

PREDICAMENTS

AF artforum.com/print/202301/barry-schwabsky-on-the-art-of-sanya-kantarovsky-89847

Barry Schwabsky on the art of Sanya Kantarovsky

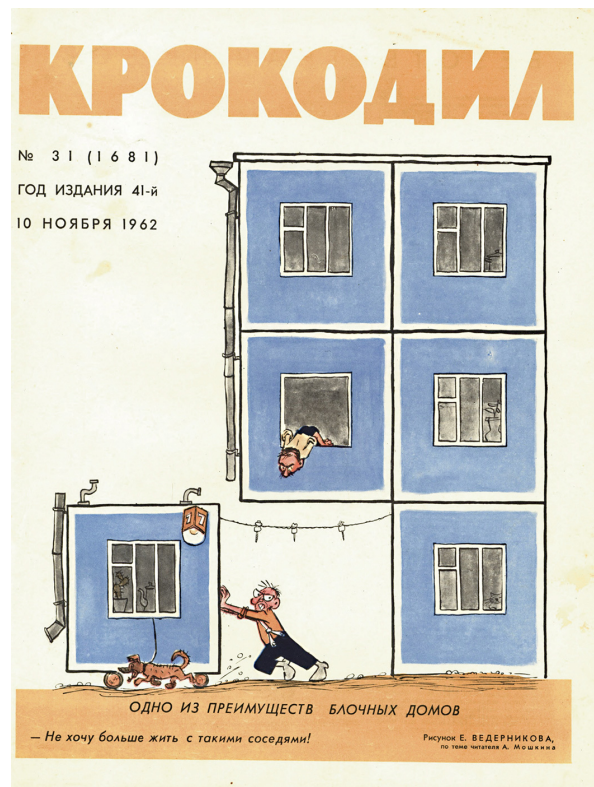


Sanya Kantarovsky, *Mandible*, 2020, watercolor on paper, 14 3/4 × 11 1/4".

SANYA KANTAROVSKY is quintessentially a painter—someone who lives and breathes the materials, procedures, and heritage of the art. He’s someone who, according to the curator Elena Filipovic, “believes more in the utter necessity of painting than nearly anyone I’ve ever met.” So it might seem counterintuitive that his first American museum exhibition, which opened this past month at the Aspen Art Museum in Colorado, will be a video installation—no canvases in evidence.

But no one who knows the artist would be entirely surprised. Yes, Kantarovsky is a painter, and passionately so, but his very passion is what makes him cast such a severe eye on so much of the painting he sees—and, implicitly, on his own. Others may speak of faith in painting. Not Kantarovsky. True, he’s not part of that tribe of Krebberite anti-painters. But he paints out of a suspicion or skepticism of painting, perhaps a diffidence, which can involve a not-always-convincing self-distrust: “My work, at least in my eyes,” Kantarovsky once claimed, “is predicated on the fact that I don’t know what I’m doing.” To my eye, in fact, his paintings look like the product of someone with consummate craft, and if they can sometimes be compositionally awkward, they are always consciously so: Their awkwardness, in other words, is not necessarily deliberate, but is accepted as a

necessity given the awkwardness of the feelings the paintings are built to carry. Although the feelings encapsulated in the paintings do not fall into any of the specific categories analyzed by Sianne Ngai in her 2005 book *Ugly Feelings*, Kantarovsky's work has something in common with Ngai's in that, like her, he "approaches emotions as unusually knotted or condensed 'interpretations of predicaments'—that is, signs that not only render visible different registers of problem (formal, ideological, sociohistorical) but conjoin these problems in a distinctive manner." The paintings take an analytical detachment from the disquiet they express, but that detachment does not entirely defend them against being caught up in that disquiet.



Cover of *Krokodil*, November 10, 1962.



Page from *Krokodil*, April 30, 1965.

In part, this disquiet runs on imagery alone. For all his conversancy with the alchemy of paint, Kantarovsky possesses a cartoonist’s or caricaturist’s proficiency with the little nuances of line that sum up a character or an attitude—a facility that can at times be its own reward and, perhaps for that reason, provokes mistrust, even from the artist himself. Kantarovsky, who was born in Moscow in 1982 and spent the first ten years of his life there before his family immigrated to the United States, has spoken of the illustrations in the famous Soviet-era satirical magazine *Krokodil* as among his formative influences. A 1964 *New York Times* report on the periodical gives the flavor of the illustrations’ mix of didacticism and imagination: On the theme of panic buying—remember that in the Soviet Union it could be impossible to predict when goods would be for sale—there was the image of “a bear hauling a huge bagful of alarm clocks as he was retiring to his den for his winter sleep.” Or: “A circus scene shows an acrobat balancing on his forehead a pole laden with other acrobats sitting on easy chairs. A spectator comments to his neighbor: ‘It’s just like our office: One man works and the others sit.’” *Krokodil* did not long outlast the Soviet Union, but still, if Kantarovsky’s life had taken a different course, he might have found success supplying drawings for the *New Yorker*. Some of his imagery would not be out of place in the Cartoon Caption Contest at the back of each issue of that magazine—except that readers would be stumped because the feeling complexes his sophisticated and richly ironic pictures embody are at once too knotty and too perfectly rendered to admit of any textual supplement.

For all his conversancy with the alchemy of paint, Kantarovsky possesses a cartoonist’s proficiency with the little nuances of line that sum up a character or an attitude.

Mandible, 2020, a watercolor I recently encountered in a private collection in Dallas, for instance, shows, amid a nocturnal atmosphere, a naked young woman tenderly offering her forearm to the bloody bite of a goblin-faced little old man with an infant's bare behind. Her unbitten hand lovingly strokes the pocket-size creature as he sinks his teeth into her flesh; one would say that, more than simply permitting, she is training the man-child-goblin in this vampiric pastime for her own enjoyment. But maybe that's saying too much, for as she is looking down, gazing intently at her masticating pet's bald pate, her dark hair hanging over her eyes and seemingly transmuting into a black mask or pair of dark glasses, her satisfied expression remains otherwise rather inscrutable. When I saw this piece, what struck me first, and with rare intensity, was the certainty that it perfectly summed up a form of relationship I immediately recognized. But second, and in retrospect even more important, came the realization that I didn't have a name for this thing I'd recognized—that the work was teaching me something new about my experience, that it was taking the place of a nonexistent word (and thereby rendering that word unnecessary) to designate an interpersonal emotional reality.



Sanya Kantarovsky, *Untitled*, 2010, ink, oil, and watercolor on linen, 21 1/2 × 25 1/2". The ambivalent relation to language comes into clearer focus when one looks back to Kantarovsky's early efforts from around the time he earned his MFA from the University of California, Los Angeles, in 2011. Many of his works from this period are single-figure studies, but with no faces visible. One painting from 2010, *Untitled*, depicts a lanky dark-suited man leaning disconsolately over what looks like a school desk; whatever the cause of his despondency, it hasn't left him any less affectedly refined in appearance: The line from his forearm to his shoulder and back leading to the rakishly upturned tail of his jacket is a Matissean wonder. In *An Episode from History*, 2012, what could well be the same fellow sits—lounges, really—on some succinct linear armature; head facing away from the viewer, he is nothing more than an elegantly arabesque silhouette, most human, perhaps, in his elongated fingers, as one hand stretches out to the left in a sort of warding-off gesture while the other, cigarette lightly grasped between middle and ring fingers, supports his head. In *Events*, 2012, someone—presumably a woman, though you couldn't

prove it from what the painting shows—is on the ground bent over in a yoga posture, one hand clenching her head while the other extends out in front of her, holding a sheet of paper: instructions on how to make child’s pose more challenging?



Sanya Kantarovsky, *An Episode from History*, 2012, oil and watercolor on linen, 30 × 24".

These early works are all modest in scale and executed in various combinations of ink, oil, and watercolor on canvas. What they have in common is that they imbue an anonymous figure—an ultrarefined everyman or everywoman—with a highly expressive silhouette. These are ciphers of personality rendered with a calligraphic flourish, or with a type designer’s eye for the rhythmic energy that gives a letter its visual impact. Looking at the implicitly linguistic nature of Kantarovsky’s early figures in a somewhat different way, the critic Eli Diner suggested that “all these splayed feet, slender fingers and mannered—even effete—poses amass . . . into a kind of mini-lexicon. It’s a system of recurring gestures, postures, costumes, furnishings, and props.” Kantarovsky’s intuition of the painted human form as an alphabet of summary expressive configurations is something he shares with an otherwise very different painter, Alex Katz—whom I’ve heard say that the most important class he took as an undergraduate at Cooper Union was typography.



Sanya Kantarovsky, *Events*, 2012, oil, watercolor, and bleach on linen, 34 × 26".

In any case, Kantarovsky soon began putting his figurative alphabet to more complex use in compositions with multiple characters and, moreover, ones in which the face, so rare in his imagery up through around 2013, begins to take on greater centrality. It was at this point that I started to see Kantarovsky's work, both at fairs—he'd been exhibiting internationally even before getting his MFA—and at his New York solo debut, "Allergies," at the Casey Kaplan in 2014. The show mainly concerned the intricacies and embarrassments of interhuman relations, erotic or otherwise. Apart from introducing his new range of compositional and thematic complications, Kantarovsky had begun to rough up his painted surfaces—not exactly veiling the inherent grace of his line but playing it off against textures of greater richness. One memorable canvas from this exhibition contradicted its own title, *How to Enjoy Being Alone*, 2014, by showing its protagonist, prone at the foot of the rectangle, covered by a pair of other figures, one partial (legs and feet only), the other dissolving into the general painterly activity of the background. Are these imaginary companions? Or are they real, leaving the central figure free to enjoy his solitude even in their company? No answer is forthcoming. *When Things Don't Work Out*, 2014, portrays an encounter between a woman leaning back against the left edge of the canvas, as if to get as much distance as possible between herself and her companion, another of Kantarovsky's male grotesques, a shade more comical than the one in *Mandible*: a gloomy, purple-faced creature sticking his head out from under a cover. The spare, scruffy abstract painting on the wall behind the mismatched couple is on the verge of congealing into an image that might comment on their situation but finally declines to do so. That demurrer already suggests that the constructed environment has as much agency as its nameless inhabitants—maybe more, in fact, than the male ones (women come off with a little more dignity than men in Kantarovsky's world).



View of “Sanya Kantarovsky: Allergies,” 2014, Casey Kaplan, New York. From left: *Strange Eyes*, 2014; *Labor Dance*, 2014; *How to Enjoy Being Alone*, 2014. Photo: Dawn Blackman.

The ambiguous nature of Kantarovsky’s multigure compositions swerved away from a full commitment to the narrative impulse he was clearly drawing close to. At one point, he referred to the narrative content of his work as “usually pretty half-baked,” since the paintings function by way of “discreet vignettes, narrative fragments that imply some sort of problem, the exact conditions of which are rarely available to the viewer.” Still, in 2015 he tried his hand at something like illustration, exhibiting at London’s Studio Voltaire a sequence of paintings based on Mikhail Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita*, that classic Soviet novel mixing supernatural elements with satire. (The novel, written over a long period starting in 1928, was published only in samizdat versions until 1973.) The match between writer and artist feels perfect, yet the paintings break free from reference to the text—the narrative handles given by the paintings’ long titles end up feeling ironically misleading, e.g., *The Master Is Released: Behemoth cut himself a slice of pineapple, salted and peppered it, ate it and chased it down with a second glass of spirit with a flourish that earned a round of applause.*, 2015. The painting creates a pointed, almost Manet-esque, dichotomy between its clothed male characters and its nude women, while the knowing female face that in the upper right corner overlaps the scene like a Picabia “transparency” implies that all of this is a charade anyway. The text exists to generate the vignettes and fragments out of which Kantarovsky constructs his paintings—not to resolve them.

The question of meaning is tossed back to the viewer with aggressive nonchalance.

Since the Bulgakov series, Kantarovsky has continued to find uncomfortable situations—predicaments, to use Ngai’s word—in which to place his characters and his paintings’ viewers. Sometimes his people look like they’re in bliss, and sometimes I feel that way observing them, but are they? Am I? Take *Beach* of 2019, a highlight of “On Them,” his exhibition that year at New York’s Luhring Augustine gallery. It gives us an aerial view of a man wearing a wide-brimmed blue hat carrying a green-faced woman in a long white dress (a bridal gown? a shroud?) to the water’s edge. An elongated pink dog—it makes a gracile arc that implicitly links up with the bend of the woman’s figure and proves Kantarovsky has never quite given up on his talent for typographic elegance—observes them curiously. Whether this is a scene of mortality or ecstasy is unanswerable; take your pick. An elopement, a kidnapping, an invalid’s last view of the sea? As usual with Kantarovsky, the question of meaning is tossed back to the viewer with aggressive

nonchalance. In the artist's words, "Meaning is made outside of the work itself, in the mind's eye, through the labour of the viewer. In the gutter!" With the word *gutter*, he is ostensibly referring to the idea that in comics, meaning is produced more by the gaps between frames than within the frame itself. But words have their own power, and Kantarovsky's exclamation reminds us that when the viewer's mind is "in the gutter," meaning can go haywire. *Honi soit qui mal y pense*.



Sanya Kantarovsky, *Beach*, 2019, oil and watercolor on canvas, 79 × 111".

Kantarovsky's ambivalence toward narrative—his desire to evoke it only to drop it into the gutter—takes us partway back to the question I started with: How did this painter come to video for his first American museum show? And we get still closer by remembering his ambivalence toward painting itself, perhaps his wariness of his own facility with it. For those, like me, who were not familiar with the work he made before his New York debut, it's salutary to be reminded that in the beginning he did not present himself as purely a painter, and that on occasion he has continued to incorporate elements other than painting in his show: the cat-shaped stage that was part of "Apricot Juice," the show presented in collaboration with Ieva Misevičiūtė at Studio Voltaire in London in 2015, for instance. In recent times, this is something that, among Kantarovsky commentators and interlocutors, only art historian Jason Rosenfeld has emphasized; Rosenfeld led off his 2019 interview with Kantarovsky with precisely the question of medium, seeming to imply that there was something surprising in the artist's recent focus on painting. "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?" Kantarovsky responded by described his disillusionment with his early propensity to make a "mise-en-scène" in which painting might play only a part and the importance of Lari Pittman's encouragement, during his student years in Los Angeles, 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."



Sanya Kantarovsky, *When Things Don't Work Out*, 2014, oil, watercolor, pastel, and oil stick on linen, 55 × 40".

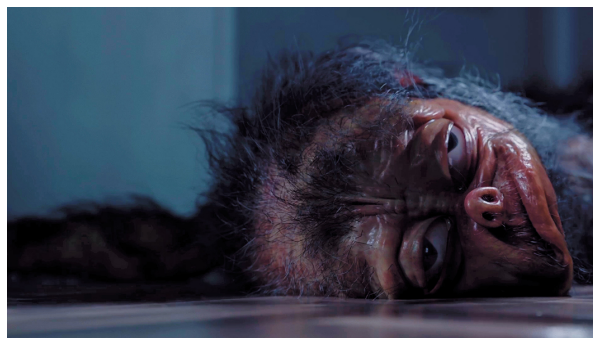
And yet Kantarovsky's history so far suggests that he has always counterbalanced his indulgence with self-denial. The video for the Aspen presentation, *A Solid House*, 2022, begins with the sound of heavy breathing, though it might be synthesized, as the camera wanders in close-up over what quickly reveals itself to be a reproduction of Jacques-Louis David's *Death of Marat*, 1793; the page is covered in fingerprints. Then it cuts to a close-up of something different, a recumbent hairy animal, deeply breathing, asleep. A radiator rattles; a caterpillar crawls over foliage—all that is overture. After about a minute, the voice-over narration begins. The text, adapted from a book by the Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chogyam Trungpa, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* (1973), tells the story of a monkey that moves from the jungle into a house. As seen in the film, the dwelling's human occupants seem not long gone. Eventually, we catch sight of the digitally animated beast clumsily rattling around in the kitchen, bumping into furniture, hitting its head, and knocking things over. It's easy to identify this small, scuttling creature with the animalistic male inhabitants of some of Kantarovsky's paintings. And I thought, too, of the speaker in Franz Kafka's unforgettable "A Report to an Academy" (1917), the monologue of an ape who has painfully learned to become, or at least to simulate, a human being. The animal's failure to domesticate itself means that what had appeared as a possible escape turns out quite otherwise; instead, as the narrator intones, "one begins to explore one's imprisonment."



View of “Sanya Kantarovsky in collaboration with Ieva Misevičiūtė: Apricot Juice,” 2015, Studio Voltaire, London. From left: Sanya Kantarovsky, *The Master Is Released: Behemoth cut himself a slice of pineapple, salted and peppered it, ate it and chased it down with a second glass of spirit with a flourish that earned a round of applause.*, 2015; Sanya Kantarovsky, *The Flight: Margarita floated out of the window, where she turned and hit the glass a gentle blow with her hammer. It shattered and cascaded in smithereens down the marble facade on to the street below. Margarita flew on to the next window.*, 2015; Sanya Kantarovsky’s stage for Ieva Misevičiūtė’s performance *Apricot Juice*, 2015. Photo: Andy Keate.

While *A Solid House* is not exactly a suspense movie, I still want to refrain from spoilers. I can reveal, however, that the monkey does eventually come across a book on Marat. He seems to like pictures. Perhaps for this reason, “the monkey begins to hallucinate—to dream.” Does becoming human mean becoming a being whose imagination can be set off by pictures? Perhaps. But the incongruence between imagination and reality leads to a crisis, “a sudden losing of faith.”

•



Sanya Kantarovsky, *A Solid House*, 2022, HD video, color, sound, 12 minutes.



Sanya Kantarovsky, *A Solid House*, 2022, HD video, color, sound, 12 minutes.



Sanya Kantarovsky, *A Solid House*, 2022, HD video, color, sound, 12 minutes.



Sanya Kantarovsky, *A Solid House*, 2022, HD video, color, sound, 12 minutes.

Kantarovsky’s curious and eccentric short film draws our attention to the power of the still image—the image one’s eye moves across, rather than the one that moves. If the work’s final message is one of pessimism, that only serves as a reminder that when he is painting, Kantarovsky’s pessimism gets wrapped up in something more complicated—because, like his viewers, he can be seduced. Where I’d argue with him is that, while his goal is “something unnameable, something that creates a sense of delay, a sense of discord, that you then have to work to wrap your head around,” as he told Rosenfeld, that complicated something is not the thing that delays or thwarts or even ruins pleasure. It is the thing that produces pleasure as a strange effect of self-knowledge: the creation of a self that knows, superior to the self that is known. I don’t know whether Kantarovsky identifies with the pitiful male homunculi who populate his oeuvre—I can certainly see a resemblance to myself sometimes—but if so, he can’t be one when he’s painting.



Sanya Kantarovsky, *Growth*, 2022, oil on canvas, 87 × 67".

Perhaps making *A Solid House*, with its doomed sense of imprisonment in the carnal, animal self, has somehow, paradoxically, been liberating for Kantarovsky. When I visited him as I was preparing this article, the most recent painting in his studio suggested a change of direction. Few would recognize *Growth*, 2022, as having been made by the same person who painted *Beach* or the *Master and Margarita* cycle. In it, the social body—its poses, its garb, everything that renders it culturally legible—has been condensed to an organic abstraction, a strange floating entity that retains the mask of a face but reduces it to a purely biological function, something like a liver drifting in a pinkish amniotic sea. Is this what an egoless self would look like? Note the ambiguity—still typical of this artist—signaled by the painting's title. *Growth* is what we are all trying to achieve, supposedly, but it is also what an oncologist might be called on to remove. It's another one of our predicaments.

"Sanya Kantarovsky: A Solid House" is on view through April 2 at the Aspen Art Museum.

Barry Schwabsky is a coeditor of international reviews for Artforum. He has recently published two books of poetry, *Feelings of And* (2022) and *Water from Another Source* (2023).