

What to Look For: The Struggle Against Photographic Vision

Tom Huhn, New York, 2008

Aris Kalaizis's recent works push hard against the central unavoidable fact of our current visual life: the perplexity of trying to look at things and at the world with something other than photographic vision. Viewing these paintings, we watch as this fact becomes the pervasive issue of Kalaizis's work, appearing at once in both their themes as well as across their surfaces. The paintings seem to imply that the medium of photography not only too often reduces the world to nothing but seeming information, but that it also, thereby, flattens experience to the overall look of the photograph.

But why might anyone, and in this case Kalaizis's paintings, protest against photography? What is purportedly so dangerous about photographs? Can't we simply ignore them or even just pragmatically take whatever we find of use in them? One answer is that the premise of photography presupposes a backward logic with far-reaching implications: because photos reproduce the world homogeneously and generically, the world that lends itself to such reproduction must already be homogeneous and generic. Photos thus assault the thought that whatever there is to see must be a made, constructed thing; in other words, an image. Thus the photographic "image" is a kind of oxymoron, for the photograph begins as a thing denying the artifactual nature of its image. This complaint is not simply that the hand of the painter, draftsman, or engraver is absent from the photograph, or that the photographic apparatus somehow replaces this (or even that one objects to the look of the photograph); the objection is rather that this very absence somehow becomes the photographic prerequisite for the value of its purported image.

What the photograph offers, strictly speaking, is not an image at all, but an agglomeration of image-like components that, together, give the illusion of being an image. This is what Roland Barthes famously discovered and named the *punctum* of every photograph: the wound of its having excised the possibility of being a true image. Still, what makes nearly every photograph compelling is just this ventriloquist's illusion. Like the dummy on the lap of something real, photos seem to speak—imagistically even—but the origin of that which allows them to appear so real to us always lies elsewhere, away from us and unrecoverable. Photos are thereby uncanny but nearly always banal.

Kalaizis's paintings work most insistently on and against just these two elements of photographic images: the uncanny, of that which seems so insistently meaningful, and the banal or that whose meaning seems so flatly obvious. Nearly any of the most recent paintings can serve as an example. **Pentagrass** (2006) will work just fine. The waxiness of the Hazmat suits worn by the three figures is an allusion to the fate of flesh under the regime of the camera, whereby flesh takes on the promise of a viscosity, sheen, and a ready yieldingness (has flesh ever promised so much as when it appears in a photograph?). But this waxiness cuts at least two ways: one is toward the illusion of preserved lifelikeness in the flesh of waxed fruit. The other is toward the waxy appearance of the flesh of human corpses. The device of the Hazmat suit allows Kalaizis to emphasize what is elsewhere a far more subtle appearance of waxy flesh in many of his other paintings, for example, the two pairs of Nike and Psemata paintings. **Pentagrass's** left foreground—from which the perspective of the painting proceeds—contains the chalk outline of a murder victim, as if to signal a disregard for and complicity in the destruction of the drawn figure. The hose also functions as a narrative of figuration and photography, for the figures themselves alternately struggle with and against it. The hose might also

represent the continuity of the tradition of drawn and painted figures—no wonder the hose must be treated photographically as itself something toxic. Alternatively, the hose might carry the antidote to that tradition, or perhaps it is being dragged, however reluctantly, into the new tradition that is photography. In sum, given the chalk outline of a corpse (though even the corpse is absent), whatever necessitates the Hazmat suits, the deathly flesh appearance of those same suits, the allusion to the *Laocoön* group, etc., we might say that the deathliness of the photographic image is here precisely overdetermined. The question to ask then is what life, kind of life, or even lively impulse makes these appearances of death so pressing. That is, and to put it psychoanalytically, how should we characterize whatever the life impulse is that struggles so unremittingly against the multiplicity of deathliness in this painting?

We could go after Kalaizis's encounter with photographic vision another way: by way of the gap or fissure that seems to structure each of his paintings. One overarching gap is the lacuna that exists in each of the paintings narratives. The gaps yawn on both sides of the events depicted: in **Pentagrass** the moment depicted leads someplace utterly unpredictable and, importantly, unforeseeable. But so, too, does the momentary image of the painting arrive from someplace inexplicable and rather unimaginable. It is not so much that the painting alludes to a break in the narrative of which it is a vital moment, as it is rather that the painting gives a narrative charge, an illusion of narrative, without any of the integration necessary to compose a narrative. One might best describe this effect as "narrative-like." We could say that each painting partakes of the "as if" quality, each could function as if narratively, though strangely without any element that would have the narrative congeal. In just this way Kalaizis's paintings mimic—but to an extreme that no single photograph could achieve—the conviction of the reality of the narrative seemingly apparent in every photo.

The painting titled **Bahren** (2007) offers an example of this sphinx-like narrative riddle: What possibly could have prompted the arrival of the seminude woman knee-deep in a pool of water illuminated by auto headlights; and what might next happen? The narrative fissure within each of Kalaizis's recent paintings might also be acknowledged in the realization that it is impossible to discern whether the compelling event has just occurred or is instead just about to occur. The sadness, indeed the mournful quality of these paintings, is recognition of their inability to succeed narratively.

A painting such as **Deafcon No. 1** (2006) even makes light of this photographic absence of narrative content in the midst of a substantive narrative conviction: here the self-portrait figure illuminates a wall utterly blank with meaning. The figure leans forward toward the wall expecting to find some mark that might redeem his conviction. And yet the three doorways of the painting imply that the viewer is more likely to find a way through the wall than encounter some meaningful mark. Such a mark (nonphotographic!) would—precisely by thwarting our forward progress through the implied transparency of the wall—instead productively confound us. So, too, in **The Allies** (2007) does the self-portrait figure again have hold of a light fixture, but in this case the painter tilts it directly into his face. Peering into the light here shows that light itself is to be interrogated—perhaps for its complicity with photography—rather than taken for granted or used as the means by which some meaning might be brought into existence. It

is as if the light holds some secret of its own meaningfulness, of how it is able to illuminate and bring meaning.

In a still more comic manner, **A Winter Day in Laibach** (2006) mocks the search for the meaning of an image. This painting goes even farther in implying the folly and foolishness of the assumption that an image has a meaning that it exists in order for us to decipher it. **A Winter Day in Laibach**, however, is a dream image: it populates a desolate winterscape with a child's memory of the meaningfulness of a wooden toy figurine while at the same time half exposes the dreamer's nakedness as a sign of the inappropriateness of continuing to hope for the salvation that meaning would provide. It is thus a nearly perfect dream image insofar as it conveys both the longing of the dream (and indeed its primitive origin) and the simultaneous discomfort (bare feet in the snow) with that longing.

In the painting **The Morning After** (2006), illumination is again used as utterly confounding. (Is it too much to suggest that the appearance of light in **Deafcon No. 1** and **The Morning After** functions as an allegory of the light and lighting central to the photographic process?) The male figure here looks both at his hands and at the light within and reflected by them. The source of the light—note that it appears to be a wall with a black-and-white photograph affixed to it—is not questioned, or even looked into; rather it is as if the man is looking at his hands with the expectation that they ought to hold and thereby reveal whatever could be substantive within light itself. But to capture light, to fix it photographically, can only function to preserve a dead image of light rather than embody a dynamic continuation of it. What confounds the man is the insubstantiality of light. The painting's implication is that light has no existence unless it is somehow reflected or deflected. The woman standing directly behind, dressed in black with boots, gloves, and head scarf, serves as the shadow that gives substance and body to light precisely by obscuring and deflecting it. Nearly entirely encased in black clothing, she becomes a cipher for the necessity that light must be concealed in order for it to produce its effects. She thereby also becomes a muse: the muse of painting, I suspect. She is herself unseeing—her eyes are closed—while her shadowing presence gives content and structure to the illuminated space surrounding her. The child clad only in white underclothing represents an embrace by the earlier innocence of light not yet tainted by photographic processing.

More evidence of the prevalence of the structured gap takes place in the doubling effect that occurs in so many of Kalaizis's paintings. Consider again the shadows, but this time the literal ones, for example in **Deafcon No. 1**. There, the gap of pictorial space appears between the self-portrait on the left and its shadow in the doorway on the right. But there is also the gap of incommensurability between the appearance of the self-portrait with right arm raised and the shadow with both arms at its side. So, too, must we take account of the implied gap between the self-portrait and the painter of it. In **The Undecided Man** (2007), a whole series of distinctive gaps appear in the multiple, Magritte-like reflections of the seated nude figure. And then, too, there is the gap between the circular reflection reproduced on the left and the opaque, unfinished circular shape on the right. The undecided man, occupying the space between the reproduced reproduction and the seated figure, can be understood to be himself reflective of the choice between at least two alternatives. The undecided man occupying the space between

the mirror and circular shape might be seen as trying to decide in favor of the purported transparency of reflection offered by the distorting mirrors on the left, or the sheer opacity of the empty circular shape on the right.

Gettersby (2007) is still more to this point: the man on the left is mirrored by the shadowing man on the right and yet there is a third, perhaps mediating, shadow between these two figures. The center shadow fits neither man perfectly, let alone well; indeed it appears as if the man on the right is trying to enter the shadow while the man on the left is attempting to vacate it. Or, one might also hazard that these three figures are themselves three different aspects of existing as a shadow, even as a shade. That would make the left-hand figure—the best realized and most detailed, indeed the most photographic of the three—but another iteration of darkness. **Gettersby** also prominently contains one of what Carol Strickland aptly describes as Kalaizis’s trademark graffiti. And though I agree with Strickland that this graffiti resembles a flower or butterfly, I think its arms, head, and legs also make it into an iconic homunculus. It is an image that contains the bare minimum of what constitutes an image, and yet it is image enough to conjure the idea of the human being as a whole and unified thing, hence a homunculus. The purpose of the graffiti in this painting is not, however, to signify something human, but rather to show that an image succeeds only by being whole, that is, by referring to something other than itself complete and entire. What the image actually refers to, be it butterfly, flower, homunculus, etc., is of far less importance than the structural unity that conspires from image to referent. Kalaizis’s particular achievement in this painting is to provide a lesson in the variety of ways in which very different images seem to evoke the same thing: graffiti, shadowy man, shadow, and detailed man. Kalaizis thereby evokes both the boundaries as well as the possibilities of figuration and thereby marks a crucial difference between painting and photography.

The theme of doubling becomes unavoidable in this selection of paintings. Even superficially, the doubling of titles and subject matter can be seen in two instances: **Psemata** and **Psemata II**, as well as **Nike and Nike II**. Here, however, the doubling is not an imitation of the prior image but rather a further iteration of the original. But then the question that arises is about the relationship between the first and second. Is the second image the redoing, perhaps correction, of the first? And, why only two images rather than a series? This theme of doubling exists literally in the title and image of **The Double Man** (2007), yet in another self-portrait, there are three images of the same figure: in detail, quasi-shadow, and full shadow. Here, the adversarial relationship among the images is quite explicit, for the quasi-shadowing central figure has a large block (or suitcase) raised above his head and is presumably prepared to land on the head of the detailed figure. The right-hand, fully shadowy figure in turn appears to have its arms raised above its head to visit the same violence on the middle figure. Though we cannot see what object the right-hand figure might threaten the central figure with, we might nonetheless note that the shadowy figure’s hands appear at the top edge of the canvas—as if to imply that the right-hand figure threatens to pommel both other figures with the canvas itself.

In **At the End of Impatience** (2006), the doubling is even more rampant: the young girl appears twice, and the window, curtain, light fixture, and radiator are each doubled. Even the double bed is doubled. **The Green Room** (2007) also has a number of sly repetitions. In both these paintings, the figures are nude or seminude, as if to show

that their doublings are not the effect of some sleight of hand. The nudity is a way of showing that no painterly trick has been played.

It is just this reflexiveness that is central to the doubling that structures Kalaizis's paintings: they work by way of their relentless self-referencing, trying thereby to form a closed, unified circle of meaning and meanings. They thus mimic the structure of photographic vision. They charge themselves less with the duty of meaning-making and more with the obligation of tightening the circuit by means of which meanings might emerge from each painting. They are not then meaningless; they are instead concerned with the structures of how meanings come to be by way of imagery. And this brings us full circle, to the problem of photography and the rich relationship between it and Kalaizis's work. The imagery of his work repeats—albeit via painting—the fate of imagery under the shadow of photography. Kalaizis's imagery thereby brings the work of photographic vision to its extreme, indeed near its breaking point. Kalaizis's paintings are a kind of incantation of all things photographic: repeating the spell of photography, they seek to reveal the convulsive emptiness of photography and thereby liberate painting form a photographic vision.

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