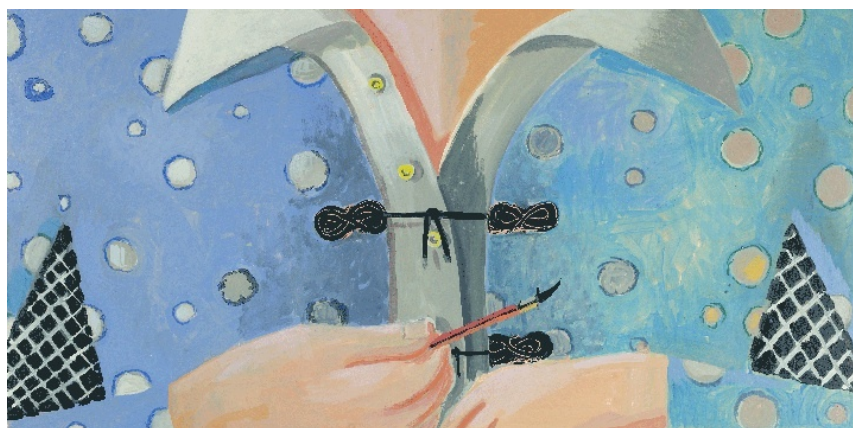


Art in America

Becoming Adults: The Paintings of Elena Sisto

by Julian Kreimer 04/25/13

Manhattan-based artist Elena Sisto paints fictitious painters, mostly women, in front of their canvases. The seeming inevitability in the interlocked structure of her compositions belies the many thin layers and changes below the surface. While her earlier works included faces, the newest ones crop them out, but patterns on clothing and canvas, or the way a brush is held, reveal as much about these figures as expressions.



Elena Sisto, *Frogs*, 2013, oil on canvas, 30 by 60 inches.

April is a big month for Sisto. She's having her first New York solo show since 2004, the traveling exhibition "Between Silver Light and Orange Shadow," which originated at Miami Dade College Museum of Art + Design, made a stop at the University of Florida's University Gallery in Gainesville and is now at New York's Lori Bookstein Fine Art (through May 25). She also was awarded a Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship this month.

Sisto, 61, studied at Brown University, the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, in Maine, and New York's Studio School in the '70s. Since then she's had numerous solo shows, most recently at New York's Littlejohn Contemporary, and the American University Museum at the Katzen Art Center, American University, Washington, D.C. She spoke with *A.i.A.* about her new work at her East Village studio while Frida, her nervous rescued Affenpinscher, watched attentively.

JULIAN KREIMER The cropping in these paintings makes them seem more abstract, even though they include figures, than earlier works in which you included faces. Why do you think artists are so interested now in the line between abstraction and figuration?

ELENA SISTO One of the reasons is because there's a misunderstanding. To say a painting is abstract doesn't necessarily mean it has no figures in it; it means that it's constructed abstractly. We're living in a moment when we see so many images all the time. People are looking at them iconographically. There's a lot more to a painting than just how the iconography reads. That's why it's very important to me if someone goes up close to my painting. When you look at one of my paintings, I want you to look at it and say, "Oh, I know what that is." And as soon as you start looking at it, the abstraction carries your eye off in an unexpected way. When you're painting, if you don't put things down in the right order, it looks mundane. Here [*pointing to Overalls 1, 2013*], in this shirt, it was very important for the blue to go down once, and only once. I had to keep painting the shirt out white and then repainting it so that the blue could retain its transparency. I think you can see when you come up close,

these works are very, very loosely painted, compared to what you might think from a distance.

KREIMER They look flat, but they're not at all.

SISTO In this one [*indicating* *Black Apron (2013)*], for instance, I'm just much more interested in the feeling of the figure moving forward really hard against the canvas, which is moving backward. That feeling of compression is sort of what it feels like when you're painting. You're compressing your life experience in some way. It's a high-pressure situation. It's a performance.

KREIMER Why are these new paintings so tightly cropped?

SISTO When I started getting rid of the head and focusing in on the figure more, I felt like there was more of a body identification between the viewer and the painting, so that maybe you get more of a physical feeling rather than thinking about a psychology.

KREIMER Why was the psychology a problem?

SISTO It's not so much that the psychology is a problem, it's that psychology implies the word "intellectualizing," and I wanted it to be more emotional than analytical.

Now it's less of a portrait and more of a state of being. The figure's body is almost more like a field, instead of a figure. There are still psychological elements, but they're more subtle—the gesture, or the pose, or the choice of clothing. And the special relationship between the figure and the rectangle and the figure and whatever else is in the picture.

In a way, I think of these pictures—especially these cropped-in pictures—as a place where there's an intersection of forces that are much larger than the pictures themselves.

For instance, here [*points to* *Black Apron*] you've got the apron, the canvas and the table all coming in from outside of the picture, so you know they extend beyond the picture. And I'm putting a frame around where they intersect.

I am very interested in cartoons. I don't want the imagery to turn out as a cartoon, but I'm intrigued by the way that cartoons are so abstract, and in the abstraction they give so much human content. I really like that. If someone stands like she is standing, [*points to* *Black Apron*], it means something. I don't need to have her face.

KREIMER The shadows glow, as if they're the brightest parts of the painting.

SISTO That's where the psychology comes in. The reflected light in the shadow is introspection. The shadow is a private space, and that's a life that's going on inside of the shadow.

KREIMER And what's the silver light in the show title?

SISTO The silver light is a light that starts really modifying or pushing colors, from, like, 2:30 in the afternoon through sunset.

KREIMER Is there a parallel between that silver light that pushes color and the way each figure is pushed socially in a certain direction?

SISTO Oh, definitely. If you're insecure, you're going to hold your chest in. If you're secure, you put it out. If you put it out, it catches light, if you put it in, it doesn't. There's definitely a social significance to the light. Which is weird to say. With the earlier girl paintings [e.g. *Upside Down*, 2011], there was a balance between the private world of childhood and the adult world pushing in on them. They were just on the edge between childhood and adulthood, so they were teetering on a very thin line, whereas these girls or women are more in the world as adults. They're more confident. And they're pushing back with their paintings. They've got agency.