

Dying on Stage

By Kyle Chayka

In 2013, the iconic comedian and actor Bill Murray told *Esquire* magazine that it takes a certain amount of courage to be on stage. “You’ve got to be completely unafraid to die,” he said. “You’ve got to be able to take a chance to die. And you have to die lots.” Getting a laugh, prompting an emotional response from your audience — you have to be willing to risk your own dignity and gamble something to pull off the trick. In fact, failure is a necessity. Being on stage is precarious. The entire endeavor could succeed or fail at any moment; it could all fall apart, and it often does. But that potential danger also makes success so much sweeter. Even if you fail, there’s always the chance that the next line will be the hit of your career.

The quote was brought to my attention by painter Tatiana Berg, one of the five young artists I curated together in “Dying on Stage.” Berg likens her painting practice to improv comedy, in which an ephemeral story evolves between actors, who crack jokes and stretch the narrative before it unfurls or shifts into a new form. Comedy and painting don’t make for an expected pairing, but the comparison is apt: When Berg is painting, she makes gestures, gauges how they land, and shifts her approach to the canvas based on the results. The studio is the stage, and the audience is the painter herself, set against the backdrop of art history.

This precarity between success and failure is at the backbone of contemporary painting. The Abstract Expressionist ideology of what makes a good painting — non-objective abstraction, the influence of the artist’s strong hand, a certain moral aggression — has been gone for decades. We have repeatedly been told that painting is dead, though it never is, and it’s the phrase itself has lost meaning rather than the medium. In fact, with the rise of the Internet, the world has been flooded with a larger volume of visual imagery than humanity has ever seen — all eras of art history are stripped of their contexts and mixed together in an aesthetic stew. So what makes a good painting now? Can such a thing even exist?

Given the work of the painters shown here, the successful painting is one that discloses its influences without becoming burdened by them, moving between abstraction and figuration, old and new, the physical world and the virtual one. There are no rules but to have fun, to entertain yourself and your viewers. The canvases beckon our eyes but don’t command them. They reward a short glance as well as a long stare. Their narratives form and collapse, push and pull, provoke laughs and sighs, flirting with resolution but never reaching it.

Sarah Faux’s works tend toward the bodily. Figurative landmarks like nipples, breasts, and legs appear in the midst of abstract passages, providing an immediate

sense of intimacy along with an attendant strangeness. In “Tangle” and “Torso” the artist wrinkles and dyes her canvases, giving the supports an added organic, vein-like texture. Like Faux, Kristina Lee mingles discrete figurative references with abstraction. Lee’s female forms emerge from dense, tropical jungles, like those of Wilfredo Lam. The foliage of “Bandit!” becomes microcosmic universes that play with paint’s ability to create and destroy space.

Tatiana Berg trawls relentlessly through visual history for her paintings, which take the form of both wall-mounted works and shaped, pyramidal structures stretched with canvas and mounted on wheels that she calls “tents.” On two of its sides, her “Stripe Tent” calls back to the minimalist paintings of Daniel Buren, but its third surface appears what might be a green and brown elementary school doodle: a calligraphic rendering of grass and mountains in curving swoops. At once simple and subtly skilled, the work is a vehicle for aesthetics as language.

The impetus for Clare Grill’s diaphanous paintings are drawings the artist makes of 18th-century samplers, the embroidery practices that young women would complete as part of their education. Grill takes elements from her drawings and magnifies them, creating visual moments that refer to symbols without ever coalescing into the real thing — hence the script of “Fits” and the chalkboard sky of “Star.”

Ariel Dill’s paintings and collages synthesize the history of abstraction, drawing from Joan Miro and high modernism as much as they do Japanese fabric patterns. Above all what I feel in Dill’s work is a joy in exploring the history of painting, experimenting, sampling, and pushing at the boundaries between what were perceived as different genres of art. “Glyph” is a brave foray right into the breach of figuration. Outlines flow smoothly into the shapes of organs and eyelashes, the mushy internal architecture of a Picasso portrait. Bare canvas shows through, casting the composition into an infinite space. Nothing is sacred, and yet everything is.

These are a group of painters who, through their improvised, zig-zag path through visual culture and their relentless pursuit of the incisive gesture and the right moment, have become unafraid to die. Their fearlessness should be applauded.