

## **Valentin Hauri & Rhea Myers**

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### **Text by Simon Würsten Marin**

The first thing you could probably think upon discovering the exhibition *Valentin Hauri & Rhea Myers* is that the confrontation between these two artists' practices results in an aesthetic clash. On one hand a selection of recent conceptual paintings by Hauri with their apparent interplay between figuration and abstraction and, on the other, reproductions from Myers's 2019 NFT series *Tokens Equal Text* – two originals on screen and two silkscreen renderings from a newly produced edition – each displaying four cryptic lines of coloured text describing seemingly unrelated objects or visual impressions. Formally, these works could hardly be more contrasting. Yet, in their strategy they have more in common than meets the eye.

Both artists' practices are resolutely conceptual, but not visibly so. Since 1994, Valentin Hauri (b. 1954, CH) has followed a strict and consistent protocol to produce his oil paintings: five predetermined formats – all respecting a 10:9 ratio – and an *alla prima* technique foreclosing any possibility for subsequent edits to the canvas. He uses existing pictures as a source material, cutting out clippings from magazines, posters, or catalogues, and collecting film stills as well as images online, all of which then serve as compositional references for his paintings. For his works, Hauri reinterprets salient features in these source images, oftentimes details or structural elements which he selects for their particular shape or colour in the original. Through the process of decontextualisation and rescaling as well as the removal of all traces of human figures, these elements lose their figurative or structural essence and become abstract shapes, making it practically impossible for the viewer to trace them back to their original source. For Hauri, this approach to painting equates not so much to picture-making as to a process of discovery and revelation of intrinsic artistic qualities in existing images.

Among these references, Hauri's most important source of inspiration are works by self-taught, outsider, or else marginal artists. He is drawn to these images for their genuine and personal creative essence as opposed to the culturally and socially conditioned art by trained professionals. Hauri has often sourced these references in the Sammlung Prinzhorn – an important German collection of art by patients from psychiatric institutions. At Last Tango, most of the exhibited paintings are works created

in reference to the elusive photographer and filmmaker James Bidgood and to the outsider artist Henry Darger. In using these artists' creations as source material, Hauri celebrates art-making as an impulse and the visual manifestation of a deeply subjective vision shaped by individual experiences rather than as an aesthetic calculation. Yet Hauri also creates an interesting paradox, as he himself resorts to a meticulously defined procedure to produce these works conceived as a tribute to intuitive creative drives, often in the face of poignant life experiences and ostracism. It is in this paradox that the conceptual component in Hauri's artistic process takes all its significance: in subjecting these works to a predetermined set of creative parameters he confronts two radically different aesthetic approaches – an intuitive one driven by impulse and subjective decisions and a rational one meant as a reduction of arbitrariness in formal choices. As a result, these paintings materialise the fundamental question of where the authentic creative character of art lies although, or precisely because, Hauri's conceptual approach remains imperceptible in the final object. The paintings, in this sense, exemplify a defiance of modernist painterly canons by simultaneously encapsulating a conceptual protocol and a celebration of non-academic forms of art-making.

Rhea Myers (b. 1973, UK) uses the blockchain as a creative space in order to challenge our assumptions about both technology and culture. More particularly, she is interested in investigating the relevance of conceptual art's legacy in our current technocratic, consumerist, and hyper-real contemporary condition. With her crypto-works, she questions our relationship to value and ownership as well as technology's role in the circulation of cultural phenomena in our dematerialised and increasingly virtual reality.

The works from the series *Tokens Equal Text* presented at Last Tango are digital artworks in the form of NFTs and silkscreen prints. The title is descriptive: each of the NFT works consists of an Ethereum ERC-998 composable token that itself combines four ERC-721 non-fungible tokens, each representing a line of the text that can be read on the visual rendering. These text fragments are themselves encoded into the ID number of these four NFTs. They correspond to a random assemblage of words from four lists of preselected items evoking a distinct visual element in a pictorial composition, and their colour is determined by an algorithm using the values provided by the ID number. The colours and the visual universe hinted at by the text are intended to recall visual tropes from the Vapourwave movement. Vapourwave is a cultural phenomenon that arose on the internet in the early 2010s as both a music genre and an aesthetics. Visually, it is characterised by kitsch and rudimentary digital collages involving stereotypical elements such as classical-looking statuary, vintage technological devices, dolphins, geometric shapes, water and night skies, mainstream symbols of wealth and commodities, as well as an abundance of violet, blue, and pink hues. It was described as an ambiguous, post-ironic movement that reflects at the same time critically and nostalgically on the 1980s and 90s golden age of consumerist capitalism

and pre-internet culture.

In Myers's works, the reference to Vapourwave does not succeed through a direct appropriation of the genre's aesthetics, thus bringing to a halt the infinite cycle of variation and repetition of the same formal tropes. Instead, she uses algorithms to both order and randomise lexical cues which almost subliminally summon this internet subculture to the viewer's mind. In doing so, her works draw attention to the implicit rules that dictate the aesthetics of the movement, allowing to interrogate its ideological values and foundations while simultaneously confronting this epitome of the internet's visual culture to fine arts' canons. But with the use of a systematic algorithmic protocol to create her crypto-artworks, Myers doesn't merely challenge traditional artistic media. She also questions the blockchain itself as a creative space, both aesthetically and ethically. Following the economic boom of cryptocurrencies and the surge of artists using NFTs on the mainstream art market, Myers's singular conceptual approach in reference to Vapourwave also exposes the cultural transformation of the blockchain from a space of (artistic) emancipation to one of speculation, accumulation, and hyper-capitalisation. Exploiting the blockchain's own encrypting features to frame the content and formal characteristics of her works, she deconstructs the technological mechanisms through which market value and uniqueness is created in the digital realm, and she does so by using references to an aesthetic movement ironically characterised for the circulation and reuse of visual contents and its indifference towards originality. As a result, Myers's NFTs manifest an ambiguity towards ownership on the blockchain that is not unlike Vapourwave's own dubious nostalgia for a bygone era in which it was still possible to shamelessly yield to the siren song of consumerism.

While formally contrasting, both Hauri's and Myers's practices display a use of conceptual parameters in order to distance themselves from their respective medium, so as to question its role within the art economy as well as the status of art within contemporary culture. Their approaches reveal a creative meditation on art after conceptualism – the moment in art history when the idea took precedence over aesthetics. Reductionist strategies such as protocols or algorithms allow them to channel their formal choices, yet in both cases in such a way that these conceptual underpinnings become dissimulated under the guise of formalism. Consequently, both artists feature in their work a degree of encryption within their own aesthetics that conceptually re-enacts the mystery of art's beauty, though achieved at least in part via external parameters rather than conscious human decision. Amusingly, they both use as a point of departure references to confidential or marginal art forms traditionally considered to be eccentric and beyond art's aesthetic canon.

In their practices, Hauri and Myers appear to use each in their own way a combination of creative strategies and references that end up blurring the logical link between idea and aesthetic result. While the formal parameters of their work exist as visual traces of the conceptual process, they do

not explicitly reveal the artists' intentions. In a world obsessed with intelligibility and ideological clarity, such an approach actively resists the tendency for self-explanatory art. Instead, it celebrates ambiguity, polysemy, and mystery by using a conceptual veil to frustrate interpretative attempts. At Last Tango, this veil seems to conceal a queer ethos that invisibly runs throughout the exhibition and further unites the two artists. The artists referenced in Hauri's works presented here were not only outsiders in the artistic sense; both of them also seem to have shared life experiences at the margins of society and of the gender and sexual norms, though in different eras. From the iconic erotic film *Pink Narcissus* (1971) that was revealed after nearly thirty years to be by James Bidgood to Henry Darger's numerous depictions of gender-ambiguous children from the mid-20th century, the source materials used by Hauri in his recent works are informed by their authors' demonstrated interest in gender and sexual deviance.

Rhea Myers has commented that her attraction for the blockchain came about at the same time as she realised that she was herself living an encrypted life, and that it had helped her crack the code of her own trans identity. She observed that the blockchain represented a privileged creative space for trans and nonbinary artists and that gender non-conforming people may well have a proclivity for coding, given their experience of having to constantly produce and process hidden meaning. Yet just like Hauri's works do not disclose their visual source, even less so their author's identity or life stories, Myers's art does not thematically address issues of identity. This doesn't mean however that these questions are absent from their respective practices but, rather, that they are invisibly embedded in their work. It is precisely this strategy of dissociating form and content through the use of conceptual procedure to reinterpret pre-existing material, whether it be algorithms or strict creative protocols, that Hauri and Myers have in common. In their approach, the creative process is not dictated by a subject matter or a thematic point of reference but by a set of external factors that determine the visual outcome. As a result, their artworks do not visually reveal the density of information that compose them. They are instead characterised by their formal sobriety that incites the viewer to wonder about the process rather than the content. In this way, Hauri's and Myers's practices directly question the cultural relation between visual regime and production of meaning in our postmodernist and post-conceptual age.

In a sense, this exhibition at Last Tango follows a similar strategy. It presents two artists whose clashing aesthetics conceal a commonality in approach. With this unexpected juxtaposition, it raises the question of what exists behind appearances, thus also questioning itself as revealing device.