

## Sanya Kantarovsky's Truth-Bearing Fantasy

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Kantarovsky's paintings unveil reality as a fabrication whose true form is instability and transience.



Sanya Kantarovsky, "Exfiltration" (2020), oil and watercolor on linen, 74 3/4 x 55 1/8 inches (all images courtesy Modern Art, London)

*"There is some wisdom to be had in taking the gloomy view and looking upon the world as a kind of hell." (Arthur Schopenhauer, Parerga and Paralipomena, 1851)*

I was surprised to think of Schopenhauer's pessimism while at Sanya Kantarovsky's current exhibition, *The House of the Spider*, at Modern Art in London, given that the artist's work always has an element of humor, despite its general dark ambiance. The title is derived from a passage in the Quran that alludes to the precariousness of the human habitat, be it environmental, sociopolitical, cultural, or spiritual. It is a perfect metaphor for what we have experienced globally over the past year and what might have entered the painter's thoughts while making this suite of paintings.

Apart from the gloom that occupies the show, Kantarovsky's work has developed from previous exhibitions, his paintings becoming more realistic and painterly than illustrative or cartoonish. The formal distortion of the human figures recalls post-Stalin Soviet poster art (for instance, *agit-plakat*), but the figures are more fleshed out with paint; the hands in "Examination" (2020), for example, evoke Lucian Freud's handling of the paint as flesh. What replaces humor is an intensified level of irony and a solemn attitude to the eternal questions of life and death, suffering and injustice, power and powerlessness.



Installation view, *Sanya Kantarovsky: The House of the Spider*, 2021, Modern Art, London

Kantarovsky has previously stated that he conceives of a series of paintings in an exhibition as a whole. *The House of the Spider* presents a cohesive narrative, reflected foremost in the placement of paintings. The pairing of "Next Right Action" (2020) and "Examination" in a corner suggests two adjacent pages in a book, indicating a sequence.

More curious is that "Next Right Action" is hung much lower than the average height at which paintings are usually hung on gallery walls. This deliberate gesture compellingly invites viewers of average height to bend down, reflecting the person in the painting. The placement hints at the heavy toll on the artist's mind during the process of painting while manipulating the body that beholds the work. The painting's placement not only interrupts but also enhances and opens up how we read the image. This decision shows that Kantarovsky has veered further away from his early practice of integrating paintings and multimedia installations, instead honing his skills in spatial organization.

The exhibition seems to unfold like a theater play, one act followed by another, each of them distinct yet interconnected. "Exfiltration" (2020) sets the tone of the play as it confronts us by the entrance. The painting portrays a crow eating from the nostril of a mummified human head afloat on a lotus pond, surrounded by an idyllic landscape. The subject matter inspires contemplation on the meaning of life and death, here married in nature. Perhaps the crow connects the two realms by traveling in between them. The unsettling contrast between the disgust induced by the feasting crow and the pleasant background is representative of the dark humor that permeates Kantarovsky's oeuvre.



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In reading these paintings it is important to acknowledge their literary influences. “Examination” might recall Franz Kafka’s *The Trial* (published 1925), which tells the story of Josef K., who is persecuted and executed by a faceless justice system without knowing what crime he is accused of committing. The painting also depicts an unclear situation, yet the power relationship is made very clear by two partially seen figures, one wearing black leather boots, the other holding his hands behind his back and bending over an emaciated, shirtless man with bluish skin curled up on the ground. It is an unbearably demeaning image that summons a deep sense of guilt and fear in relation to violence experienced or witnessed in reality.

An understanding of the Russian avant-garde idea of *ostranenie* [making strange], first coined by the Russian formalist and literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky in his essay “Art as Device” (1917) is beneficial when perusing Kantarovsky’s paintings. “What we call art exists in order to give back the sensation of life, in order to make us feel things, in order to make a stone stony. The goal of art is to create the sensation of seeing, and not merely recognizing things” proclaims Shklovsky in his call to see the world anew through art.

Under the influence of this literary device, Kantarovsky reconfigures tropes, symbols, and metaphors, aided by the disfiguration of human bodies in the manner of caricature, in order to delineate his lived and immediate experiences in terms of felt sensations rather than conventional perception. In this way, he disrupts the habitual and automatic perception of the viewer and forces us to question what at the same time seems familiar.



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“Birth” (2020), which directly addresses the subject of Death, depicts an infant being handed to a skeleton mother who has just given birth, her hospital bed tainted with a splash of blood. Traditional devices in art for contemplating life and death, such as Vanitas paintings or the Dance of Death, are defamiliarized by the sight of the umbilical cord that connects the baby and skeleton. The idea of “birth-giving death,” as in the cycle of nature, adds a tinge of bitter optimism to the gory scene. To paraphrase Plato’s *Phaedo*, which posits philosophy as the practice of death (*meletē thanatou*), painting is an exercise in dying, and a tool to reflect on our own mortality.

“Annus Horribilis” (2020) is another example of defamiliarization. The power structure in the painting is made clear by the royal guard’s dominant position and his bearskin hat, which asserts itself as a supremely phallic object in Kantarovsky’s eloquent hands. Before British royal guards became welcoming mascots for tourists and public entertainment the hats were intended to intimidate, and the original connotation of intimidation is revived in this painting. “Annus Horribilis” raises the question of why this symbol of the pinnacle of patriarchy still exists today when the monarchy does not and will not protect its people anymore. Or have the tools of power ever served us?

The most exciting and mysterious painting in the exhibition is “The House of the Spider” (2020). The combination of oil and watercolor intensifies the sense of unreality and its mesmerizing, psychedelic perspective, and the red jewel hovering above the protagonist’s forehead subverts gravity and incites imagination.



Sanya Kantarovsky, "The House of the Spider" (2020),oil and watercolor on linen, 94 1/2 x 65 inches

An ambiguous purple form in the top right corner could be the spider of the title, or an eight-petal flower. The title is rich in implication yet lacking specification. This invites prolonged viewing to follow the hints in the artwork. Maybe the confusion here is intentional — when viewers actively seek the spider on the canvas, they may end up finding a flower as the spider's illusion or shadow, and the flower assuming the shape of a spider continues to bewilder and challenge our perception.

This fantastical scene of mental frenzy may allude to what the spider house allegory in the Quran suggests, as interpreted by the spiritual philosopher Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri in the exhibition's press release: the world as a stable habitat is but a fantasy and the quest for stability will only result in disillusionment.

Kantarovsky's paintings unveil reality as a form of fabrication, a fiction; in this way he suggests reality's true form is instability and transience. His fantastical images, bearing fruits of reality, also remind us that painting itself is not only a means of deception but also the answer to its own riddle. The pleasure of looking at these paintings is not a matter of beauty. Rather, it is an experience of confronting truth, which, as Leo Tolstoy wrote in *What Is Art?* (1897), "destroys illusion, the main condition of beauty."

Sanya Kantarovsky: The House of the Spider continues at *Modern Art* (4–8 Helmet Row, London, England) through June 19.