

Gerard Hemsworth: Mushrooms in the Rain
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FROM THE RIDICULOUS TO THE SUBLIME

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Within the ordinary and the familiar lies the extra-ordinary. Within the rational and sensible, there is the ridiculous. In Gerard Hemsworth's paintings such oscillations take place endlessly. They can take you by surprise. The initial surprise encountered here is their apparent lightness of touch and content. This is highly unexpected since high art is meant to be a very serious matter. And indeed it is. Yet these paintings seem to go against the grain of all that fine art adopts in order to be taken seriously. They are humorous with a tinge of melancholy and naïve wonder. The figures and movements represented in them are not the heroes of action or delinquency that are central to the repertoire of modern art, nor the grand gestures of abstraction with which it continues to be preoccupied. They are instead amusing and often winsome creatures that, because of their apparent frivolity, are all the more disconcerting to find in serious contemporary art. These figures – and the paintings they occupy – could even be said to be ridiculous when compared to the sorts of things that are done in the effort to prove the earnestness, commitment and importance of art. And this is in fact their critical importance; it is one amongst many audacious challenges Hemsworth presents to what we expect art to be when it takes itself seriously.

This ridiculous aspect, which is also the critical aspect of Hemsworth's paintings, is perhaps the most disconcerting of all – not just in this work but also in relation to the unquestioned demands contemporary art makes on itself. After all, it sounds like a paradox: what is ridiculous barely deserves consideration or contemplation. It lies well outside of what we usually take to be critically dignified, not even as worthy of attention as dumbness, absurdity or the abject. The latter are all now readily accepted as strategies for refusing the demands of conventional ways of making meaning, as active rejections of expectations that are well-mined in contemporary art. What is ridiculous, however, doesn't have this comforting recuperation. Like cuteness, it doesn't seem a very clever place to go, if only because it seems to belie all notions of cleverness. But this is exactly why it deserves more thought, even though all the thought in the world won't help make any more sense of it. Because in fact it's hard *not* to be caught up with by cleverness, to *not* be brought back down to earth and captured by the forces of sense, authority, control, and seriousness. Yet somehow the ridiculous manages to escape these bindings, generating laughter instead of a sense of mastery. What does such laughter tell us? It betrays some recognition of what cannot be taken seriously. Hemsworth's paintings demonstrate the power of this identification with

what lies beyond the guidelines of our expectations, removing them from us however momentarily. Shifting us, perhaps, into the realm of the unknown.

Not that any of this loss of sense is unknown in the history and repertoire of fine art. In some ways it is even the major theme of what fine art has striven towards in the last two and a half centuries in its critical dimension. It is perhaps most familiar to us not in the manner of the ridiculous, however, but as the sublime. Hemsworth's paintings obviously refer to this genre in the pose of his figures and in the spaces that his paintings draw attention to: the gaze into a mid-distance or a beyond, the distracted attention, the tarrying with larger powers that can't quite be gotten at, the temporary loss of self. But what is also clear in these paintings – and what is then also critical about them as regards this long-standing ambition of modern art – is that the grandeur of this project is taken up and simultaneously deflated through the low key yet insistent power depicted in Hemsworth's paintings. In the world that fine art finds itself in today the recourse to nature and the transcendental beyond has little if any credibility as a place where we can be caught suddenly off guard, where our knowledge falls short and our expectations confused. Science, it is thought, can comprehend and take care of nature and bring it under some sort of human power; contemporary philosophy does the same to the transcendental. What then are we left with? In Hemsworth's paintings the response is clear: the contemplative power that the sublime used to have is now to be found in an urbane and knowing re-presentation. But in that move it changes its character altogether, for the sublime was always associated with the outside, with what lies beyond the limit of our understanding which it nonetheless lets us sense. Hemsworth proposes that it has been displaced into that other mode of curiosity and bewilderment, that other sort of encounter with what's not understood so well but which is to be found directly in front of us. For all its proximity, however, what displaces the sublime still cannot be explained or fully grasped, even though it keeps on insisting itself upon us in its inexplicability and disruption of our normal expectations. It is the ridiculous, which remains compelling and bewildering even if at one level we know it very well.

When nature loses its power to overwhelm us as an idea (however much it continues to do so in fact), when what confuses no longer comes from an outside but from what was apparently known (as it must now that we are in a globalized world), then what surprises and displaces our understanding can only come from what we are familiar with. Or, at least, what we thought we were familiar with. From what was ordinary but now becomes extra-ordinary and strange and, in the shock of re-recognizing it, makes us rethink our expectations. This is the critical impact of the ridiculous. But it is also an unnerving experience that extends beyond the reversal of nature's overwhelming power into the low-key yet equally disarming scenes Hemsworth depicts. This complexification, bewilderment and wonder in the face of what is close at hand rather than exotic and unusual is a key experience of modernity in

general today. Scientists speak about complexity and fractal theories, which reveal that simple phenomena are internally and infinitely intricate; sociologists speak about a risk society where the social structures that provide security and comfort are also responsible for dangers and treats; psychoanalysis speaks about the secret workings of the unconscious in our rational decisions. What is familiar and even comforting is where strangeness and the unknown happen. They cannot be distinguished, separated, from one another. What is close at hand becomes uncertain. As then are our expectations.

The destabilisation of security courses through Hemsworth's paintings, most evidently in how their sly humour deflates the expectations of high art whilst remaining within it. Even the nature of the image in these paintings is bewildering: we remain unsure whether we are involved with figures that point to something outside of themselves, as signs do, or which give us some sort of connection to that which is beyond our immediate experience, as representations do. This supposedly fundamental distinction is lost and these images pray upon our understanding of images, asking us to return to them again and again, insistently, without respite. In their insistence these paintings have no time for ignorance or escapism from the arduous difficulties of thinking and seeing the complexities in painting and image-making today. Without running away from the questions opened by abstraction or figuration, of the oscillation in imagery and affect between 'high' art and popular culture, of the internal and external limits of paintings today, Hemsworth proposes that these concerns – which extend beyond the field of painting – are not repressive weights or limitations. They are rather conditions for painting to open into new imaginaries. In this way, they provoke a reevaluation of what fine art has to be if it is to continue being relevant to our understanding of our relation to ideas, nature, images, one another. Thoughtfulness, contemplation, depth cannot be distinguished from lightness, emptiness, thoughtlessness; profundity and self-awareness cannot be distinguished from the silly and the slight, nor seriousness from the enjoyable.