

Benjamin Senior: Choreographing the Moment

By Ben Street

“... [the] pious English habit of regarding the world as a moral gymnasium built expressly to strengthen your character in...”

George Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman* (1903)

Figurative painting often invites a weighing of differences between its world and ours. Benjamin Senior's images do this, but they go further, the disparity between these two parallel realities somehow being played out within the paintings themselves. Figures stretch, dive, run, bend or stroll within settings that echo their movements back to them. Patterns run across a pair of Speedos and into a tiled wall. Piping on a sports vest gets picked up in the raked lines of a field. Senior's painted subjects live in a world that is both animated and held in place by the movements of athletic bodies. Every bent elbow or stretched back acts like the branch of a diagram, charting the composition and keeping us always within each painting's borders. As in the work of Nicolas Poussin – an artist Senior has been interested in for some time – the painted world is a kind of corrected version of this one: more elegant, more ordered, more *anticipated*. In both painters' works, the immediacy of the lived world bumps into its corrected twin. In this encounter, Senior not only creates unusual spatial and temporal dynamics, but captures some odd human characteristics in the process too.

A disconnection between two worlds has characterised Senior's practice to date. While studying painting at the Royal College of Art from 2008 to 2010, he found himself immersed in formalist and neo-romantic discourses. While his peers often explored the serendipitous moments of studio process, Senior's crisp and hard-edged paintings kept the drama of the studio firmly in check. By using egg tempera, Senior chose a medium that demands a method that is both contemplative and sure: using tempera implies a slowness of hand, a calm and steady technique. That his subject matter at this time centred on bodily exertion (inspired in no small part by the proximity of the Royal College campus to the personal trainer hotspots of Kensington and Battersea) suggests a further dislocation within this body of work – the disparity between his subject and his method. Senior chose his subject matter by virtue of its distance from his own experience (not being an exercise fanatic himself), resulting in a self-imposed, singularly unromantic estrangement from the subjects he depicts.

It is this distancing, perhaps, that granted his early works the licence to embed surreal or uncanny elements within scenes of ostensible normality. A painting such as *Two Runners* (2009), which depicts two Lycra-clad female joggers on a city pavement blithely passing a pile of rubbish – namely an upturned wheelie bin and an old mattress – would invite a reading of social satire were it not for its startling departure from visual reality. The women's bodies are identical, and their doubling raises nagging questions that run through the artist's work as a whole: what levels of reality are we looking at here? What modes of representation are at work? To what extent is the visual language itself surreal?

By not providing us with answers, Senior leaves us with an unsettling uncertainty as to his purpose or intended meaning: something is being articulated, clearly and eloquently, but quite what that is almost certainly remains unresolved in many viewers' minds.

The subject of physical exercise affords Senior's paintings scope to explore repetition, and, by extension, pattern. In *Tilt* (2010), first shown at his Royal College of Art graduation show, two women practice yoga in a park, lying on their backs on coloured mats and swinging their legs right over their heads, each of them holding a large turquoise ball between their shins. Their two contrasting positions are like illustrations in a manual – figure one, figure two – and in being so imply a repetition that could go on forever. (Here, as is so often the case, Senior's figures show no signs either of exhaustion or of the *possibility* of ever being exhausted). The balls are located in opposite corners of the image, and beyond their iconographic meaning, become abstract forms in the work's formal conversations between colour, shape and line. The repetitions we might associate with exercise pulse through the painting like a drum: the repeated colour relationships in the screen of trees in the background, reds against yellows; the exercisers' striped leggings like undulating piano keyboards; even the women's faces in profile, stiffly vertical and self-assured. As a theme, exercise as the performance of visual pattern owes at least something to the theatrics of dance, and Senior has discussed the influence of Busby Berkeley's choreographed musical spectacles of the 1930s and Oskar Schlemmer's 'Triadic Ballet' of 1922. In both cases, the human body becomes abstracted to a pattern, the former through homogeneity and repetition, and the latter through bizarre, geometric modernist costume design. By isolating and repeating a single athletic movement, the human body becomes divorced from quotidian movement; divorced from itself. It becomes an abstraction.

For Senior, the culture of the interwar years provides exceptionally fertile ground. That a young painter should seek out works of art loosely assembled under the banner of 'the return to order' – the impetus among avant-garde European artists to revert to traditional subject matter and media after the horrors of the First World War – might suggest a conservative unwillingness to engage with his own moment. Yet for Senior, classicising works by Pablo Picasso, André Derain and Fernand Léger are component parts in a particular, sometimes marginalised history of modernism within which he positions his own practice. This modernist counter-current, much espoused by the American critic Jed Perl and articulated in writings by painter Jean Hélion, finds its roots not in Cézanne's fragmentary landscapes but in Corot's classicising ones, via Seurat's harmonic modernism, Derain's solemn later figuration, Balthus' clenched psychodramas, and Vuillard's transfixed domestic interiors.

In the years following Senior's graduation from the Royal College of Art, his work found an international audience with debut exhibitions at James Fuentes, New York (a two person exhibition in 2011 with Ella Kruglyanskaya and subsequently a solo exhibition in February 2013); a solo exhibition at BolteLang, Zurich, in 2012; and a solo presentation at Galleria Monica de Cardenas, Milan, in September 2013. Audiences discovering Senior's work have drawn parallels with

earlier precedents, such as US artist George Tooker's eerie social surrealism, the often revered Balthus or the Italian Novecento artists of the 1920s. Historically distant from the traumas that lent these painters their energy, Senior's work borrows their atmospheres in a spirit of revival. In this, he's not alone. One might usefully group his work with paintings by contemporaries who similarly return to somewhat neglected corners of early modernism, such as Kruglyanskaya, who brings together zippy fashion illustration with some of the complex awkwardness of Jean Hélion; Sanya Kantarovsky's listlessly elegant figures reminiscent of interwar cartooning; or Christoph Ruckhäberle's theatrical cubist dioramas. Each of these artists, like Senior, brings together a formal confidence and forcefulness with a wilful evasion of narrative clarity, in which figures, locked within the confines of elegantly delineated compositions, replay, seemingly endlessly, dramas of dissolution, detachment and disarray. For all of them, the dark and unloved corners of the modernist project provide material to articulate the confusions of the current historical moment: a call to disorder.

Following on from the yoga paintings, Senior's shift into new subject matter – swimmers (mostly female), depicted stretching and diving in sunlit, 1930s-style swimming pools – marked a step away from more evidently contemporaneous allusion. In a work such as *The Bathers* (2011), shown at Senior's New York debut at James Fuentes gallery that same year, the modern world makes itself known only in glimpses: the familiar insignia of sportswear, maybe, or the straps of goggles tight against rubber caps. Such points of reference are subsumed to a greater whole in which the body locks into a grid-like structure at once reminiscent of Mondrian's Apollonian abstraction and the aforementioned Poussin's ruthlessly ordered compositional games. Notice that sequence of limbs, displayed on a loose curve that sweeps into the painting as a counterpoint to the room's blunt angles; it's a pattern borrowed from Poussin's rhythms of dappled legs in works such as *A Bacchanalian Revel Before a Term* (1632-3). And in Senior's tondo *Orphic Swimmers* (2012), three figures in identical one-piece swimsuits stretch or prepare to dive at the lip of a pool; a Poussin-esque inverted triangle, generated by their stretching limbs, binds them together in perpetual deferral of bodily action. Senior's figures, like Poussin's, are employed as components within the painting's own scheme. A single unbent back, or a completed dive, and the painting's serenity can be broken in an instant. Order is something gently asserted here, for fear of being shattered.

In his solo presentation at South London's Studio Voltaire in October 2013, Senior created a suite of paintings that concluded his primary focus on the theme of exercise in his work, for now at least. In this exhibition, the theme of bathers met a gym ball-toting pilates class, and with it came a new approach to the human figure. In his tempera painting *Poolside Construction I* (2013) three swimmers in goggles and swimming caps are seen only from the neck up. Their heads overlap each other, creating a sequential spiral that moves in harmonious opposition to the curved railings that fill the painting's closest plane. The proximity of the viewer to the heads of the depicted swimmers does not bring with it the revelation of character that might be expected from such a close-cropped composition. Rather, as in the work of Alex Katz, closeness simply brings the painted surface into sharper relief. We bump against it, like a bee at a

window. Painted depth, implied by the receding sizes of the subjects' heads, leads us only into looped pattern. The painting's world asserts itself as an inner one, its edges like borders shut against the outside. The heads, their eyes invisible under goggles, either don't, or won't, acknowledge the viewer's gaze. It's as if we, or they, are behind soundproofed glass.

In early 2014, Senior began to open up his painting to the urban environment, which acted as a sort of escape route from the exercise paintings. Focusing on the South London suburbs of Crystal Palace near which he was then living, his works from this time exhibit a markedly looser approach to mark making, something undoubtedly aided by his forays into oil painting. Where tempera allowed a kind of ready-made metaphor for the subject of concentration and mental focus in the swimming paintings – being synonymous with an almost meditative solitary practice not dissimilar to the loneliness of the long-distance swimmer – oil paint gave his works the chance to exhale a little, to unclench the jaw. In *Grey Studio* (2014) – its title perhaps a nod to Matisse's red one, Senior's work having a more restrained, less hedonistic approach – a mostly-nude model sitting on a chair arches her back, flexing her arms behind her head. Her full body is obscured by a pot plant, whose bushy components seem placed to both cover and act as equivalents for certain points in her body (head, breasts, bottom), in a curious *pas de deux* of human and natural forms. Seen from the artist's elevated position, the model is both less visible and, oddly, more so, since the plant's verticality emphasises her own; as in Senior's earlier works, the world is a diagram of the body, and vice versa. The furred tonality of the model's body, aided in no small part by Senior's novel use of oils, brings a sensuality to the painting that is all the more potent for being shown at arm's length.

In 2014 Senior made trips to his native Hampshire, painting and drawing *en plein air* with fellow painter Michele Tocca. This marked an important step away from the contained echo chambers of his swimming-pool paintings. Senior embraced the speed of hand and eye necessitated by making work outdoors, and the experience acted like a rush of air through his painting practice. Why Hampshire? In part for the childhood memories it inevitably embodied for the artist, which must infuse his work, Constable-style, with a wistful nostalgia for the past; and also, more curiously, according to the artist himself, because the fields there are 'so prim and tailored they look like sportswear'. Senior's drawing until that time had been characterised by two principal approaches: the expediently quick drawing made on public transport of details of a stranger's pose or outfit, to be stored for possible later use in a painting's composition; and the life drawing, done in the studio, of poses carefully orchestrated by the artist himself – those stretches, crouches and dives you see in the swimming and yoga paintings of previous years. In the works following the *plein air* excursions, though, the viewer has the sense of a corner being turned, into a more deeply symbiotic relationship both between painting and drawing as artistic practice (after all, that's what *plein air* painting, historically, has been about), and between man and nature as themes within the work. With a few notable exceptions, nature had been present in Senior's paintings in a (literally) contained form; cacti pepper the foreground of works such as *Ball Games IV* (2013), stretching and dipping in comic echo of the human figures alongside. In

The Stile (2012), hikers rest beside a green fence, which cuts a horizontal swathe through the composition and acts as a grille through which (and by which) the landscape is seen and understood.

For his solo exhibition *Enclosure* at Grey Noise in Dubai in January 2015, Senior presented two distinct subjects, loosely divisible into urban and rural preoccupations. In *Three Walkers on Beacon Hill (Spring)* (2014), the farmed landscape of Hampshire is spread out like a sequence of striped rugs (or, indeed, like the piping on the shorts and vests in the artist's earlier paintings). In the foreground, two figures, one standing, one sprawled on the ground, examine a map, to which one points with her walking poles; a third figure, his back to the viewer, shakes open a blanket in the middle distance. Although these three figures are contained within a right-angled triangle – a shape rhymed, if flipped, by the pointing poles – their arrangement within the landscape setting is one of correspondence, not containment. And despite the painting's irresistible visual puns (that green striped T-shirt which, drawn deeper into the painting, becomes a furrowed field; the backpack's utilitarian design, picked up in the compartmentalised fields of the surrounding vista), the figures relax and spread within their setting. Senior's darting brush revels in the natural forms of nettles and long grass. In this work the viewer's proximity yields not the delicate artifice of a finely wrought surface, as in the earlier tempera work, but the physicality of paint *being itself*. For once, the romanticism he so long eschewed has found its way into Senior's work, however cautiously it appears.

Beacon Hill (2014) depicts three female athletes stretching, shown in profile and identically dressed in trainers, shorts and long-sleeved running shirts. Some of Senior's earlier gentle satire is at play here, as the distinctly urban attire of the athletes sits uncomfortably within the rolling landscape. Further, the discreet geometry of the figures' arrangements, picked up in the stripes of their clothing and their outstretched limbs (again, it's somewhat triangular) seems at odds with their immediate surroundings, which Senior paints with a looser hand than ever before. Despite this, the figures and the landscape rhyme with each other unexpectedly. The seated figure's stretched arm, grasping her toe, begins a gradual curve that continues as a low, tree-fringed hill. The line on the highest figure's striped arm carries on in the stripe of a hedge, far in the distance. Where visual rhymes generated a snappy surface tension in Senior's earlier work, here bodies seem to melt into the painted depth, lending the work's contemporary allusions – the shorts, the laces, the hairstyles – some of the gravitas of Renaissance painting. Consider the way Piero della Francesca makes the landscape anticipate the figures that inhabit it; similarly, in Senior's work, we cannot imagine plucking the figures from their setting, the landscape de-peopled. Each part makes the other, as you look. The interweaving of figure and ground, once held in almost geometric tension, is now warmer and softer. Colour sinks into the painting rather than sitting on its surface. In terms of Renaissance painting, we've gone from Florentine to Venetian.

In other recent paintings, by contrast, Senior seems to return to the deadpan Surrealism of his earlier work. In works such as *Rings IV (Autumn)* (2014), full-length figures pose behind decorative railings that fill the picture plane and hold

the viewer somewhat at bay. A complex, gradually unspooling sequence of interlocking patterns – leggings, socks, flooring, railing – is picked out in egg tempera, its icy clarity of a piece with the work's sense of heightened reality. It has all the startling pin-sharp detail of a dream as experienced, rather than retold. The elegant dreamscapes of Surrealists like Paul Delvaux, or even René Magritte, are implied here, yet one might even go so far as to describe this branch of Senior's work as *magical realism*. It's that sharply delineated vagueness, the straight-faced telling of a fantastical tale. While everything within the image makes sense – no repeated figures, for example – the painting is nevertheless uncanny in its rightness, as so many of the artist's works are. The hula-hoops the two figures hold are foreshortened, egg-shaped. Your eye gets them tangled in the railings.

Four heads, sandwiched between iron railings and a decorative breeze-block wall, slide across the composition in Senior's painting *Commuters* (2014), a work representative of the artist's current preoccupations. We're in suburban South London, contemplating what we only ever glimpse: the patterns and shapes of other people's faces, hair and clothes. (Senior himself commutes into South London to get to his studio; the work's typically remote contemplation of other human subjects brings to mind, irresistibly, the image of the commuter who isn't *quite* a commuter). The railings reveal the figures' otherwise hidden geometries, using superimposed triangles (for the two women) to lock them into position, and quatrefoils and diamond shapes over the men's faces, which bind the evidently disparate protagonists into a rigid pattern like a flowchart. This rigidity invites us to supply the psychological and narrative layers that are absent from the literally buttoned-up characters within. The checks, stripes, spots and diamonds of the clothing act as harmonic components within a composition that makes Senior's jaunty visual patterns collide with all of the distanced and decidedly cool observation of a Seurat painting of Parisians sizing each other up in a public park. Every element of Senior's painting – nostrils, scarves, eyebrows, chins, shoulders, the seams on hats and coats – is a component of a discreetly complex ordering that, once seen, returns to itself, endlessly repeating, ticking like a pocket watch and breathing like a body in mid-dive in the moment just before it breaks the surface.

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