

BROOKLYN RAIL

Jana Euler: *Unform*

by Katherine Siboni



Installation view: *Jana Euler: Unform*, Artists Space, New York, 2020. Courtesy Artists Space, New York. Photo: Daniel Pérez

In Jana Euler's painting practice, the medium's conventional rectangular format is often acknowledged by the figurative imagery within, and frequently with visible discomfort. In Euler's treatment, the rectangular painted image is neither illusionistic window nor impenetrable mirror. The painting's frame is adapted instead to behave as a literal enclosure, a container in which absurd physical conditions are enacted. This negotiation between content and framework is not only formal, but institutional, as Euler demonstrates at her Artists Space exhibition, *Unform*, bringing together traditionally stretched paintings with painted canvas sculptures of "slugs"—soft-bodied avatars liberated from the frame to perform a range of gymnastics across the interior and exterior of the nonprofit's new site.

Euler opens the exhibition with the paintings *Unform 1* and *Unform 2*, installed above Artists Space's foyer. Each painting catalogues a form of movement or occupation by Euler's slug archetype, constituting two-dimensional prefaces to her sculptures (the latter collectively titled "Unstretched," and created in 2020. All paintings 2019). *Unform 1* latches to the painting's top and emanates tendrilled extensions across its surface. *Unform 2* burrows a tight path within the painting's frame, suggesting more mobility than *Unform 1* but of a limited, predetermined nature. The slug, an invertebrate, lacks structural coherence. It is both adaptable and vulnerable, it moves independently but also seeks shelter. Euler specifies by way of the exhibition brochure that the slug is a proxy for the artist in relation to the institution, yet the motif also embodies a deconstructive impulse that permeates the exhibition as a whole.

Installed in the smaller of the space's galleries, the cartoonish, bustling acrylic-on-linen *Under Distraction* summons overstimulation on both an individual and global level. Euler constructs a face from the trappings of the attention economy and mood-altering substances, the overall effect of which is a vacant, insomniac physiognomy. Lips are funneled with holes, shaped to facilitate seamless and constant intake of cigarettes, joints, pills, booze, and junk food. Multiple irides and pupils encircle the peripheries of two eyes, such that only bloodshot whites face the viewer. The two sleepless globes of eyes, with each iris bound to a computer or phone screen, evoke 24-hour models of production in the global economy, such as "follow-the-sun" workflow in which projects are passed between time zones for continuous labor. The genre of portraiture is blown open: vehicles of diversion replace psychological authenticity, the individual is crowded out by the collective consciousness to which she has constant access.



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Another of Euler's stretched paintings, *Circling the Horizon*, deflates the Renaissance ideals of Leonardo Da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*. As the original work inscribed exemplary male proportions across a neat overlay of a circle and a square; *Circling the Horizon*, as its dimensionally ambiguous title suggests, confuses the geometric harmony guiding Da Vinci's original. Euler folds Da Vinci's circle onto itself, forming a square from the original composition. Atop the central model's stance, three additional men encircle the canvas's periphery enacting different poses, Euler articulating their musculature in pink, raw brushwork that signals physical strain. On each edge of the canvas is a visible handle, negating the notion of a correct orientation. On either side of *Circling* are two nearly symmetrical paintings of male figures, contorting their crouched bodies in mirror images to embody the square of the canvas.

In the main gallery, Euler's painting *gwf 9 Richter/Baselitz* expands upon her "Great White Fear" series exhibited at Galerie Neu last year, in which phallic great white sharks explosively emerge from the water, their bodies extended and tumescent, faces variously anthropomorphized into horror at their own exposed form. In this instance, Euler summons two towering male predecessors of German painting, signaling each by way of their respective directional trademarks—Gerhard Richter's calibrated horizontal smudge, Georg Baselitz's 180 degree flip—a subtle deflation of auratic gesture.

Woven across Artists Space's new architecture, and amongst these paintings telegraphing structural mutability, are Euler's "Unstretched" sculptures. Slouched, suspended, engulfing Artists Space's Corinthian columns and hovering over Tribeca passersby from the building's façade, the slugs' poses are further elucidated in the exhibition brochure in drawings and text: "The relaxed slug is strapped to the column,



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imagining itself to be freed from the authoritarian structure while bound, dependent, and well-fed." Of the exterior slug, "This relation to the inside of the gallery licenses the slug to venture into the world outside, with the potential for freedom and possibility of harm." Each "slug" represents an active or passive artist in the gallery and museum system. Yet "Unstretched" also highlights the structural unruliness stirring within Euler's hung paintings, as her sculptures maintain material vestiges of oil painting but do away with its defining frame. Euler's stretched paintings such as *Circling the Horizon* suggest confinement in their shallow depth and tight boundaries; whereas her sculptures imply liberation. Euler's mining of the space in between constitutes a range of radical approaches to painting.

Contributor

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