

ArtSeen

Ansel Krut: *Back to Back Balloons*

Krut's extraordinary paintings take us back to 20th century existential angst

By **Alfred Mac Adam**



Ansel Krut, *Man in the City*, 2018, acrylic on paper, 30 x 22 in., 76.2 x 55.9 cm. Photo: Pierre Le Hors. Courtesy Marlborough Gallery.

Like his fellow South Africans William Kentridge and Marlene Dumas, Ansel Krut might be defined as an expressionist of the latter day. Where Kentridge is theatrical and Dumas passionate, Krut seems zany, but in fact he is dead serious and addresses a wide range of artistic and social issues in these 30 acrylics and oils, all painted between 2017 and 2018.

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Politics take center stage in *American Icon* (2017), an oil on canvas. Krut transforms the colors of the American flag into a cult object: the blue turned into a cross that is also a wall, the red and the white into violent versions of Aaron and Hur supporting not a victorious Moses, but a faceless cruciform mass. This wall-cross signals only mindless negativity. *Exit* (2018), an acrylic on paper stretched on board, complements *American Icon* in that it is an exit to nowhere, an exit that refuses to be an entrance. A door in a desert telling the hapless passerby (or viewer) this is the way out because there is no way in. Taken together the two paintings constitute a commentary on issues of the moment, but when the moment passes they will be grim reminders of a time when hospitality and charity gave way to self-righteous xenophobia.



Ansel Krut, *American Icon*, 2017, oil on canvas, 70 3/4 x 55 in., 180 x 140 cm. Photo: Robert Glowacki. Courtesy Marlborough Gallery.

Krut has an obsession with heads, which feature prominently in at least seven works. Side by side hang *Head Hanging by its Nose* (2017), an oil on canvas, and *Head on a Ship* (2018), an acrylic on paper stretched on board. Both seem playful but in fact explore the complex symbolism of the head. Here the head is suspended via its nose to an equilateral triangle: to achieve transcendence the head or mind must be separated from the body and its desires in order to get beyond the illusory world of phenomena. Krut constructs a hieroglyph self-portrait, the artist achieving his identity by renouncing the world. *Head on a Ship* is yet another icon related to the artist, here in command, as Dante puts it, of "the little ship of my genius." Only by taking complete control of his powers can the artist express himself fully. *Boat 2* (2018), an acrylic on paper, confirms this idea with a monumental head "steaming full speed ahead."



Ansel Krut, *Head Hanging by its Nose*, 2017, oil on canvas, 70 3/4 x 55 in., 180 x 140 cm. Photo: Robert Glowacki. Courtesy Marlborough Gallery.

Almshouse (2018), an acrylic on paper stretched on aluminum, brings the viewer back to social reality. An almshouse is a manifestation of society's recognition that the poor, the elderly, the incapacitated need help from the community at large. At the same time, Krut's building set against a background of triangular mountains is itself a complex interplay of triangles and rectangles, symbols, respectively, of transcendence and order. This almshouse alludes to the balance between the private man of art and the public man-citizen. The same interaction between triangles and quadrilateral shapes dominates *Man in the City* (2018). Here, however, Krut focuses on isolation within the social matrix. His lonely man possesses structural integrity, but he is in constant danger of disintegration from within, represented by the violet, crumbling rectangle inside him and his own triangular chin falling apart.



Ansel Krut, *Boat 2*, 2018, acrylic on paper, 30 x 22 in., 76.2 x 55.9 cm, Photo: Pierre Le Hors. Courtesy Marlborough Gallery.

Ansel Krut's extraordinary paintings take us back to 20th century existential angst and its unending inquiry into identity, fate, and self-determination. His painterly style may seem casual, crude, and ludic, but this is work of high seriousness and deep moral content.

Contributor

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