

Sophia Anthony, "Interior Motives II"
by John Zotos

Ro2 Art, Dallas, Texas
Continuing through June 24, 2023

Sophia Anthony's "Interior Motives II" is a stunning body of work. Her personal version of contemporary figuration in painting reveals a new home-grown talent. A few years shy of thirty, Anthony has been painting for the greater part of her life in her native Dallas. Armed with a formidable knowledge of physics and a masterful technical skill, her paintings reflect an ability to draw upon diverse sources such as literature and European cinema. This, in turn, imbues the work with a narrative sensibility informed by psychodrama, alterity, and immediacy such that the final results escape resolution much like an Alain Robbe-Grillet novel.



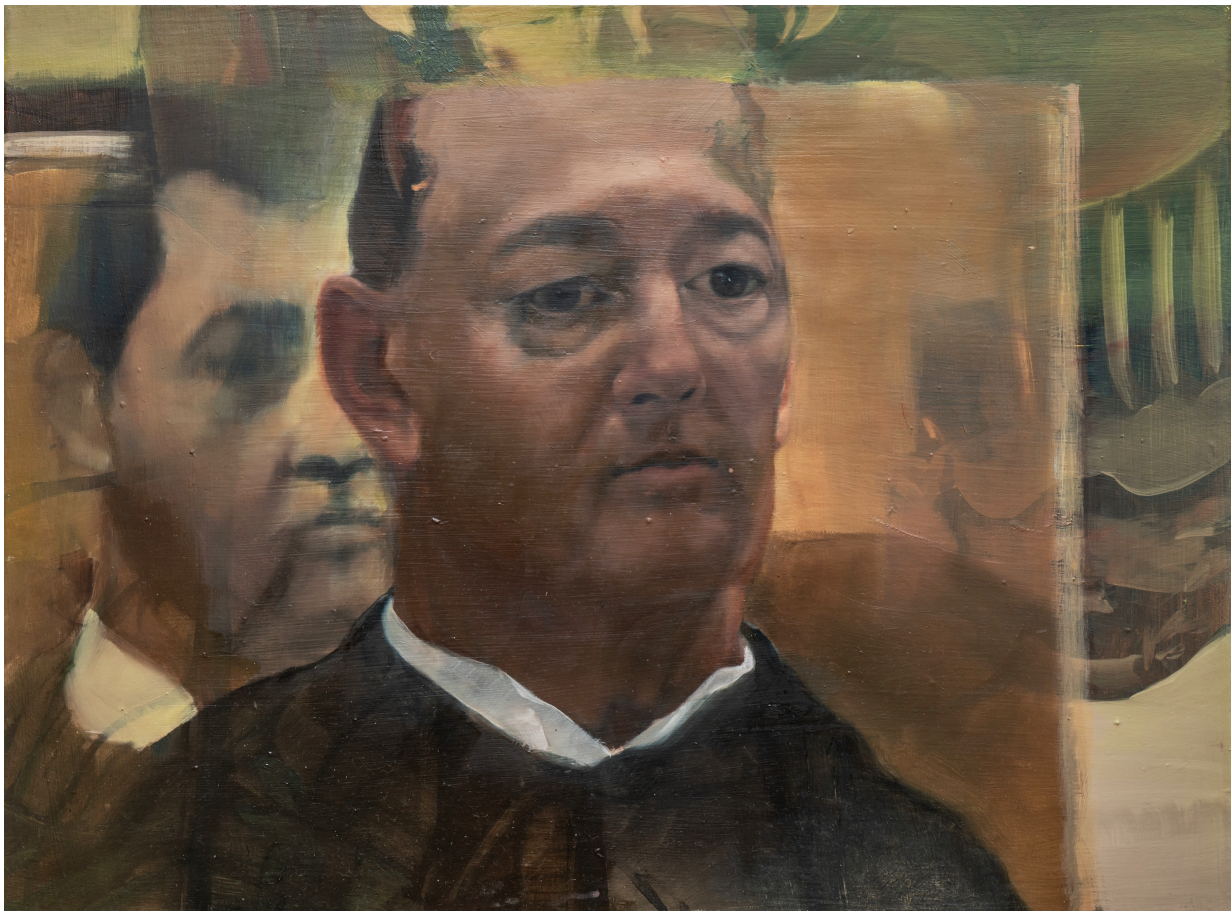
Sophia Anthony, "Interior Motives," 2023, oil on linen, 18 x 24"



Visual Art Source, June 2023

Of particular literary interest to the artist in this body of work is Alexander Pushkin's "Eugene Onegin," a novel in verse published in the early 19th century and generally regarded as one of the earliest Russian masterpieces. The titular character, filled with ennui about contemporary life, slowly unravels and is presented to the reader as a type of composite bereft of a true self. For Anthony, the idea of a man in crisis and dripping with desperation, perhaps on the verge of falling apart, held the key to picturing the varied versions of fractured masculinity in the paintings on view here.

Along with the figuration Anthony punctuates her surfaces with loose gestural phrases that heighten the ambiguity and tension on both formal and interpretive levels. While the faces and figures are drawn from cinema film stills and found imagery, these complex compositions summon the metaphysics of vision and reflection found in three classic examples of Western painting: Jan van Eyck's "Arnolfini Portrait," Diego Velazquez's "Las Meninas," and Edouard Manet's "A Bar at the Folies-Bergere." Up to now, no single art historian has been able to make claim to the definitive reading of any of the three paintings. Anthony brings the structure of these visual conundrums into a dialogue with Pushkin's character, only reshaped and distilled through an early 21st century lens.



Sophia Anthony, "Double Bluff," 2022, oil on canvas, 18 x 24"



Visual Art Source, June 2023

Consider “Double Bluff,” where a balding man with an expressionless face, rendered with stark precision, stares out into the distance. His eyes avert direct contact with us; he’s seemingly captured and cropped by loosely rendered and transparent line-bound planes that also circumscribe another effigy directly behind him to the left. Are they both there? Is this a mirror where we see two figures reflected in the image? Or might the second man be a younger version of the central figure, a memory of himself? This visual puzzle lends gravity to the painting and contributes, in general, to the mystery found in many of the works in the exhibition.

In the haunting “Bitters End,” a supine figure seems to rise up and engage with a hand holding out a beverage on a silver platter. A surface full of radical line formations punctuate the shirt sleeve of the second man who offers the drink, while other cuts traverse the surface. One bisects the distressed man’s face, and his left eye is completely blurred in an abstraction of painted mayhem. This in turn is countered in white to the left, where the reclining man’s smock is comprised of bold gestures that reference New York School abstraction. Again, an elegant and haunting puzzle that leads our eye in search of more visual clues in the distance toward the upper right, where painted secret passages and possible doorways may suggest unknown domains.



Sophia Anthony, “Bitters End,” 2022, oil on modeling paste and canvas, 18 x 24”



Visual Art Source, June 2023

Often, intense detail in the depiction of a single element offers a solid visual anchor that holds the painting together among all the movement and chaos. For instance, in “Off Work” a man wearing a tie passes through a room that is mostly behind him, or again he could be peering into a mirror. As the figure loosens his tie with his left hand, painted a smooth solid flesh tone, we begin to see a contrast between it and his face, which begins to dissolve, like the rest of his body, into the ghostly space of the room that looks as if it will swallow him whole.

On a larger scale, at 60 by 60 inches — arguably the painting that dominates the exhibition — “Understood Incomprehensibly” allows Anthony to work at near life size. Here, the composition centrally reveals a man who looks downwards, wearing a suit and an exquisitely detailed tie. He is bound and cropped on all sides by borders that look like a picture frame or the edge of a mirror, and a door jamb that extends the length of the canvas vertically, unless it’s simply an opening to another room where a small table sits in the distance. To the lower left, set on a table where it is cropped at the edge of the canvas, a lamp illuminates the space. It sits on a table that exits the frame, the lampshade has a red-orange hue with fabric that feels like you could reach out and touch. This hyper-real sensibility permeates the painting and demonstrates Anthony’s commitment to a personal style. The lamp emits a palpable glow of color that bathes not only the man’s face, but everything in the confined space.



Sophia Anthony, “Understood Incomprehensibly,” 2023, oil on canvas, 60 x 60”



Visual Art Source, June 2023

Ironically, it may only become clear after multiple viewings that the lamp also transmits a white light beyond the edge of the lampshade that contrasts with the light passing through the fabric. We now notice that there is a second man behind the first one, revealed by the back of his head, wearing a white shirt, further complicating the *mise en scene* with unknowable dramatis personae.

For Anthony, what's aesthetically at stake reaches beyond the current critique of masculine identity. On another level, beyond the place where the paintings engage with the inner world of memory and the imagination, and as the figures in the paintings intermingle with their surroundings, we find visual mechanics and mirroring. Their relationship to time and space leads to something that was there all along — a reading of the work through the lens of physics and especially string theory, which points to multiple dimensions, and a meditation on the nature of reality itself.



John Zotos is an art critic and essayist based in Dallas.