

On Surveilled Viewers and Captive Observers

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There was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment. How often, or on what system, the Thought Police plugged in on any individual wire was guesswork. It was even conceivable that they watched everybody all the time. But at any rate they could plug in your wire whenever they wanted to. You had to live—did live, from habit that became instinct—in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and, except in darkness, every movement scrutinized.

George Orwell, 1984, published in 1949

One can't escape them. Those larger-than-life figures with wide open eyes and demanding gazes. Stylianos Schicho's depictions of people come close. This impression is heightened upon entering the artist's studio: In relatively small rooms his canvases reach the ceilings, giant faces staring incessantly at the intruder. The narrow space doesn't permit you to step back or evade their stares. One can't help but think this sense of intimacy is deliberate, or even enforced by the artist. Sure, we have seen Schicho's works hung in vast exhibition settings, but the lack of distance in smaller spaces like that of his studio entraps the viewer and provokes a dialog.

But who are the viewers? We see the depicted people, but they also see us. We see them from an apparently raised point of view. We perceive Schicho's people looking up at us from a corner (but there is no foreshortening; the people in the background are the same size as those in front). At the same time the figures appear to be looking down at us due to their vast size. How is this possible?

Distortion, perspectival foreshortening and magnification – Schicho forms his bodies according to his wishes and perceptions: "I see a moment, freeze it, take it home with me [...] and meticulously examine it from all angles underneath a magnifying glass. Then I take it apart and rebuild it according to my own criteria, perception and sensitivity." In doing so, it is essential that the moment isn't reenacted in the studio, but rather brought back to life with the help of props and friends who stand in as models and take on roles determined by the artist. Quick sketches or cellphone photos serve as aids. Occasionally, memory alone suffices in developing an idea for a painting and freezing figures onto the canvas. The artist's drawings (or are they paintings?) serve as therapy or a diary in which he documents how he perceives

his surroundings. “I want to illuminate a moment. It is a kind of capturing, but it’s not a snapshot [...]. The paintings have an element of movement.” Schicho often incorporates his own body – which he studies in front of a large mirror – into his compositions. This act of self-observation has played a large part in his art from early on. The physiognomy of his portrayed people merges with his own on his canvases. Thus hands – but also facial expression – are mainly of their creator. “Distortions of meaning” make them appear especially large and important, as do those larger-than-life eyes: “Those are the moments that bring the paintings to life.”

Schicho orchestrates his compositions like a theater director assigns different characters and tasks to his ensemble. Some of his recurring stylized stereotypes are: the stock broker, the man with glasses, the ape, the police helmet, the hooded woman and the masked man – all of them are compiled in his new large scale painting, suggestively titled *Waiting* (2012). The piece feels like a gathering of old friends. Important figures that have accompanied Schicho throughout the years. In spite of being positioned in close proximity to one another – and besieged by a family of crickets – the characters do not seem to be interacting. The painting’s entire concentration appears to be focused on the viewer. Loneliness, emptiness and isolation resonate from its figures. Resignation, but also aggression is palpable.

“Something’s happening here ...” This feeling is omnipresent, and is the thread that runs through Schicho’s work. His characters seem pestered by us viewers while they wait for something. They react by looking at us startled. Asking, demanding: “what do you want? Something’s about to happen now, and then you come along and butt in!” We have been discovered. It is rare to take on such an active part as a viewer. Schicho emphasizes that, “The paintings seem dominant in the sense that they force the viewer to partake. As soon as you look at a painting, you are immediately incorporated into a system of glances.” For the artist, these glances create a “formal line” by which he composes his paintings. But this line doesn’t remain within the two-dimensional confines of the canvas. It transcends the illusionary space to the viewer and into real space. Precisely this phenomenon makes the paintings tremendously exciting.

The artist’s overdrawn characters and poses (like the large eyes) are reminiscent of the visual vocabulary found in comics. Schicho has developed his unique style over the years, and it has a high recognition value. In contrast to comics or caricature, his paintings lack the element of text. Instead, his eyes speak to the viewer. Yet his works still have a commonality with caricature: “He who evaluates things timidly, expresses nothing at all. Only sharp

drawing that borders on caricature is effective.” This quote by Theodor Fontane can certainly be applied to Schicho’s work.

Schicho also draws on paper, but his predominant surfaces are large white gessoed canvases. His gigantic charcoal drawings cum paintings possess extraordinary energy and expressive power. Incomplete sketch-like elements yield a high degree of immediacy and lend the work dynamics and movement. Transparent acrylic washes introduce calmness into his compositions. They lend the pieces a painterly quality despite the harshness and dominance of the charcoal. This results in fine spacious bodies that accentuate the loose quality of stroke. Although Schicho’s compositions appear dense in the structural sense, they are not fully painted in. They leave a lot of room.

Schicho’s pieces consist of multiple overlapping planes or layers. The underlying layers reveal themselves like seen through an x-ray machine, remaining perceptible to the viewer. The police helmet appears delicate and permeable, so do the tinted glasses that do not fully obscure the eyes, contrary to their purpose. Also, the hood and the face mask do not appear to function as sound protection. “We cannot hide ...”, is what Schicho’s characters seem to be whispering to us, and with that they cease to be demanding, overpowering or dominant, but appear rather insecure and small. They are visible despite their (monkey) mask, protective helmet and dark glasses. His figures don’t have a place of refuge, no feelings remain concealed. They stand on a stage, illuminated in such a way that the unknown but omnipresent viewer can see right through them. The glass man. “Observing and being observed” takes on a socio-critical dimension. Our society with its multimedia communications is gradually becoming a surveillance society replete with full body scanners and closed circuit video, (hence the bird’s eye view) but also voluntary vulnerabilities like Facebook and Twitter. Everything private is made public. According to the artist, “People should feel a bit surveilled in front of the paintings to sensitize them to this omnipresent eye.” Schicho sharpens our perceptions. He makes us more cognizant of our “nakedness.” It is therefore not a coincidence that masked and hooded people bring recent protests and demonstrations to mind such as the “Occupy” movement, a criticism of capitalism and consumerism. Other protagonists are equipped with iPhones and headphones. They entertain themselves with joysticks and toy guns. Some work out on fitness equipment, drink from fast food cups or operate slot machines holding credit cards. Subjected to the pressures of the leisure industry, they are participants in our consumer society, and are preservers – or prisoners – of the system. The border between the two becomes blurred.

Everything is open. Schicho's paintings come very close. They have much to do with us and the world we live in. His art is direct, extroverted, and immediately effective. This too makes them easily accessible. In fact, their openness and ease of engagement allows people a way in who perhaps don't have much knowledge or access to contemporary art. I feel that this is a great quality. One can't escape Schicho's work, at the same time it takes the viewer very seriously. His paintings are completed by the viewer. Or to put it into the artist's own words: "There's always someone missing in a painting, and that person is the one standing in front of it."

Some of Styliano Schicho's quotes are taken from a conversation held in the artist's studio on October 28, 2012 in Vienna. Others have been excerpted from the artist portrait "Stylios Schicho – ... weil uns eigentlich kalt ist" (castyourart, Vienna, September 3, 2008, www.castyourart.com/?s=Stylios+Schicho&x=0&y=0&sn=1)

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