

HYPERALLERGIC

Mark Greenwold's Passion for Details

by John Yau March 6, 2016



Josie (2015), graphite on paper, 19 x 24 inches

In the pencil drawing “*Josie*” (2015), at least three people and an oversized cat are gathered in a room under what looks like a skylight. A bespectacled man on the drawing’s right-hand side is wearing boxer shorts and a t-shirt, his erect penis poking through his shorts. If he is embarrassed, he doesn’t show it. A book is lying on the table in front of him, with the words “*My Struggle*” partially erased.

That, of course, is the title of the six-volume autobiographical novel by Karl Ove Knausgaard, the Norwegian novelist, five of which have been translated into English, with the sixth no doubt on its way. While the title doesn’t show up anywhere else in *Mark Greenwold: The Rumble of Panic Underlying Everything* at Garth Greenan Gallery (February 18–March 26, 2016), it seems like a good place to begin a consideration of the mesmerizing attention that Greenwold pays to the quotidian details occupying every inch of the four modest sized paintings in his exhibition. The two largest ones are 30 x 46 inches. This is what Knausgaard and Greenwold share: a refusal to differentiate between the important and the commonplace, the banal and the special. Everything is important, no matter how trivial and underfoot.

There is no hierarchy to the details in Greenwold’s work. In the painting, “*What Will Survive Of Us is Love*” (2013–14), which includes aging men and women, both nude and clothed, the mottled and sagging skin, the tufted upholstery, the cat whiskers, the stringy cascades of tresses and pubic hair, not to mention the weave of the carpet, are all meticulously rendered. Not only do we see more than we might actually want to see, but we can feel it as well, given how lovingly the different textures of each surface are conveyed.

In his landmark essay “*The Painter of Modern Life*” (1863), Charles Baudelaire writes, “*Genius is childhood recovered at will.*” He goes on to say:

To this deep and joyful curiosity must be attributed that stare, animal-like in its ecstasy, which all children have when confronted with something new, whatever it may be, face or landscape, light, gilding, colours, watered silk.

Greenwold’s genius — and, really, why call it anything else — is the extent to which he becomes possessed by whatever he is scrutinizing. In each painting there is an animal, oversized cats and pointy-eared dogs, staring at the viewer with their wide eyes. These are Greenwold’s surrogates, his familiars. He knows that there is something absurd, funny and dark about what he does, but that’s not going to make him stop. If anything, it dares him to go further.

If there is no hierarchy to the details in a Greenwold painting, there is also no differentiation between what is real and what is imagined, between the factual and the fantastic. In the painting “*A Matter of Life and Death (For Selma)*” (2015), the artist appears three times, dashing up the stairs, hanging from the rafters, and wearing a semi-transparent nightie with yellow hearts sewn on the front, just like the one worn by the woman standing on the right. If you are going to wonder which one of them is real and which is imagined, you will miss the point.

And this is where Greenwold becomes more than a painstaking painter capable of detailing each surface and object with unparalleled attention. It is not that he is trying to off: it’s that he cannot help but expose himself for who and what he is. This means that his willingness to succumb to his own subjects’ exteriors must be matched by his devotion to his own interior waywardness, to the point of insalubrity. This refusal to differentiate between the acceptable and the unacceptable is what viewers are apt to find equally fascinating and off-putting about Greenwold’s paintings. He isn’t trying to shock us, because he knows that such a gesture is tiresome and trivializing. Real shock — as opposed to titillation — is something altogether different, and Greenwold has been down that path and doesn’t need to go down it again.

Greenwold is a realist whose work is a combination of Marcel Proust, Anton Chekov and Isaac Bashevis Singer — all relentless chroniclers of facts — tripping on ayahuasca. How else to explain the grotesque faces floating in every painting? Each of the four paintings is a domestic interior or, in the case of “*The Rumble of Panic Underlying Everything*” (2014), an enclosed patio looking onto three open rooms. The painting is also a stage occupied by anywhere between six and twelve characters, some of whom appear more than once, in a different outfit. As the audience, we are unsure what drama is being played out. I don’t particularly care, because I suspect the story is going to be far less interesting than the details, which is where both God and the devil reside.

At least one person in every painting is nude or nearly so. Everyone’s hair is unkempt, and their skin is wrinkled and sagging; the men’s faces are unshaven; their bald pates are shiny, veined and spotted. It is also clear that Greenwold is aghast at these facts, these unavoidable conditions. None of the people in his paintings have indulged in Botox or plastic surgery — they accept their states with equanimity and grace: along with at least one nude in each of his paintings, Greenwold includes at least one person laughing or smiling. Sometimes it’s him and sometimes it’s not. Humor, it should be noted, is not Knausgaard’s strong point.

In “*Human Kindness*” (2015–16), a prepubescent girl is the size of a very tall adult if compared to the child-sized man next to her. These distortions along with the multiple perspectives fold yet another disquieting possibility into the work, the steady accumulation of which speaks to me of Greenwold’s defiance: he refuses to make decorous works or to be coy about the indecorous when that, of course, is what the art world would prefer to see, however much they pay lip service to freedom of expression and artistic integrity. His nearest compatriot is Peter Saul. Further out on this spectrum are figures such as Hans Bellmer, Unica Zürn and Antonin Artaud.

As much as we are tempted to read these paintings biographically — and discover who each of the figures are, because they are all verifiable — I think such an inquiry is a complete waste of time. We are not looking at the inside of Greenwold’s life, we are looking at our own, warts and all. Have we not had weird and unexplainable thoughts, disturbing dreams, fits (or is it flights) of fancy and madness? This is the place common to us all that Greenwold explores with tenacity and tenderness. Despite all the pain that has been visited upon him, and doubtless he has visited upon others, there is a current of forgiveness running through his work.

Knausgaard has said that he didn’t want to control what he wrote, which is why his novel is six volumes and nearly 4,000 pages long. Despite their affinities, Greenwold is Knausgaard’s temperamental opposite. It takes Greenwold a year and often longer to finish a modest-sized painting. I suspect that he has not finished one hundred of them and he is nearly seventy-five years old. This is something he shares with another very special artist, Myron Stout. Otherwise, they could not be more different.