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Wednesday, October 22nd, 2014

Sweet and Dandy: Tomer Aluf's Bohemian Paintings

by Noah Dillon

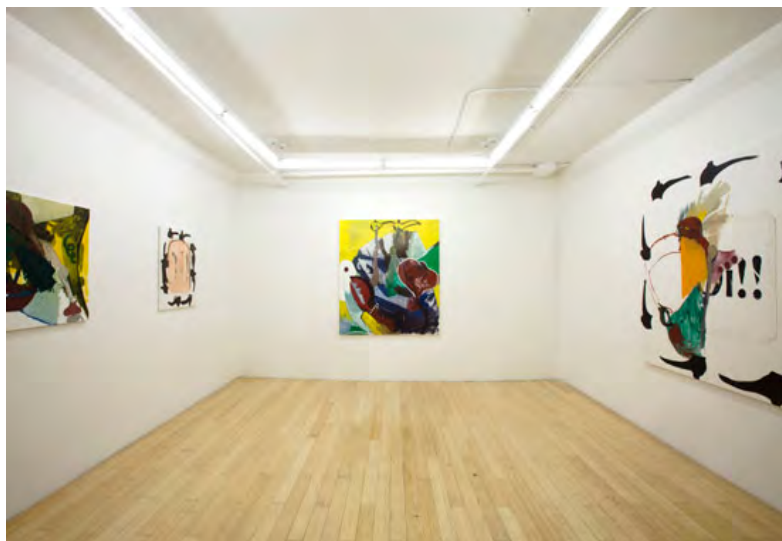
Tomer Aluf: Thirteen at Kansas Gallery

September 6 through October 18, 2014

59 Franklin Street (between Broadway and Benson Street)

New York, 646 559 1423

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Installation view, "Tomer Aluf: Thirteen," 2014, at Kansas Gallery. Courtesy of the artist and Kansas Gallery.

The dandy has long been an archetypal figure promenading through culture. Charles Baudelaire described him in "The Painter of Modern Life" as a character "outside the law," but living by another set of strict moral codes and social meters. Baudelaire goes on to assert that dandies are men of passion, but without concern, free from strife and open to love and pleasure. Gérard de Nerval and Oscar Wilde were both famous for their dandyism and were each said to walk pet lobsters through the street. In several of his books, William Burroughs (who admired Baudelaire and Wilde), describes dandies and hip priests of culture in suits with lobster claws and reversible linings, walking through esplanades and enacting rites of leisure.



Tomer Aluf, Untitled, 2014. Oil and almonds on canvas, 60 x 54 inches. Courtesy of the artist and KANSAS, New York.

At his recently closed first solo exhibition at Kansas Gallery, "Thirteen," Tomer Aluf presented sardonic oil paintings, rich with eroticism and wit. The thirteen untitled works employ repeated motives: fancy shoes with their toes pointing upwards, lobster claws, "Oii!" written in large block letters, harlequins, wine glasses, limbs. Aluf, born in Tel Aviv and now working in Brooklyn, has some of the characteristics of a dandy himself. He wears beautiful shoes, long scarves, and sharp overcoats. But he's not above dirtying his hands with paint in the studio, and obviously derives a lot of sensual pleasure from the labor. The paint is applied in thick daubs and brushy, gestural miasmas, though blank expanses of gessoed canvas remain in many works and earlier images are often partially erased or obscured by later layers. Figurative elements, such as hands or the lower half of a *comici dell'arte*, are sketched in loose, quick caricatures.

Among his other allusions to the sensual, in one large painting (60 by 54 inches), Aluf has attached whole almonds, a gambit he's used in previous pictures, such as one displayed at Bodega Gallery's New York location this past spring. Although they don't carry the same connotations of luxury, the nuts do share in a kind of bohemian lexicon. Their shape can be read as heads and breasts and testicles. And their culinary flexibility ranges from 99¢ Blue Diamond-brand single-serving packages of almonds found in local delis to chic *and* conscientious gluten-free torts and milk substitutes, to Spanish gastronomical imports.

The reiterated "Oii!!" that appears on several of the canvases is a punk salutation or exclamation sometimes (or perhaps *formerly*) found among working class urban youth in the UK and the northeast US. It amounts to something like "hey you!" and calls out to the viewer as a passerby on the street. Galleries and museums can often be frustratingly similar to boulevards and bazaars, but here the stroll feels more like the kind of Baudelairian experience of the sidewalk that have amazed urbanites since the dawn of the industrial era. Images, people, and fashions move through the crowd (which was thick at the exhibition's opening in early September), and the cry can carry both tinges of exuberance and a bit of danger.



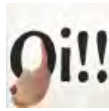
Tomer Aluf, Untitled, 2014. Oil on canvas, 60 x 54 inches. Courtesy of the artist and KANSAS, New York.

In another large painting, images couple with one another, as Aluf has pasted an unstretched "Oi!!" canvas onto a larger picture. A hand extends from its corporeal spray of orange, reaching around, down, to pinch or clutch something like a green thigh. A lobster claw mirrors the action, curling around the arm in the opposite direction. Marching loafers, each with a prominent heel, rings the whole composition.

These works, far sparer than those he has previously exhibited, can be a little taunting. They often deny easy finishes or the appearance of completion. Aluf has, here, seized on moments to explore — as in the end of a sumptuous dinner with an attractive guest, at a now thoroughly cluttered table, the bohemian spendthrift covers the check at the sidewalk café with a recent windfall, while pedestrians pass. Maybe that kind of narrative extrapolation is a little much, but in like way his skeins of dry-brushed paint, running over muddy passages and text, focus on the narrative interaction with the viewer along her path and the painter along the picture plane, without regard to expected trajectories. Neither party is clear on where the situation is headed, but he has left open other possibilities in the paintings' unfinished-looking states. Fresh food, rich paint, good clothes, a stroll, beautiful bodies in a crowd: these are simple pleasures.



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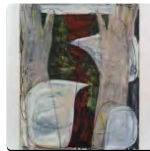
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