

SASCHA BRAUNIG

by Rose Bouthillier

Like heat rising off a desert horizon, or shadows coalescing in a midnight hallucination, Sascha Braunig's paintings appear to *materialize*. Her figures float tensely, posing and peering. They have musculature – flex – but also a plane-oriented thinness. Their animation is stilled, they pulse in place. Radiant fantasies, fancy, huh?: unruly dreams and blushing specters.

Many of Braunig's works are painted from observation: arrangements of costumes, masks, and props, both found and created, from her large inventory of still life fodder. Not straightly depicted, these models act as transitional parts, lending structure and gravity to elaborated images. Aspects of portrayal, even vestiges of it, imbue the work with a sense of mimicry – these are layered impressions and simulations: paintings of things that look like other things. Often brightly cast and spot lit, Braunig renders her figures in theatrical palettes: burning, cool, limpid, acid. Their skins have a smoothness both troubling and attractive. Soft and sloping, they evade fixed stares. Eyes slide off.

In *Hilt* (2014), a rounded sea creature-cum-pillow form sits inside an articulated frame. Hunched over a cross brace, it clings to and pushes against the bars with distinctly human hands. It appears to be struggling with its own corporeal gravity, top-heavy with a placid, near

featureless face. The painting's realism is both hyper- and sur-: *trompe l'oeil poesie-peinture*. Sometimes Braunig's figures are clearly defined, but they are often vague, emerging through patterns of stripes, polka dots, dashes, and chevrons enveloping figure and ground. Camouflage is not about *not* being seen; it's about being seen *as*, a type of becoming-through-blending. Braunig's paintings embody this manner: evasive and insistent. They shape shift. Though at times threatening to dissolve, the figures possess elasticity, and will always pull themselves back together. Fragmented and distorted parts pull the gaze – necks, limbs, ponytails, braids – in playful, seductive, and slightly sinister ways. Are we looking at, or for, a body we can place? Define, or desire, as feminine? Some features might invoke the artist herself; others resemble wire caging and plasticine. Composed entirely of plump, tightly packed pearlescent bubbles, *Saccades* (2014) sinks in along a nose ridge fault line. It has you thinking more in terms of hollowness than volume; surface tension against the pull of the void. I think of Kay Sage's *Small Portrait* (1950) with a face of morphing architecture folding into itself, drawn towards some intractable dark space beneath a shock of bright red hair. You go there, too, another inside you reach through your own.

Despite their eye-popping colors, I start to think of Braunig's paintings in terms

of gray matter: neural projections across linen/membranes, held inside frames/skulls. *Chur* (2014) embodies this exactly: a floating head composed of fleshy, tightly wound forms, held up on dangling chords. (There are specialized terms for the ridges and crevices that give the brain its wrinkled appearance: gyri and sulci, which sound like the names of some obscure mythical deities). Braunig's works have a striking sense of self-awareness, an unsettling sentience. Can a painting experience its own atmosphere? Feel its self laid down between surface and space? How might we perceive an image or object's own awareness? We might feel it as being watched, or being as one. Like in de Chirico's recollection of a winter's day at Versailles: "Silence and calm reigned supreme. Everything gazed at me with mysterious, questioning eyes. And then I realized that every corner of the palace, every column, every window possessed a spirit, an impenetrable soul. I looked around at the marble heroes, motionless in the lucid air, beneath the frozen rays of that winter sun which pours down on us *without love*, like perfect song."¹

Braunig heightens the collision of recognition and objectification, being and thingness, a duality that exists in every act of picturing. Her compact compositions and precisely rendered surfaces are like façades or veils, covers for unnerving psychological states. Often, their eyes are missing, covered, or closed, or, wide open but stone like, impenetrable. Perhaps they are dreaming too, of themselves, of attitudes and interiors, reveries of white cubes and white lights and white gloves.

1. Giorgio de Chirico, *Mystery and Creation*, 1913, in Herschel Browning Chipp, Peter Howard Selz, Joshua Charles Taylor (eds.), *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1968).