believed we must all be made aware of and able to identify our shadow selves, lest we unduly project them onto others, but also maintained that these reservoirs of darkness may themselves be the very seat of creativity.

6. I used to have a boyfriend who would often use the word "projecting." He brandished it like a dumb, padded weapon. He thought he was very smart in this and other ways. I am not fully convinced that he understood what it meant, except that it had something to do with casting the invisible net of one's own pathetic feelings on other people. I don't think he thought about my shadow. I was just projecting, he said. I think he said that to me when I broke up with him.

7. The films Avery watched growing up were surrounded above and below by modernist painting and sculpture (her namesake is one such American modern artist). The resulting paintings, however much influenced by the properties of projection in all of its forms, cannot be separated from their own intense, frustrated, and sometimes masturbatory history. They subject, in both image and title, the rituals that surround and produce art: visual studies, studio classrooms, art

patrons, performances and party scenes appear in various incarnations. In *Society of Realist Wanderers*, for instance, mangled artist easels crowd in the tight corner of a classroom. In *The Studio Visit*, two blocky bodies sit, facing cross-legged on either end of a small table in front of art that neither looks at. Someone pukes into a toilet in the right-hand corner of *Dancers Around an Effigy to Modernism*. What is inside that puke? Regurgitations of art – either too much or too spoiled – pushed down her willing throat?

8. Art is the subject of this work, but also the strategy: it brings figures inside, paintings live in galleries, parties, studios and classrooms, after all, to make a scene. (This idea of making a scene, in both a compositional and emotional sense, is vital.) Avery takes advantage of these interiors to create stages for something deeper and more psychological: a desire and disgust. This way, a painting of bohemian life is also a picture of a shadow.

9. These days concealer is airbrushed onto faces in department store beauty aisles. I tried it once in a Los Angeles mall to smooth out my uneven skin: it was hard and seamless. It felt like a mask.

10. I avoided reading anything about Avery's work on the Internet or in art magazines. To write these paragraphs I stared at reproductions of the work for a long time. I imagined her painting long cast shadows in a studio whose windows are covered with black plastic bags. I resisted calling Avery to ask about her spraying process or how she learnt sketch-up. Instead I pretended that I experienced growing up with a projector for a father, that I too work on my paintings for ten hours a day, every day, or that I have such sensitive skin. Instead I recalled what I could about Vanguardism, Wittgenstein's ideas of colorblindness, my face hardened with expensive cosmetics, the founding ideas of Jungian Psychoanalysis, and my first bad break-up.