

# SEAN KELLY

Bailey, Stephanie. "Purkinje Effect," *Art Forum*, November 2013.

## ARTFORUM

### "Purkinje Effect"

GALERIE 1900–2000

Organized by artist Laurent Grasso, "Purkinje Effect" took the idea of "dark adaptation" in color perception and used it as a curatorial conceit. The Purkinje effect refers to the way in which the eye's relative receptivity to different colors changes according to the light, so that as our environment grows darker, we become more sensitive to shades of blue. This may explain why the gallery walls were painted a deep Prussian blue and the exhibition title rendered as an icy neon sign. The works Grasso selected, ranging (except for a couple of his own paintings) from the late-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, appeared aged yet, thanks to the artist's exhibition design, luminous.

The starting point for the show, according to Grasso's exhibition statement, was the dramatist Victorien Sardou's etching *Quartier des Animaux chez Zoroastre de Bernard Palissy* (Zoroaster's Animal Quarters by Bernard Palissy), ca. 1860, which depicts a fantastical world evocative of the Victorian fad for fairies; in it, a large flower occupies the center of a fluttering pixie paradise. This vision was offset by a multitude of other extraordinary historical works mostly associated with Surrealism, which were closely hung in the gallery's space. Among these were Heinrich Hoffmann's 1912 portrait of Duchamp; Man Ray's vintage gelatin silver print *Boulevard Montparnasse*, 1930, in which the flashing lights of Paris appear like white punctures in black metal; and Max Bucaille's elegant collage on paper *Jean Sans Peur au fond des eaux* (John the Fearless in the Depths of the Water), 1939, showing the Duke of Burgundy standing in front of a large leaf extending from behind his back. Then there was the anonymous portrait of a steely-eyed Hans Bellmer, ca. 1950, along with a haunting study by Bellmer in white gouache on black paper, untitled and dated 1937, of a pair of (almost too) young women dressed in the swirling fabrics so characteristic of the artist's imagery. A couple of Picabias were on hand, too: a scribble of a country field, *Paysage* (Landscape), 1909, of the same shades as the fields van Gogh painted from his window at Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, France, and the small but effective *Point*, 1951, a pocket-size canvas painted sky blue with a small yellow orb positioned just off-center.

The inclusion of René Iché's ghostly *Masque de Paul Éluard*, ca. 1930, served as a testament to the human history behind these works. Amid these fascinating documents and objects, Éluard's face emerged from the gallery's rich-blue walls like an affirmation. The producers of these historical artworks, all forged from the context of modern industrialization and political militarization, were flesh and blood; they lived and breathed right here in Paris. And Grasso succeeded in conjuring, through this assemblage, the spirit of *their* times, now. An exquisite corpse by André Breton, Valentine Hugo, and Greta Knutson (ca. 1930) provided a glimpse into the wit and guile of these creative producers: figures such as revolutionary anarchist Louise Michel, whose 1888 play *Le Coq Rouge* was represented in this exhibition by her own drawing; and writer/performer Musidora, who is captured in a 1929 portrait by an unknown artist, her gaze liberated, defiant, and searing.

In this exhibition, Grasso produced a strange world parallel to his own art, in which past and present overlap. It was thus fitting that two of his paintings were included in the mix. One was an eerie forest path, the other a Renaissance-style landscape, its sun painted as if a large black hole. Both are from Grasso's "Studies into the Past" series, begun in 2009, meticulously produced in collaboration with art restorers and deliberately left undated. But with these paintings, as with the other works on view, it was not the historical style that felt at once otherworldly and familiar. Rather, it was the timeless anticipation of transcendent futures. Like "dark adaptations," the works appeared as luminous apparitions emerging out of historical shadows.

—Stephanie Bailey

