**First Prize**

**Entry in English**

**Nadim Samman**

**Oh You Pretty Things**

JONNY NIESCHE: Throb

Zeller van Almsick, Vienna. 12 December 2018 – 26 January 2019



A glimmer. A colorful figure slides into view: striking, well proportioned, and without wrinkles—totally put together, so all the more exciting. A flash of eye. A pupil. It is pure flattery, and seduction. But there is something strange about this vision, like mascara on a statue, or a piece of sculpture made to be slipped inside a person—holding your gaze, and the room. It is pure androgeny; a double performance, and you are fascinated. It is theatre, and the question of your own role is not immediately answered. Nor do you know what this thing wants *with* you. You remember a playbill mentioning Jonny Niesche being dragged through shopping mall cosmetics departments by his mother, in the 1980s, secretly falling in love with powder colors and mirrors; that it mentioned him (or was it you?) rapt at the sight of David Bowie, preening on stage, somewhere. As you keep looking, you begin to fall into character…

Exactly fifty years ago, as rock and roll approached its zenith, the critic Michael Fried wrote (contra minimalism) that the ‘success, even the survival, of the arts has come increasingly to depend on their ability to defeat theatre’, and that art ‘degenerates as it approaches the condition of theatre’.1 Considering the circumstance of Niesche’s artistic education, and his subsequent oeuvre, the disjunction between defeat and triumph is moot. His professor at Vienna’s Angewandte, Heimo Zobernig, exemplary investigator of formal concerns (tropes of the monochrome, and passages between painting and sculpture, forinstance) was trained as a theatre set designer. Taking up Zoebernig’s interest in what one critic has termed ‘setting the stage for art’, Niesche, too, has deployed the folding-screen format as way for colour-field painting to score architectural space—and, moreover, to occupy it as a quasi-protagonist. Speaking of his new works, Niesche speaks of wanting to imbue the surface of his pieces with a ‘performative’ quality, in terms of changing optical effects; for them ‘to be responsive to the viewer, [for] the viewer to be responsive to them, *and* responsive to the environment in which they’re exhibited’.

The artist’s claim, and the testimony that his own oeuvre supplies, satisfies Fried’s charge that such an endeavour ‘depends on the beholder, [and] is incomplete without him. It has been waiting for him’. The august critic continues—‘Once he is in the room, the work refuses, obstinately, to let him alone’. Fried’s complaint is that there is something undignified about the ‘literalist’ art-object’s overtures; something needy and entrapping—a would-be topping from the bottom. In rejoinder, one might claim that, through this theatrical scenario, the beholder’s subjectivity has been delivered to analysis and, therefore, made a visible issue. Yet, the two critical positions are not incompatible. In Niesche’s work the scene is set for the beholder to bottom from the top *and*, crucially, reflect upon this situation.

Indeed, the confluence of subject and object in his aesthetic is such that the beholding subject is figured *within* the piece, in optical terms. This doubling scenario stems from the materials employed. ‘By the reflective surfaces’, the artist says, ‘the viewer becomes present in the work’. However, the object also conditions the psychological constitution of the viewer as a libidinal subject in a theatre of relations: ‘It is this desire-like situation when you are looking through a shop window at something you want, and at some point you are apprehended by the reflection of yourself within that situation’, says Niesche, reporting his inspiration. His painting-objects at van Almsick are not just completed by the viewer. In addition, and more generally, they encapsulate a (contemporary/consumer) regard.

We have thus arrived at the figure of Narcissus, whose reflected gaze delivers ‘the revelation of his identity and his duality’, according to Gaston Bachelard. ‘Above all’, says the philosopher, this amounts to the disclosure ‘of his reality and ideality’.2 It is the latter ‘*idealizing narcissism*’ that appears to register in Niesche’s stylistics, wherein real life takes a ‘surge upward’ towards a ‘holiday in unreality’. In terms of the tactile, both the mirrored surfaces of Niesche’s objects, and the flat manner in which they have been painted, proffer an idealizing sublimation of the hand—which may be understood through Bachelard’s comments on the drama of a possible caress: The (self) image, contemplated in still water, whose beauty solicits touching, would be disturbed by even the slightest physical imposition. To illustrate this tension he quotes Mallarme—‘The least sigh / Which breathed out / Would come back to me and ravish / What I adored / On the blue and and blond water /And skies and forest / And the Rose of the wave’. In light of this we recognize the pleasure of sublimation, in Niesche’s art, as being manifest in the delicate aspect of his creative task; the smooth applications of pigment, and the perfect polishing of mirrored surfaces, both of which are analogous to a ‘virtual, formalized, caress’. Moving beyond analogy, Niesche sets the stage for the beholder’s vivid regard of their own double—neither smudged, through the laying on of fingers, nor hazy, from too much heavy breathing.

In *Throb*’s free-standing painting-objects, reflective surfaces and paint operate according to an aesthetic of near stillness. While their mirrored elements (literally) crystalize this principle, the ultra-flatness of Niesch’s (non)painterly approach, with its slow color gradients, appears to index the furthest thing from a disturbed liquid. Its antithesis, of course, is the vortex of paint (that *kriegspiel* of brushstrokes) which expresses an *active narcissism*. This said, in line with our previous claims, the pleasurable *idealized narcissism* developed through Niesche’s work is no less generative. In fact, the stillness of their surfaces necessarily *reflect* the *self*-creating possibility of artifice—a theatricality unconsidered by Fried. Bachelard speaks its sovereignty: less a case of “I love myself as I am” than ‘“I am the way I love myself.” I live exuberantly because I love myself fervently. I want to show up well; thus I must increase my adornment’.3 Witness, the vivid panopoly of hues with which Niesche adorns his objects and canvases—inspired by cosmetic products. Moreover, the way his anti-expressive technique, and laborious achievement of colour-gradients, demonstrate and solicit a *deliberate* mode of showing up ‘well’.

Stars are not born; they are *made up*. As much holds true for fame as astrophysics, and, wonderfully, etymology—wherein a line runs from cosmetics to the celestial vault itself. The latter, *kosmos*, is ‘order, ornament’, giving *kosmein* (‘to arrange, adorn’), and, finally, *kosmetikos* (‘skilled in adornment or arrangement’). For what it’s worth, David Bowie held that the arrival of a ‘star-man’ required bi-directional traffic running along such a thread: ‘If *we* can sparkle *he* may land tonight’.4 Niesche all but states that his objects are, in some way, the glam star’s ‘pretty things’—glitter on the surface of certain works serving as the direct appropriation of Ziggy’s stardust.5 Within the flowering of such a narcissus, in Niesche’s work, wherein ‘life takes on beauty; clothes itself in images, blooms, takes on light’, *showing up well* sidesteps neurosis precisely because it has a cosmic outlook. While the gradient character of most of his painted surfaces rules out any horizon line (which might serve as a vanishing point or pictorial coordination), the subjective vision that they establish is, nevertheless, not without orientation. Mathematically, a gradient is the rate of change of a function. It is a vector (a direction). In this light, even within the pure ‘ornament’ of the artist’s abstract colour fields there is ‘order’, and that order is a trajectory—a *Target* (2014)—that fixes upon the stellar figure to enact orientation.

This said, following the optical logic of reflection, the orientation in question is mirrored this way *and* that; the arrow flies from the beholder towards the target *and* also from the target to the beholder. It is unclear who, or what, is doing the seducing; whether one wants to possess the phallus or be it. Ambiguity obtains in a looking glass, where a doubling desire makes narcissus both want to *be* Bowie, and want to *do* Bowie. In this universe of desire a human entreaty may be perfectly echoed by a non-human purr—the situation uncanny, in so far as it is unclear who or what spoke first. A deeper contemporary narcissism is thus whispered, for an instant, in Niesche’s painted and reflective objects: the commodity fetish *as* contemporary sexual orientation. Here, the starry-eyed lover lives the illumination of a *mis en abyme*; where (as it was once thought) light is a product of the eye. Glinting in a person or an animal’s regard, at night, in a club, or a shop, a little fire is seen to burn. By the analogical magic of the mirror it becomes clear as day: the sun, the stars, are all eyes. The cosmos, thus adorned, can lift up the eyes of the beholder—they, too, *can be heroes*.

Jonny Niesche is just two letters away from sharing a surname with a philosopher who wrote that ‘when you look long into an abyss, the abyss also looks into you’. Perhaps if the latter wore eye-shadow then the glare of the looking glass would not have assaulted his vision so. It was, in fact, Friedrich Nietzsche who also said that ‘as long as you still experience the stars as something “above you”, you lack the eye of knowledge’.6 More than a century later, the stars ‘look very different today’, and Jonny Niesche can know, as per the title of a previous exhibition, that ‘nothing goes as deep as decoration’.

3 Ibid.

4 Lyrics to David Bowie, *Starman*, 1972.

5 *Cosmos Cosmetics* was Niesche’s solo exhibition at Minerva, Sydney, 2016.

