



Karin Preller



Strange Life: Paintings by Karin Preller

Since at least the middle of the last century, painting that lays any kind of claim to realism takes its cue not from the real world of objects and places, but from photographs. Though Karin Preller's work could not, strictly speaking, be called photo-realism, it often takes as its point of departure photos from old family albums. And while her work raises some of the same questions as photo-realism – about the nature of the real, about the relation of photography to painting, about representation – where it differs is in its eschewing of the trickery of that genre. So where a Richard Estes or a Gerhard Richter might have us wondering for a while whether we are looking at a painting or a photograph, and marvelling, when we have finally worked it out, at the closeness of the copy to reality (the photograph), Preller's work moves us very quickly away from that mental space. Its appeal is to the emotive rather than the forensic nature of the aesthetic.

What we do wonder when looking at Preller's work, is whether its chief comment is upon the purported ability of photography to record history or on the distillation of experience allowed by painting. Were her images more brightly hued we might well compare her to the nineteenth-century American realists, but the limited palette of her paintings, and her ability to suggest volume and perspective while at the same time flattening her images,



lead to a comparison of her work with Pop Art – a genre that took very seriously its relationship to photography while also commenting upon painting's claims to high art.

At the same time, however, we cannot miss the appeal in Preller's work to two genres of imagery familiar to South Africans: on one hand, the family snapshots that our generation – middle class and white, as it happens in this instance – knows so well: parents on the dance floor, cousins arranged on the lawn, aunts, uncles, and friends at dinner parties, all shot ever so slightly out of focus, all fading under the triangular tabs or yellowing cellophane of photo albums bought in the sixties (right when both the photo-realists and the Pop Artists were reinventing the snapshot they too had known since childhood). On the other hand, Preller's images have in mind the many paintings of peculiarly South African scenes so familiar to us: the verandahs of Transvaal houses, the shopfronts in platteland dorps, the houses set against indigenous vegetation. Together these two kinds of image-making comprise a visual architecture that takes its character from a deeply embedded desire to belong, a desire that is, nevertheless, imbued with poignancy because of an equally strong awareness of the tenuousness of belonging.

The paintings in Preller's series "Out on the town circa 1970" are taken from photographs of dinner parties in the late sixties and early seventies. We recognise the period

and the class of the subjects from the cut of bodices, the objects scattered about, and the table settings. The latter seem straight out of 1960s cookbooks, the more conservative kind that were the last relics of the kind of domesticity still alive in the forties and fifties but fading with beehive hairstyles in the sixties. Except that there really are no clearly identifiable subjects in these images. Rather, the paintings have a kind of synecdochic effect, a suggestion of the whole through reference to parts. The white-gloved arm, for example, suggests an elegance and self-awareness on the part of the wearer whose face we cannot see. The crowds of half-empty wine glasses and the champagne bottles with their seals torn raggedly convey a genteel liberality, a certain self-conscious propriety that came with the kind of gathering suggested by these images.

What Preller has painted, then, is not so much the fragments of a dinner party as a set of references to a dinner party; a clearly recognisable, middle-class code captured over and over again with brownie cameras by those of our parents' and grandparents' generation. The result is less a nostalgic reminiscence than a study of the quality of nostalgia. Her work separates parts from the whole in order to examine precisely what it is that makes us remember, what it is we unconsciously fix upon to orientate ourselves in relation to the past and to the world. In so doing Preller alludes not only to the photographs from



Images: (page 2, detail) Doris,
Die Wingerdblaar, Johannesburg,
1970; (page 4, detail) Sturrock
Park, Johannesburg, late 1960's;
(previous page, detail) Sturrock
Park, Johannesburg, late 1960's;
(this page) Jack, Die Wingerdb-
laar, Johannesburg, 1970.
Medium: Oil on canvas
Dimensions: 60cm x 70cm
2006



which she draws both her images and her inspiration, but also the black and white films of the fifties and sixties, and, finally, to that master of nostalgia and sentiment, advertising.

In her still lifes – silent, monochromatic renderings of bowls on cloths – Preller deliberately places herself within a painterly tradition, drawing us away from the references to photographs in her other works. Ironically, however, it is the still life that has always been the most photographic of painting genres, or at least the genre whose relationship to real objects is most plain, taking as its starting point the clear mandate to render a set of objects as accurately as possible. The result is an image that is both a painterly exercise – a study of the relationship of objects to one another within a prescribed space, of textures, of volumes and light – and a purely aesthetic apprehension of inanimate objects.

Seeing these two small series in juxtaposition leads inevitably to an examination of our expectations of the experience of looking at a painting. The still lifes on their own, because of what we know about and expect from still lifes, would have us asking only whether these are good renditions, whether they are good examples of the genre. Seen next to the twelve small paintings of "Out on

the town circa 1970," however, they become a kind of last stand for the rendering of real objects in paint. For that reason, their emotional and aesthetic impact is enhanced: they remind us of painting's traditions, they express the strange relationship between ordinary domestic objects and art, and they have us smiling at what we hold dear not only in the aesthetic object itself but in that mix of real and dreamlike experiences that we think of as our lives.

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- ⊕ - Graskop
- ⊕ - Dullstroom
- ⊕ - Pretoria - Tshwane
- ⊕ - Irene - Tshwane
- ⊕ - Richmond
- ⊕ - Cape Town