

A SHIFTING SORT OF SEEMING



The Pleasurable Difficulty of Leopold Plotek

by Benjamin Klein

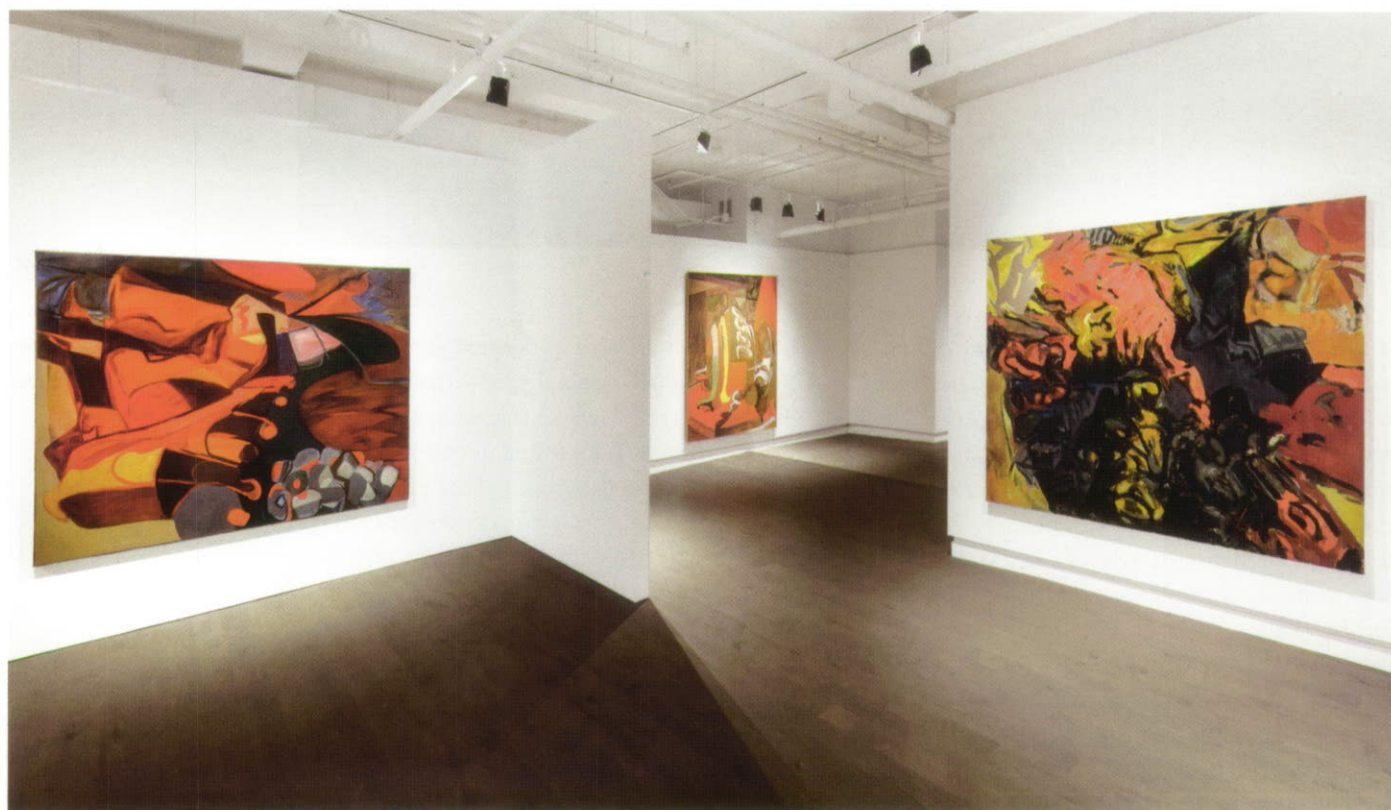
Painting seriously over a prolonged period of time, as Leopold Plotek has done, is a stranger thing than it seems, requiring both dogged consistency and renewed notions and methods. The fact is that in order for an artistic idea or motif to become a strong painting, no matter how interesting it may seem, there has to be a good reason for the hand to do it. This is something Plotek has emphasized in his conversations. Otherwise, with all the various technical and technological options artists have at their disposal, there's the risk that painting—especially in the age-old form of oil on canvas—will turn an interesting conceit into a reduced experience, or, at the least, something that didn't need to be a painting. But when for

internal, and perhaps unknowable, reasons artists need to paint their ideas, oil paint provides a unique expressive vehicle. Plotek's paintings are some of the best examples in Canada, and maybe anywhere, of a painter who uses the medium comprehensively.

Visually speaking, the deployment of bold, irregular, lyrical shapes set in stark contrasts, and dark overall tonalities made to vibrate by his using passages of high-intensity hue, have been constant features of Plotek's work. His paintings are orchestral and sonorous, controlled but expansive, and they glisten with rich, glossy surfaces that glow softly with a warm, seemingly internal light. Plotek has been in constant aesthetic development over time, pushing the stylistic elements he began with when he started to work in oil

1. Leopold Plotek, *Teddy and Benny*, 2015, oil on canvas, 79 x 75 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

2. Installation view, "No Work, Nor Device, Nor Knowledge, Nor Wisdom," 2017, Koffler Gallery, Toronto. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid. Courtesy of Koffler Gallery.





1

on canvas in the late 1970s. Initially, his compositions were worked up from memories and sketches done in Italy of churches and other buildings, which were later used to conjure a composition and unfetter his procedure, marrying a broad tool box of modernist techniques with deep, exploratory process. Over time he began to work from a range of subjects, and draw from a large field of influences, with pre- and early modern, high modern and postmodern examples all taken into equal consideration and used, as well, in juxtaposition to modulate any excessive stylistic overdetermination. Even though many reference points are present in the paintings, Plotek's work doesn't look very much like anyone else's.

The uniqueness of his work comes with a certain difficulty, although not in the sense that pleasure is withheld from the viewer or that what we see is too difficult or dark to understand or enjoy. But there is a risk of potential obscurity that comes from the artist's tendency to source complex subjects from anecdotal fragments, moments of historical interest and curiosity, and literary and mythical references, through which he activates the editorial aspects he engages. This description exemplifies but does not fully unpack or explain the autodidactic and edifying nature of Plotek's work, which generously repays close and repeated reading. There is work to be done to gain those rewards. In Plotek's

1. *Goyesca*, 2008, oil on canvas, 74 x 58 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

2. *Strange Fire: Max Beckmann in California*, 2014, oil on canvas, 65 x 49 inches, artist's studio. Courtesy of the artist.



2

paintings, what you see is, in effect, not all of what you see, which stimulates a situation that may have larger implications than can be easily perceived. It isn't sufficient to merely assume that a rote postmodern permission has been used to introduce "illustrative" materials into high modern abstraction (where they were, and sometimes still are, assumed not to belong). These paintings, in effect, propose an open intertextuality between art and life, in which an experience with a painting is holistic per se, but also as such becomes the self-consciously indexical spur to inductive thought, to research and reading, as well as to more looking, to listening, possibly to ethics. Plotek is an influential, long-time professor of painting at Concordia University, as well as a voracious reader and consumer of music. These aspects of his practice have always been present, and remain in a continuing state of becoming and importance to his art.

The exhibition "No Work, Nor Device, Nor Knowledge, Nor Wisdom," curated by EC Woodley at the Koffler Centre in Toronto this past spring, was conceived as the first career survey of a painter who has been working with tremendous focus and diligence for over 40 years. The oldest two works in the show dated from 1979 and the most recent one from 2016, with important developmental points along the way well represented and marked out by Woodley's finely considered selection. Which is no mean feat, because despite the fact that with its 17 canvases the show felt substantial and representative, it would certainly be possible to hang as many works of equal quality for every decade or so of Plotek's career.

One of the ways Plotek sometimes discusses his own work involves a clear-eyed sense that some paintings are more "done" than others, carry more weight, are stronger objectively even though

any other viewer's opinions or preferences could be different from his own. He refers to "first, second and third drawer" works, and often edits "third drawer" works out of exhibition opportunities. Formally speaking, some definite "first drawer" pieces would be *Galgenlied*, 1979; *Furthest From Him Is Best*, 1988; *At the Hotel Regina*, 1998; *The little Klingsor: Bocklin, Wagner, Cosima*, 2004; *John Donne: The Resurrection Portrait*, 2007; and *Marrano*, 2015. But this type of focus on visually spectacular or powerful effects doesn't cover the issue entirely. *At Uxetter Fair*, 2008, a medium-sized, tonally quiet and quite figurative piece improbably depicting an overcome Dr Samuel Johnson confronting the dilapidated book stall his working-class father used to operate is a devastating painting, which creeps up on the viewer as an emotional experience and then becomes hard to look away from. Top drawer, for sure. Or *Teddy and Benny*, 2015, which depicts a fraught jazz concert in the 1930s. On the canvas the great African-American pianist Teddy Wilson is situated behind a curtain on stage, hidden by miserable necessity from a hypocritical white audience we don't see, while playing on tour in the American South with bandleader Benny Goodman. The outrage and absurdity of segregation, and the redemptive, transformational power of jazz, are registered and referred to in and through the fierce, stark formal expressiveness of the painting—but as in many of Plotek's canvases, the subject can be known only once we have read a didactic blurb. Even to see Wilson at the piano takes several moments, and Goodman is just a slice of shoulder breaking the contour line of the curtain.

Marrano, also from 2015, is named for the term given to Jews forced to convert to Catholicism during the Spanish Inquisition. The imagery and composition, as with many of Plotek's works, are easiest to describe as semi-abstract, and are powerfully suggestive,



hinting at objects and scenery but without disclosing any definite or resolved scenario. Deep space is mostly transposed, relocated in or close to the picture plane, with atmospheric perspective permitted just enough breathing room but prevented from usurping optical control. There is a mutating, quasi-cubist force at work, churning the volumes and masses around and transforming the being of things into a shifting sort of seeming.

Internal to these works is the cognitive possibility that interacting with the paintings (as well as the proposition of making them) constitutes an act of learning. The work is as interpretive of ideas and history as it is creative and reflexive as contemporary art. Plotek's work is professorial in the best and most open sense, but not academic, because it creates curiosity rather than satisfying it (or claiming to); so we can say that philosophically speaking, Plotek, as an artist, is much more an empiricist than a rationalist. Experiment and improvisation are a systemic method in the paintings, without which they could not exist. One important implication of this process, which

starts with the modernist tendency to collide form and content, but refuses to make an ideology out of so doing, is to render the outcome as open as possible until work on a given piece is closed for experiential reasons. Because it feels complete.

There is a range of affect in the recently shown work, which encompassed the witty to the baffling, the joyous to the sorrowful to the frightening. This can be rediscovered every time we interact with the paintings, and can comfortably sustain and reward reacquaintance by the viewer. The title of the exhibition was from Ecclesiastes—"Koheleth" in Hebrew, which originally meant "gatherer" but also means "teacher," as well as the nominal "preacher." It refers to the simple injunction that we ought to apply ourselves with all our energy while we are alive, to our work, to love, to being fully alive, and points to our state beyond this life, where these things may no longer obtain. Plotek's work does so. ■

Benjamin Klein is a Montreal-based artist, writer and independent curator.

*The Ledi Kant, 2009, oil on canvas.
65 x 65 inches. Courtesy of the artist.*

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