

ArtSeen
Wilhelm Sasnal: New Paintings and One Film

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Wilhelm Sasnal's paintings are sometimes described as "photorealistic," but that's not strictly the case. As his film *Paintings and Bikes* (2019) makes clear, the images in paintings occupy their own spaces and are preoccupied with their own concerns, not ours. What appears to be believably naturalistic at a quick glance tends to be far more abstracted, as the artist employs the logic of stencil or silhouette on grounds of often churning or swirling brushwork. Sasnal relies on our proclivity for pattern recognition to encourage our eyes and brains to complete the picture with him. It might take the form of his signature strategy—this black shape over this color—or, as here, in the cangiant handling of blue and red-orange on a canvas like *Youth* (2020).

Some of the paintings included in Anton Kern's current exhibition were made from the artist's images of a stay in Los Angeles in 2019–20. Accordingly, we're treated to keyed-up color and tropical fauna, as in the larger-than-life (nearly 5 by 5 feet) anthurium in *Untitled* (2020). Such a flower matches Sasnal's habits so well, with its waxy red petals and white highlights substituting for his more common planes of dark tones and its leaves plausibly photographic until we get closer and realize that they're achieved with boldly zig-zagging brushstrokes, a tactic also deployed on the wrinkled jacket worn tied around a woman's waist in *Untitled* (2020). *Monstera* (2018) casts axonometric, leafy shadows. Though made before his trip to California, *Monstera* seems to reflect that built environment, with impastoed dots of paint shot across the field, summoning the look and the feel of a stuccoed corner.

Lest we get too carried away with our LA fantasies, Sasnal brings us back to his surfaces with two medium-sized canvases calling back to Robert Smithson performances. In *East Coast, West Coast* (1969), Smithson famously played a stereotypical West Coast artist confronted by his East Coast counterpart, assumed by Nancy Holt. Among other assertions, Smithson tells us, "I never read books; I just go out and look at the clouds." We find ourselves doing the same with Sasnal's *Los Angeles* (2020), which envelops the city's horizontal profile in a spectacularly frothy marine layer. *Asphalt Rundown* (Smithson's version 1969/Sasnal's, 2020) borrows its palette from the filmed version of the act, its dump truck registering a different blue from the robin's egg Roman sky and the quarry's rock glowing orange (photographs of the *Rundown* record a significantly more subdued color experience). When we look at Sasnal's



Wilhelm Sasnal, *Untitled*, 2020. Oil on canvas, 59 1/8 x 59 1/8 inches.
© Wilhelm Sasnal. Courtesy the artist and Anton Kern Gallery, New York.



Wilhelm Sasnal, *Youth*, 2020. Oil on canvas, 19 3/4 x 15 3/4 inches. © Wilhelm Sasnal. Courtesy the artist and Anton Kern Gallery, New York.

image, we remember one of Smithson's sketches (1969) for the performance, in which ink stands for the asphalt that covers the page in black Sasnalian rivulets; far from the delicate, Art Nouveau tendrils of spilled liquid that Smithson depicted, the hot asphalt ran on top of itself and dried in a brutal, clawing fashion. Sasnal paints that spill surprisingly flat, as flat as a photograph.

Glue Rundown (2020), based on Smithson's Glue Pour (1969), is a black-and-white monochrome that recreates the black-and-white documentation of a similar pouring action for which Smithson overturned a large barrel of glue onto a Vancouver hillside. Color images of this event portray the glue as variously being a sickly brown or an alarmingly glossy and vivid burnt sienna. In black-and-white, the glue is white, and Sasnal paints it flowing from the unseen drum at the top of the canvas as the whitest white—straight out of the can, we might say—to become mixed with coils of black as the painting develops in its lower three-quarters. Smithson and his collaborators stare down the hill, starkly painted in black, details of their clothing and accessories—a purse worn across the torso, a camera around the neck—picked out in white, hair and collars not blurred as in a photograph but doubled, almost a mirror incident. Sasnal's painterly economy of means is on full, glorious display here, as is his intellectual project of painting from source material (and particularly this source material, permitting Smithson and Holt to make appearances in his art as they did in reproductions of the performances of so many of their contemporaries). He denies the easy duplicate and turns the source/outcome equation on its head. What could seem photorealistic instead creates its own reality.

Contributor

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Wilhelm Sasnal, *Glue Rundown*, 2020. Oil on canvas, 63 x 47 1/4 inches. © Wilhelm Sasnal. Courtesy the artist and Anton Kern Gallery, New York.