



Alex Urban, *Nie ma czasu na work/There's No Time For Work*, 2017, olej na płótnie/oil on canvas, 50 × 50 cm

The Ur-realism of Alex Urban

Cathryn Drake

Nature is not something that can be seen by the eye alone – it lies also within the soul, in pictures seen by the inner eye. – Edvard Munch

Fear and obsession are the subjects of Alex Urban's bizarre universe. Her salacious paintings seem to be vivid renderings of dreams, or nightmares, but they are actually more real than not, more familiar than we might like to admit – and that's the kicker. Urban's images are actually culled from the Internet, a receptacle for the detritus of the human psyche – and perhaps the most accurate barometer of the collective unconscious we have today. Although many of the pictures seem to depict explicit sexual or paranoid fantasies, it is not always clear what exactly is going on, leaving it up to the viewer's subconscious to fill in the blanks. What society deems as transgressive is often simply human nature and not harmful to others,

yet we hide away such impulses as undesirable. You could say Urban makes Rorschach tests that reveal the cracks in our psyches.

In *Coach* (2013), a dog bites off the face of its trainer, who emerges from behind a blue curtain as if on a theatre stage: the beast may represent our primal instinct, rebelling at the strictures of proper behaviour and education, nature busting through the seams of *decorum*. Surrealism comes to mind here in the cryptic imagery as well as the simple illustrative style and palette – there is even a Magrittean *Everyman* in black. Yet in the painting *Wild Dog* (2016), the animal looks urbane and contemplative, even a bit bored – in fact human and totally tamed. The breaking out of the beast is inevitable; repressed desires seep out slowly as perversions deformed by our adult inhibitions, by self-imposed impotence. Young girls at easels in a painting class earnestly portray a *Parrot* (2016) displayed atop a penis-shaped plinth – a double pun mocking the way they obediently copy the bird, oblivious to the much bigger 'bird', the giant sexual organ in the middle of the room. As in many of Urban's paintings, the subjects float in a swirling field of candy-coloured pigment, evoking

innocence, as if enveloped in the blissful ignorance of childhood.

Urban's portrayals of love, dominance, and submission are rendered in lurid colours that almost hurt your eyes, and many of the characters look like they might inhabit a fairy tale. The phantasmagorical quality of these images, often portraying the sort of kitsch sexuality promoted in Hollywood movies, undermines their potential for eroticism, and some element is always clearly off-kilter. The sickly sweet pastel palettes, most often the pinks and blues of little boys and girls, are injected with shocks of black – the menacing specter of the Other and a shot of black humour. In *Lovers* (2013), Urban's Adam and Eve, a blonde woman of a certain age and a Pinocchio, not clearly male or female, embrace in a psychedelic garden with black snakes slithering sinisterly in the corner. An erect black organ protrudes like a gun from a whitewashed background in *Dildo* (2013), only a pair of rosy nipples above indicating the possibility of a human figure – or is it a black man in whiteface with red eyes? All of this points to the shame that we use as a weapon against ourselves, and the inexorable other lurking inside.

We might recognize these pictures in our own guilty fantasies, and in this Urban is akin to Paul McCarthy – lampooning popular norms as ridiculous and exposing us as bumbling bumpkins, sympathetic though we may be. Thus Urban's people are portrayed as animals, taking selfies adorned in antlers or wearing pig masks and pearls, and as clueless clowns pondering their own sexual organs with dumb curiosity and an utter lack of passion. The Pollyanna attitudes and aesthetic standards proliferated by the mass media replicate themselves endlessly in glossy but empty perfection, while Urban reveals that the child in the Disney story has a black eye or has been violated by her father in much worse ways. It is the jarring juxtapositions that shake out the most meaning, pointing out the irony in social reality. The fluorescent palette and cartoon sensibility mock the unreality of pop culture to the effect of parody. Indeed, what Urban portrays is the precise disjunction, the ambiguity, between society's projection of what reality should be and what it really means to be a human being.

Another kindred spirit is Surrealist Léonor Fini, who illustrated



Alex Urban, *Pony*, 2015, olej na płótnie/oil on canvas, 100 × 80 cm



The Story of O, whose protagonist allows herself to be groomed as the perfect submissive sex slave. She depicts the transgressive acts in soft, lush, romantic palettes. A disturbing photograph by Henri Cartier Bresson portrays Fini with a stocking pulled over her head, the features of her face grotesquely distorted; in another, by André Pieyre de Mandiargues, she hides behind a lion's mask, her breasts exposed in provocative décolletage. Similarly, Urban's photograph *Meatlove* (2015) could be seen as a Surrealist paradigm: a woman's face is slathered with meat, bringing to mind both beauty mask and anatomy model, an inside-out portrait, like an X-ray of the soul. In all of this there is the sense of constant transformation and abuse of the self as victim to the impossible, often deformed, standards promoted by the media.

Yet if many of Urban's situations seem surreal, the target is not the Surrealist interpretation of dreams but the button that triggers the regurgitation of repressed fears, desires and obsessions, those for which the Web allows an anonymous public exhibitionism via avatars of our own creation, which ultimately may be our own true selves:

those with the balls to enact what we really want but don't feel free to do. The portrait *Poodle* (2014) looks too human to be canine and too wise to be mere kitsch. We might see our own souls peering out of the fluffy guise, grotesque and vulnerable at once. The sculpture of a young girl puking, *Pukelinka* (2014), could be a portrayal of a catharsis wrought from saying it like it is. Looking at Urban's work is like going on a psychedelic drug trip that peels away the thin veneer cloaking the ills of modern society.

