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Ian Grose, Norman Thomas di Giovanni, Translator of Borges, oil on linen, 80cm x 60cm, 2010



IAN GROSE

TEXT ALEXANDRA DODD PHOTOGRAPHY DAVID CROOKES

I have tried to find the embedded counterpoint to the loss of translation, and even the poetry of that loss

UNDERSTATED EROTICISM HAUNTS THE canvases of Ian Grose, who, in a delicious twist of fate, was recently awarded the Absa L'Atelier prize and the coveted opportunity to study at the Cité Internationale des Arts in the heart of Paris. Why so particularly delicious, this twist of fate, you may ask? And therein lies a tale of a struggling artist's thwarted dream of wandering drunk on absinthe through the grungy back streets of the Left Bank with a motley crew of exiled Russian poets.

But let's not get carried away here. This is, after all, the 21st century, in which a degree of critical distance seems *de rigueur*. And a stylish grip on the workings of allusion and influence is of the essence when it comes to deciphering the viscous glossiness of Grose's alluring brushstrokes.

Grose stole viewers' breaths away with his first outing at the Michaelis Graduate Show at the end of last year. A sense of loss or absence pervades his lushly rendered oils. Depicting the ruffled sheets of an empty bed, a lone path through the snow-covered woods or clothes strewn casually across a Persian carpet, his paintings are frequently depopulated, imparting a strange sense of emptiness, of someone having, just seconds before, departed the room.

"That translation incurs a loss of detail or meaning is unremarkable. The interest is in the nature of the remnant, the new thing."

Grose works out of a small paint-spattered studio in a reclaimed office block on Roeland Street. In one of those everyday puns on art/literary history that mostly go unnoticed, the building happens to be called Ruskin House.

But Grose's works are not oil paintings as Victorian art critic John Ruskin might have encountered them, sauntering amidst the rarified halls of the Royal Academy in the 19th century. They might exude the loving exactitude and sensual allure of that faithful old mode, but they are painted with eyes wide open to the frenetic immediacy and hyper-mediated visuality of the now.

In this sense, there is a beautiful stubbornness in the loveliness of his paintings, which seems almost to refuse the wake-up slap delivered by that exhausting glut of cheap trash images hitting the fragile mindscreen by the millisecond. Unapologetically nostalgic, they also draw inspiration from the contemporary media

sphere, in which we can stalk the family photo albums of strangers on Facebook, download half of the Pompidou via Google Images or follow a murder trial on Twitter.

Painted from a collection of personal photographs, which combine low-brow snaps culled from the internet with classical subject matter, his images play on the cultural proximity and slippage between the photographic image and painting. One portrait features American actress Lindsay Lohan, while another features Norman Thomas di Giovanni, translator of Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges.

Grose's paintings are quietly imbued with a novelistic sensibility — capturing frozen moments that seem to be drawn from larger unfolding narratives. Take his Absa L'Atelier award-winning triptych, *Colour, Separation*, which features three tonal renditions of an empty bed. The presence of the person who has just left the room is implied by his/her absence from the frame, by unsettled sheets and the place in the bed, which one imagines might even still be

warm. The imagination is triggered and one can't help wondering, filling in the gaps of story that the painting begins to tell.

"Writing is an important part of thinking — of painting — for me," says Grose who grew up in a house of books and studied literature at the University of Cape Town before undertaking his postgraduate diploma in painting at Michaelis last year.

"I did a seminar with [the late] Stephen Watson while I was in third year and he asked us to write a piece in the style of one of the South American writers that we had studied. I immersed myself in Borges, which left me with an abiding fascination with his writing. He has quite a detached scientific mind and his style can be quite dry, but there is a surprising or disarming romance about him." It strikes me that Grose might just as well be describing the duality in his paintings, which are quite post-modern in their conceptual framing, yet not without Romantic immersion in their execution.

Throughout his gap year and during his undergraduate studies, Grose produced

commissioned portraits (from photographs rather than sittings) to earn a living. "The period of apprenticeship is a long one and it felt quite absurd a lot of the time, but I kept telling myself that I was making bad pictures in order to make good pictures one day."

One of his most captivating works, a diptych, captures the rare expression of the young boy in Stanley Kubrick's psychological horror film, *The Shining* (1980), as he encounters the ghostly twins in the haunted hotel. While freeze framing the precise instance in which innocence is lost, the two images also echo the disconcerting doubleness of inexact twins. The inexactitude of paintings and their uncanny ability to sometimes capture reality more convincingly than photographs is key to the conceptual life of Grose's paintings.

Group exhibitions have included *This Must Be The Place* at iArt Gallery, *The Night Show* at the Goodman Gallery, Cape Town, and *Alptraum!* at the Deutscher Künstlerbund Projektraum in Berlin, while his first solo, *Other Things*, drew crowds to Blank Projects in June.

His studio is dotted with an assembly of torn-out quotes and favoured images stuck to the walls alongside a small bookshelf, which houses books on Egon Schiele and Diego Velasquez alongside Italo Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* and John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*.

"In painting from existing images, and understanding myself as a translator of visual material, I have tried to find the embedded counterpoint to the loss of translation, and even the poetry of that loss," writes Grose in the statement that provided the initial key to seeing his works as he painted them.

While at university, Grose got the idea to go to Paris and study art. "I had devoted myself to the idea of dramatically interrupting my life ... and ended up in Paris after graduation with a portfolio of my work. I applied to the École des Beaux-Arts with my very rudimentary French, and didn't get in." At the time it was a "huge nightmare".

He could never have predicted it, but in a typically literary life twist, two years of studio slog and a baptismal year at Michaelis later, his brushstrokes have conjured nothing less than Paris.

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Artwork courtesy of the artist