

SANYA KANTAROVSKY with Jason Rosenfeld

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"I feel that humor is ultimately the most important element, this more Bergsonian kind of humor, a kind of self-reflexive humor, a tap on the shoulder."

Sanya Kantarovsky's new exhibition of paintings at Lühring Augustine is titled *On Them*. It is his first solo exhibition with the gallery.

New York

Jason Rosenfeld (Rail): Much of the work that you've done in the past has been multimedia, involving different kinds of installations and modes of hanging works and playing with the visibility above and beyond and around paintings and sculpture. So how did you approach this show of only paintings?



Sanya Kantarovsky, *Fracture*, 2019. Oil and watercolor on canvas, 103 x 79 inches. © Sanya Kantarovsky; Courtesy the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, and Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London, and Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin.

Sanya Kantarovsky: When I was in graduate school in Los Angeles, when my work started congealing into something worthwhile, I was heavily invested in a type of practice that positions painting in contingency with other things, and makes it part of a *mise en scène*. I was very much into the work of Lucy McKenzie and Paulina Olowaska—which I still am—and people like Mike Kelley and William Levitt, who created environments, and I was interested in doing that. It took me a few years to understand that there was something counterintuitive in trying to constantly complicate the instance of the exhibition, because the paintings always ended up resisting this type of treatment. And this also restricted the degree of indulgence that I could have with the paintings themselves. So then these different interests started to separate. Rather than trying to create scenarios, I started working on projects separately and not necessarily trying to force them together in exhibitions. Ultimately, everything always revolves around painting in my practice. It has always been my biggest interest and challenge. So the last show I did in New York, *Allergies*, at Casey Kaplan, was five years ago and in the course of those five years a lot of different things happened. Since the majority of the work has unfolded in Europe, I wanted to bring some of the things I've developed outside of New York back to New York, and painting seemed like the most solid, cogent way to do that.

Rail: Do you feel your education at RISD [Rhode Island School of Design] and then at UCLA did not emphasize painting, was more about a totality in different media, like Mike Kelley environments?

Kantarovsky: Well they were very different moments in my life, involving radically different approaches to art education. RISD was very much a baseline undergraduate foundation that I'm very happy that I got. More than anything, it taught me how to work and problem-solve. Whenever you meet people that went through that ringer, they have a very specific approach to problem-solving. And such a large portion of making art is really problem-solving, formal and otherwise. At UCLA it was a much different experience. I was at a point where I was ready to assemble all these different hats I was trying to wear into something I could feel good about and let out into the open. It was a great place because on the one hand there was this community outside of the school where I met a lot of people who remain in my life to this day, and started a lot of conversations that I'm still having. Within the school itself I had the daily luxury of being able to speak about my work to artists like Mary Kelly, Andrea Fraser, Cathy Opie, Jim Welling. They all had these really amazing, useful, if oftentimes very conflicting voices. But the backbone of my education there was my relationship with Lari Pittman. Lari was the first person who opened my mind to this idea of allowing yourself to indulge in facility, in the things that I was good at doing, in the way that I'd been drawing since I was a kid. I was gravitating towards these things that I had not let myself do for a long time, and he gave me the permission, so to speak, to use these languages in service of something interesting, in service of an artwork. He is so heavily invested in looking at and speaking about painting, and my attitude towards painting also became a lot more serious. But my taste, at the

time, and my interests, owed a lot to the idea of an artist as multidisciplinary, the artist as an actor in his own play. And I resented this idea that painting could not do this or could not do that. Then admittedly later on I came back around to the realization that the limits of painting encompassed such a rich and complicated arena, and increasingly I became more invested in painting as a practice. A conceptual painter friend recently told me that you can only be a good artist or a good painter—one or the other. I think there's some truth to that, but I'm of the mind that being both is possible, albeit very difficult. Very few belong to that Venn diagram sliver.

Rail: Interesting to hear that idea of facility as something that was downgraded.

Kantarovsky: I think it still is. I always tell my students that there's nothing more tragic and boring than a painting about facility, than painting about being good at something. Because no matter how good you are at painting, there's always a precedent that includes people that are much, much better than you. Facility is only interesting in service of something larger. It needs to serve a purpose, and that's where Lari came in. He made me see that equation more clearly, and made me realize that good art didn't necessarily have to come at the expense of joy in making.



Sanya Kantarovsky, *On Them*, 2019. Oil and watercolor on canvas, 75 x 55 inches. © Sanya Kantarovsky; Courtesy the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, and Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London, and Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin.

Rail: We've been so conditioned to be suspicious of the possibility of deriving pleasure from looking at brushwork. No one's going to be as facile as Sargent, say, but there is a kind of pleasure to be derived from painting that is slowly being embraced now, much more than it has been in the past. It doesn't necessarily jive with an idea of beauty or a particular kind of coloration. And it's interesting the way your color seems to have changed consistently over your career, from garish to what you're getting in this show, with deep tones and more harmony. But that sort of pleasure in looking at paint married to something which seems thematic, or has a figurative content, is back. It's a good thing, I think.

Kantarovsky: It's interesting that you mention Sargent. The way that I think about these things is that all artists, painters included, have their own skill set, and everyone's skill set is radically different—I could never make a [Richard] Tuttle painting, and he probably couldn't make my painting, and probably neither of us could make a John Currin painting. Some of these skill sets are aligned with something more recognizable. Sargent's an example of this very classic, academic facility. There's also somebody like Guston who was an absolute virtuoso, but the markers, the criteria of that virtuosity, report to another system of values, not a classically academic one. That kind of specificity of facility is very important. It is what makes a voice feel primary and not secondary. I am not after this idea of pleasure, of looking at something pretty or beautiful. That seductive quality of a painting—that way a painting can pull you in—can also give way to a much more complicated experience, one that couldn't be articulated as pleasure. It is perhaps something unnamable, something that creates a sense of delay, a sense of discord, that you then have to work to wrap your head around. That's when painting becomes really interesting, and important insofar as it is one of the last sites we have that demands a very slow and discerning look. I remember Peter Doig saying in a talk that the way you look at a painting is the way that you look at a lover's face, and that of course is very romantic, but it is an interesting idea, that this register of looking is very different from the way we look at almost everything else. I don't necessarily think that it's about pleasure. It can actually be incredibly unnerving, or discomfiting, or energizing—whatever you want to say.

Rail: Well that's the sublime. The concept of a pleasure that you take from a kind of unsteadiness and irresolution.

Kantarovsky: The sublime and the transcendent are very religious ideas, and what I'm talking about is much more secular. In the history of 20th century painting in this country, ideas of the sublime have been conflated with ideas of freedom and happiness. Post-war American painting was instrumental in furthering the idea of American cultural superiority, because of course the pre-war American art world was far inferior to what was happening in Europe. The idea that Abstract Expressionists were getting to the sublime, getting to the transcendent, was a way of claiming meaning and authority over

contemporary art. When you look at something and you're stumped by it and it causes a kind of slippage or doubletake, that's not you accessing the sublime. It's just meaning. It's like when meaning is made in a way that is unfamiliar, unexpected. I'm more in tune with this Russian avant-garde idea of *ostranenija*, making strange. This was the notion that art had to defamiliarize something and make you feel you're looking at it for the first time. Those are ideas that resonate with me more.

Rail: Do you think that connects with the concept of nostalgia? Because some of your other interviews and writings express the idea that there are things that initially look familiar and then you draw back and you actually are unsettled. What we do as art historians, and often artists do too, is look for concurrences. Then as an art historian you try to tease some meaning from that. Because it can't just be a facile resemblance to other art. The artists never think of it that way. But there is that idea of nostalgia, maybe for something that you can't actually put your finger on.

Kantarovsky: I was always reluctant to speak about this stuff because my work was always framed as nostalgic, and also framed as conjuring painters of yesteryear, but for me it was never about that. Nostalgia is a real longing for the past, and I don't long for the past, particularly not a past that I wasn't really a part of. At the same time, I do push against this notion of novelty that fuels the art world. Everyone is really hungry for this trope of contemporaneity, everybody wants to see the present represented or reflected in a very literal, direct, topical way. And what this amounts to I think is captured in this term I love, "nostalgia for the present." But it's kind of a red herring, because technology in our highly mediated and modified and gamified environment is actually changing so fast that the work that attempts to comment on, or illustrate technologies that are persistently lightyears ahead, is kind of shooting itself in the foot in the long term.



Sanya Kantarovsky, *Beach*, 2019. Oil and watercolor on canvas, 79 x 111 inches. © Sanya Kantarovsky; Courtesy the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, and Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London, and Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin.

I'm very interested in the notion of continuity, what remains the same and what remains vital to lived experience. I am obsessed with looking at paintings that were made thousands of years ago, paintings that were made hundreds of years ago, and paintings that are made today. I see a strong thread in the ways that people have struggled through and used this strange structure, this very thin sculpture with paint on one side, to work through a sense of exitlessness. I feel a connection to this history, and I'm less interested in developing a kind of novel brand or language, because the stakes that were set up art historically after photography have kind of run their course. We no longer have this expanding circle. Now art has claimed every possibility imaginable. This conversation could be positioned as art, anything could be positioned as art. So in this sense I am just very interested in the language of and possibilities within painting, and I am constantly absorbing and transmuting and working my way through the things that I'm interested in or frightened of, and sometimes that can lead to visible tips of the hat to certain things that existed a long time ago. I see it as a conversation.

Rail: Robert Hughes's concept of the shock of the new, it doesn't apply so much now. We're in a new age of anxiety politically, environmentally, and in terms of identity. Continuities are one path, but nostalgia for the present—I love that idea—because once I became a dad I felt that immediately, like you're going to miss the present, I already do. When you have kids who are growing up. And that's something that maybe I never thought about before, thinking about my immediate experience as something that I'm going to miss. The cartoonist Daniel Clowes's *Ghost World* [1997], which was also made into a great film, is about the time when a young adult understands an idea of nostalgia. The protagonist Enid begins to conceptualize the idea that she's going to miss where she is in life, but it's also proleptic, it's about thinking about where you're going to be and what's going to happen. So I'm thinking more about nostalgia not for past art, but for experience. That's the really gripping thing that you're looking at in the gallery here, that idea that as an art historian one part of my brain looks at the paintings and thinks, this reminds me of this, this, this, this, this. But another part of my brain is thinking emotionally about the image and how it relates to experience. And *that's* the deeper connection. The art historical relationships are there in your art, and you seem to be developing stories which you enter into at a particular moment without a beginning and an end. They relate to everyone's experience in a way that seems familiar but slightly ungraspable.

Kantarovsky: It's the difference between a primary experience and a secondary experience. When you look at someone who's determined to make Picasso sculptures or Ad Reinhardt paintings, for which there's always an appetite, you look at them and it seems you've seen those exact paintings before, in a much stronger form. And sometimes you look at something and although it feels familiar, you're very aware of the fact that you're seeing it for the first time. It feels lived in, but yet still singular—the first of its kind. There's something interesting about that cognitive dissonance, and it goes back to that Russian idea of making strange. That's kind of the bar that I try and set for myself, and this intense ringer I often put the paintings through is really aimed at getting to that place.

Rail: Do you work on them simultaneously?

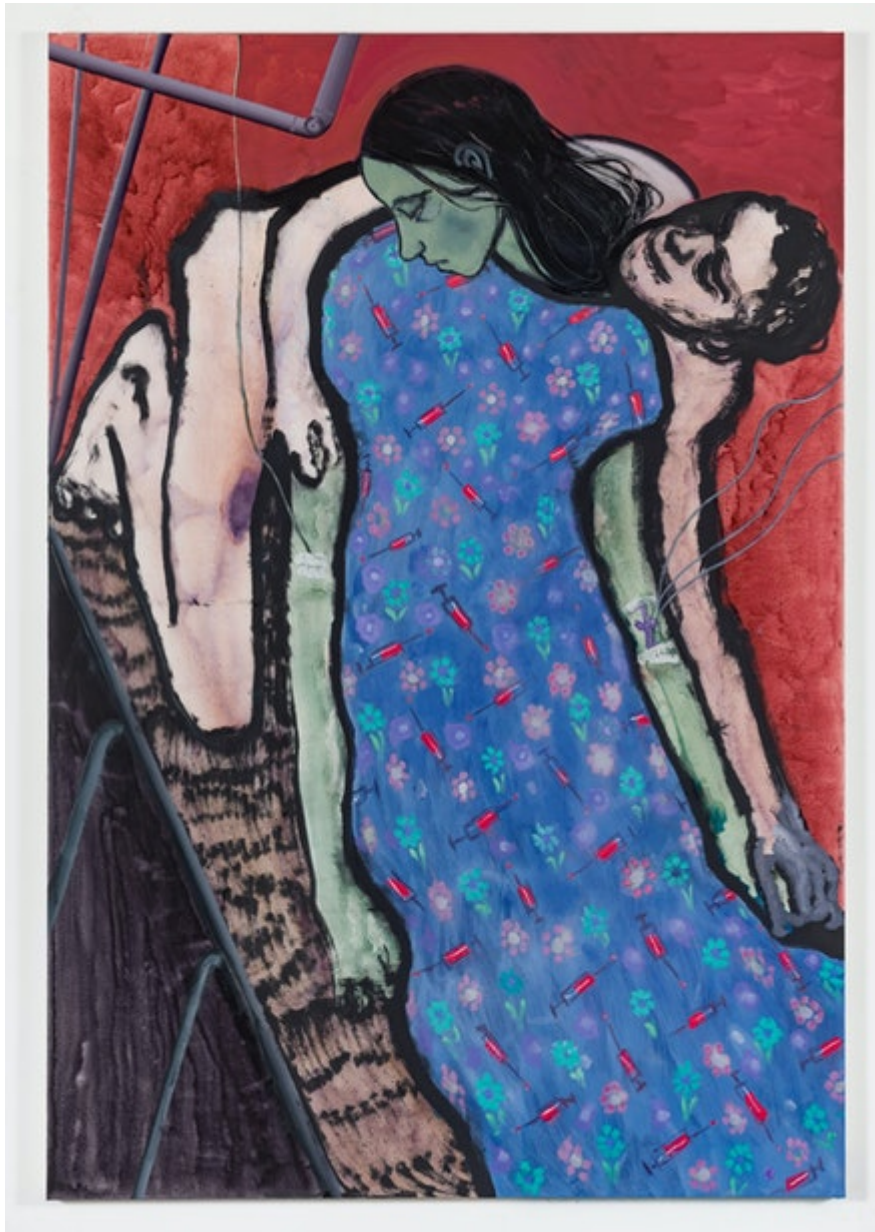
Kantarovsky: I do.

Rail: Even the big pictures?

Kantarovsky: It's a process that's very organic. I always have many happening at once, but then some start demanding all kinds of things, and you put them aside, and new ones come in. It's nice because the paintings are always different from each other, which is another very obviously deliberate feature of the work that comes out of a particular anxiety. The shifting of gears becomes important in the construction of the exhibition, kind of yanking the viewer from one headspace into another. Because the paintings are made at the same time, often I'll literally run from one to the other, even for something as simple as discovering a color and realizing that it might work really well on another painting. So they all kind of share certain affinities and certain pieces of DNA. And that's the cogency of the thing as a show, it comes out of that. When I first started painting I would work on one, finish it, and then work on another. I worked in that way before I started making shows. When I started making shows I realized that they all have to be worked on holistically, as a totality, in order for them to function together.

Rail: I've always encouraged my students to go and see such gallery shows because they will never see these pictures together again except maybe in some retrospective in thirty years. Artists are always thinking about a conversation amongst pieces that is very carefully thought out and then installed. Even the gaps between certain works help communicate a kind of grouping or a certain distinctiveness.

Kantarovsky: Oh yes, the gaps are as important as the paintings [*laughs*].



Sanya Kantarovsky, *Needles*, 2019. Oil and watercolor on canvas, 95 x 65 inches. © Sanya Kantarovsky; Courtesy the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, and Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London, and Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin.

Rail: What works in the exhibit have this quality of affinity that were talking about? Something like *Fracture* (2019)—for that one I wrote down these notes: “Picasso, pietà, Schiele, beanbag chair, voluminous skirt.”

Kantarovsky: It definitely was a skirt and not a beanbag [*laughter*]. That's another funny thing in my paintings, a lot of them have that kind of “once you see it, you can't un-see it” thing, details that, having made them, are so obvious to me. There was another version of a painting that is in the show, which has now been painted over. There was a boat floating in water with a giant octopus underneath, and no one saw the octopus, which was totally crazy to me. But people just thought it was a sort of complicated reflection of the boat. So that happens a lot where someone's hand doesn't register, and I still don't know how I feel about it, to be honest.

Rail: I see that in *On Them* (2019), in the play of hands.

Kantarovsky: Exactly. In *On Them* the subject has one hand over the other person's face and another hand underneath and he's in the process of wringing his neck and twisting his hand, but there's such a complex interplay of hands and arms that some people don't see that. Sometimes I have to decide how important it is to me to articulate something, because it's always a very fine balance, and something can become overwrought or too literal very quickly. A friend told me that my work was marked by "a fear of being misunderstood." I always feel like I'm wrestling with that fear, and really appreciate artists who don't have it.

Rail: I love the way that *On Them* kind of contradicts a whole cycle of dependency which you see in some of the other pictures like *Fracture* and *Beach* (2019) and *Needles* (2019) where there's this enveloping and supportive interaction, which is what I see as a kind of pietà connection without it being religious. But in *On Them*, you think maybe initially the person is trying to pull the other person up, but in fact it looks like he is pushing him down and twisting his head and that sort of lurking malevolence problematizes the whole rest of the show.

Kantarovsky: I'm happy to hear you reading it like that. I think in almost all of the imagery in the show there are many possible readings, and very rarely situations with fixed meanings. I support that quality with the titles, which are very often double entendres, or rather than clarify something they sort of complicate it, or make something that feels very tragic into a joke. To me these kinds of incongruities are really the main stuff, the lynchpin of the project.

Rail: Well *On Them*—just the title—fiddles with that also. I was thinking, what does it mean? There's "that's on you," which is a kind of pushing responsibility and also blame, as in "that's on *you*—you fucked up." But it also can be a positive element, as in "drinks are on me, the next round's on you," so there's a kind of trade in a way or bartering or a kind of alleviating a load.



Sanya Kantarovsky, *Thief*, 2019. Oil and watercolor on linen, 16 x 12 inches. © Sanya Kantarovsky; Courtesy the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, and Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London, and Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin.

Kantarovsky: The title mobilizes both the painted subjects and the audience, and the question then is “who is the them?” And I love how it’s two very short words with so much gravity and very little specificity. The things that I’ve been bothered by outside of painting are the way that we live our lives, and these illusions of distance between comfort and violence, affluence and poverty. We surveil, we love to keep ourselves informed of other people’s misery. But we very rarely claim any kind of agency, or feel actual connection. It just gives us a sense of some kind of moral standing to know that something horrible has happened, yet we are unable to think further through what it means or what our responsibility might be in regards to these problems. The fact is that we’re all in this collective death drive that we cannot control or resist, and so we don’t mind the fact that we’re trampling towards death. We consciously ignore it. In my mind that title really resonated with those thoughts. The art world too, runs according to a consensus that sometimes runs counter to the opinions of really intelligent people. But the gears that are

in motion are too big to fail, and no one wants the carousel to stop spinning. And that's kind of sad, but it just proves that our art world is no more special than the rest of the world, which is fueled by desire for money and power at the end of the day. [Laughter]

Rail: Coming out of art fair week like we just did, it feels like that. It's this frenetic influx of people from all over the world to go all these exhibits. And there is just the impossibility of seeing everything that galleries have very carefully crafted in their booths. It's a little dispiriting to go and realize you're not going to see it all.

Kantarovsky: I can't do them anymore unless I really have to. I didn't go to Frieze. They're vampiric in this way that I can't even describe. I feel very wasted after I go to these things. It's like that Diedrich Diederichsen essay about surplus economy where he writes about these types of experiences where you can only say the word "intense" afterwards, and you don't remember anything anyone said or anything you saw.

Rail: And it takes forever to get a coffee.

Kantarovsky: Yeah, it's a bummer. I mean I have to do them, just like everyone else has to do them, on occasion. It's the least fair situation for a real artwork because people's attention economy is so bankrupt in those instances, where you see art floating on those temporary walls surrounded by things that they have absolutely nothing to do with except for the fact that these people have the same dealer. It's a very weird way to look at art, and in the rare instances that I see something that I really connect with I feel so bad for that thing because I'm thinking, "what are you doing here?" But that's the way it is.

Rail: That's the argument for the kind of gallery show you're putting on now, in its totality.

Kantarovsky: Sure.

Rail: In this show it feels as if there's something about medicine and disease and a kind of physical suffering, as seen in works such as *Thief* (2019), where you have limbs being carried, or *Platelets* (2019) or *Needles* (2019). I don't think I've seen this in your work before, or at least not as comprehensively. Is that something that's just kind of come into your thinking, story, or narrative.

Kantarovsky: It's less about disease and more the body. I was interested in this idea of measuring the distance between the inside and the outside, interiority and exteriority, the private and public, and also just thinking through death and the body as a kind of finite living mechanism. And what that kind of telescoping does to things that might feel trivial or things that might feel important that start to feel trivial. For example the snowman [*Baba*, 2019] took me a really long time to nail down because I wanted it to feel like this kind of haptic, heavy form. Snowmen are interesting because their resemblance to a human body is so approximate, right on the cusp of being legible as a body. And so I wanted it to feel like it was this body that was totally trashed, that was really full of, you know, God knows what—piss, coffee, cigarette butts—this idea of being pregnant with junk.



Sanya Kantarovsky, *Baba*, 2019. Oil and watercolor on canvas, 85 x 65 inches. © Sanya Kantarovsky; Courtesy the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, and Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London, and Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin.

Rail: That emerges as it melts, from the core.

Kantarovsky: With a friend I discovered this trove of dirty snowmen—snowpeople—photographs. They were just such incredible images, some of them were so good. The way these things fall apart is so incredibly fucked up.

Rail: Dirty in a graphic sexual way or dirty in an actual gritty, dirty way?

Kantarovsky: Dirty in a physically dirty way. They become these receptacles, these magnets for everything, and because they're white their dirtiness is so incredibly legible, it's in high relief. I wanted to transmit that sensation, and that's why it's so much more bulky and physical in the way he's painted, because I wanted him to appear as this thing.

Rail: Do you mind talking about the title? *Baba*?

Kantarovsky: “Baba” is a Russian word that I really love. A Russian title is very hard to make legible in English. But phonetically, I also love connecting things, connecting dots that are gustatory or sensory, and “Baba” is a kind of onomatopoeia. Like what does a baba look like in English? But in Russian it could be translated as “broad,” describing a woman. Yet when it’s made into its diminutive form, which is “babushka,” it’s very warm and tender. But baba is much more specific than “broad.” It connotes someone crass, unkempt, perhaps angry or unsavory.

Rail: So we’re meant to read this snowperson as female? Or the woman in the puffy coat?

Kantarovsky: Not necessarily. It is the only work in the show that came out of a preexisting image. It was a Soviet cartoon that was published in the satirical journal called *Krokodil*. It is an interesting joke to read in the context of what’s happening right now because it was these two women walking in this factory setting past this snowman that looks torn apart and has hand prints all over him, or her, and the caption was something like, “Oh, the boss got really drunk last night and thought this was a woman.” And they call the snowman “Baba.” Dark.

But to go back to the medicine thing, for example in *Needles*, it’s unclear whether she’s being tranquilized or if she’s dead or whether she just went off life support, and there is this kind of innocuous and yet disturbing hospital pattern of her gown that has the syringes on it. It’s really more about these kinds of signals. They’re almost kind of like notes. I wanted some of the paintings to feel bodily and visceral, which is why some of the imagery is there. And of course the *Thief* painting became this joke of me laying myself out for others to tear apart and carry away. He’s also kind of the usher of the show [it is displayed in the front].

Rail: I was surprised to see the size of some of them, having looked at them only in reproduction, because their monumentality belies how big they actually are. I hadn’t looked at the dimensions. The big ones are tremendous, they have such an impact and a presence. They do sort of draw you in bodily, and you have spoken about such an impact on the viewer, the intersection of various gazes, and how the pictures pull you in. They’re not sort of aerobic in a way that abstract works are, where you want to go right up close to them and back and forth. But instead they have this real presence that sort of envelops you and that has to do with the compositions and the forms and also the connections with the faces.

Kantarovsky: They’re meant to be seen up close. They’re obviously made from up-close, and I like to think in an ideal scenario, when someone who is willing to go that far, something different happens up-close. To me they’re much more important as things rather than as images. I look at the image as a door, an entry point into the artwork.

Rail: From close up, *Beach* reminded me of Munch woodcuts. The way that you’ve worked the hair in the one figure it looks like sort of scratching out striations and it breaks up the seamlessness of the paint application. It feels more like a print in a way. I wouldn’t notice that from a distance.

Kantarovsky: Up close it becomes more of an abstraction in the sense that you're able to see the making of the thing, and the way that it falls apart and assembles and falls apart again. Oftentimes these paintings have several other paintings beneath them and that's something I'm interested in, how the history of the thing is laid bare, and that's part of the reason why the work isn't made in a linear way. I never know exactly what it will take to finish something. I make the kind of work that could be finished at any moment.

Rail: You don't work from preliminary sketches?

Kantarovsky: I do, but it almost always goes rogue. The demands of the painting oftentimes accelerate over whatever commitment I have to translating a drawing.

Rail: Do you do underdrawing?

Kantarovsky: Honestly, it's always different. Sometimes I do. There are some paintings that I don't start with a drawing, I just sort of find something and keep going with an oil stick or with a brush to have a more intuitive way of structuring the painting. Ultimately it always starts with drawing in some sense. I always think of myself as a drawer.

Rail: I wanted to talk about cartooning and illustration. I don't know how you think about it, or your interest in comic books, graphic novels.

Kantarovsky: Especially now that I have a daughter, I am very interested in and am a consumer of children's books. Children's books and illustrations certainly formed a big part of my visual vernacular very early on. That is an incredible world to go to, at its best, for really inventive image making. I love Tomi Ungerer, whom I've been reading with my daughter quite bit, and is very interesting because unlike Maurice Sendak and other contemporaries, he wasn't interested in a personal style. Every story looked like it could have been drawn by a different person. But at the core, to me the primary difference between illustration and art or painting is that one is about accelerating an exterior body or language or idea, and one is about delaying it, or just delaying language, oftentimes in a self-contained way. Those are diametrically opposed value systems. And with respect to my affinity with illustration or my interest in cartoons, they're something that I absorb along with a lot of other things, which sometimes come from painting, sometimes from life, or just the world, and it all gets subsumed into the paintings. Because no matter how good an illustration is you don't really stare at it. Its values are different, you don't sit with it for a long time. It's a direct address that has an instance, and that instance is meant to live as an image, usually in print or online. It's not meant to exist as an object. And all the tricks and colors and sensibilities in illustration are always in service of that kind of acceleration of an idea. Some of the illustrators that in my mind approach art, are approaching it not in a sense of painting, but in the sense of idea making—someone like Saul Steinberg, whom I'm a huge fan of. It's about the fact that the drawings, the jokes and humor, and the skeleton of that project are so much about shifting the way someone thinks. That's what makes him an artist.

Rail: But is there a distinction of course because he's also the writer? The writer, illustrator, all in one.

Kantarovsky: For sure. His whole universe is very much art. What I'm trying to say is that the paintings I make have a kind of image component, and in that image component there are shared values and oftentimes shared languages with certain kinds of illustration. But in an illustration, *that's* what it is, it's the image, whereas with the paintings there's that moment. That feature of the painting is one step along the way of what it is as an artwork.

Rail: Does it have to do with a kind of visual accessibility, maybe? In illustration, presumably you have a source that you're accelerating.

Kantarovsky: In a way. I do kind of relish the fact that the paintings have a broad spectrum of engagement. Perhaps someone who doesn't know, who doesn't have the connoisseurship or love of painting to really scrutinize and think through the thing, can still get some kind of frequency that is interesting or useful. And I do think working with the figure allows for a slightly lower common denominator or something. I am interested in that, simply by virtue of the fact that I had so many powerful experiences with narrative painting that I can't let go of and that I keep indulging in. I'm also interested in the cartoon body for the same reasons I'm interested in the snowman. It is so flexible because there's a kind of a tether to the human body and there's a possibility of identification. You can identify with a cartoon, but then a cartoon can also display degrees of violence and abuse that in realism would be gaudy, and very difficult to take seriously. It can allow a very dark joke to be made without over-articulation. In some instances the hyper-real can serve that purpose, but only in historical examples. Like the way the Paul Cadmus painting [*Herrin Massacre* (1940)] of that Ohio massacre feels, where it's just like—holy shit, he really wanted to describe this violence! And the reason that painting works in a weird perverted way is how insanely it's painted, with such a heightened attention to every little hair and blood droplet.

Rail: Yes. It's lurid.

Kantarovsky: But I think it would be very difficult, if not impossible to make something like that today.

Rail: Well look what Goya did, Goya was doing the same thing. He was pursuing a sort of intense illustration in “Los Caprichos” and “The Disasters of War.”

Kantarovsky: Goya, [Honoré] Daumier, Doré. A lot of those people from the 18th going into the 19th century started to approach and synthesize cartoon language. That's another thing—thinking about cartoons in relationship to Mannerism, for example. This idea that divinity didn't have to be translated in human terms, that a divine body had to be distorted in a way that communicated that supernatural divinity. So you have Pontormo, Parmigianino, and of course El Greco, who in my eyes is very present in this show, where you have this kind of very cartoon strategy. You have the early Felix the Cat cartoons or Disney cartoons where the body is accentuating or exaggerating a movement by distorting its proportion. All those things are very interesting and of course painting as a kind of a

space is really rife with possibility for making those decisions and doing things that don't add up. Sticking to perhaps a moment of realism and then abandoning it in a sort of jarring manner.

I feel that humor is ultimately the most important element, this more Bergsonian kind of humor, a kind of self-reflexive humor, a tap on the shoulder. I think that having a laugh at something that is difficult is important, a way to deal. I always tell my students the two most important values are efficiency and humor—when something looks the way it looks because it has to, and when something has a degree of humor in it. And that humor doesn't have to be a haha slapstick kind of humor, it can be a kind of humor rooted in violated expectations. I cannot look at humorless work. I can't take it seriously. And there is work like that. There's plenty of stuff like that, but I have a very hard time engaging with it on a deeper level.

Rail: Is that a tap on the shoulder and then you turn around and nobody's there?

Kantarovsky: Possibly, yeah. There's a famous Kafka story that was a point of departure for a show I organized a few years ago at Tanya Leighton Gallery, which is so much about the tap on the shoulder. It's called "Kleine Fabel," or "A Little Fable." And then David Foster Wallace wrote a short essay called "Laughing with Kafka" about that story. It's about a mouse that's stuck in a very elaborate, gigantic maze, and it just can't get out. It finally sees that the maze is ending, and it gains speed and sees a giant mousetrap, and then it hears a voice from behind saying, "all you have to do is change your direction." The mouse turns around and it's a cat saying this. That's the joke. To me, that's a really good encapsulation of what I'm talking about here.

Rail: A kind of gallows humor.

Kantarovsky: Well, I'm a Russian immigrant [*laughter*]. My tradition is of laughing at one's own predicament [*laughter*]. Without running away from it, I guess. That's the difference between American humor and Russian humor.

Rail: Right, taking it on.

Kantarovsky: Or choosing not to pretend that it will end at some point.