



Andrea Belag

Ghost Writer

FRONT COVER:

Ghost Writer

2017, oil on wood panel, 30 x 22 inches

BACK COVER:

Back

2017, oil on wood panel, 20 x 16 inches

Andrea Belag

Ghost
Writer

paintings

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steven harvey fine art projects
208 forsyth street new york ny 10002
917-861-7312 info@shfap.com www.shfap.com



Tag
2017, oil on linen, 22 x 30 inches

Andrea Belag: New Paintings

Jason Stopa

I first encountered Belag's work in a group show at DCKT Contemporary in New York in 2013. At the time, the painter was making mid-size paintings with large gestural, whirling brushstrokes and overlapping transparent color. They felt quick, but with a clear, straightforwardness that belied their casual appearance. They radiated light. These were buoyant paintings. A lot has changed in four years. Belag's husband, the philosopher Russell Hardin, passed earlier in the Spring of 2017. The nearing of his passing coincided with transformations in the studio; and Andrea's recent body of work is nothing short of revelatory. The artist has abandoned her all-over treatment of the canvas in favor of highly sensitive, discreet mark-making. The size of her supports has decreased to modest, intimate proportions. Making the logical step from canvas to birch wood and linen, Belag's new work often reveals exposed wood that acts as a stand-in for flesh. A wide range of color has been reduced to just a select few. These decisions are not by mere chance. This is an artist in full control. Belag knows her themes: heightened emotions, physical intimacy, shared encounters, the passing of time, the memory of a lover. They all fall under the blanket of sensuality. In the *Ghost Writer* series, each surface is a body.



Cave

2016-17, oil on wood panel, 15 x 12 inches



Press
2016, oil on wood panel, 20 x 16 inches

Belag has been painting since the 80s. Over the past 30 years she has absorbed the spirit of her time while retaining a cohort of like-minded sensualists. One can see a relationship to contemporaries like Amy Sillman and Laura Newman. All three painters possess a unique, idiosyncratic sensibility in painting. Belag departs from the other two in her embrace of Eros. Eros took on many guises in Ancient Greek art. As early as the fifth century B.C., Eros appears as a cruel god. During the Classical period, Eros takes the form of a beautiful winged youth; and somewhere around the early 300s B.C., Eros is depicted as the god-child. Eros' birth, as the story would have it, came from an affair between Aphrodite (goddess of pleasure and procreation) and Ares (god of war). This creation myth is not without a relation to these new paintings. Belag's new work relate to the corporeal body that is both sensual and mortal.

The artist mentions the particular influence of four distinct artists—Bill Traylor, Georgia O'Keeffe, Araki and Matisse. Traylor was born a slave and began making art near the end of his life. He used a simplified illustrative approach to painting to create narratives that reflect on memories and observations of African American life in America. Traylor and Belag square up in that, everything begins as drawing, resulting in paintings that contain form without line.

Belag's interest in the body manifests as surface where paint and surface is skin. The iconography in the *Ghost Writer* series reveals her kinship with O'Keeffe, Araki and Matisse. Araki is one of the most well-known photographers hailing from Japan and has made a career of producing highly provocative images of love, sex, death, consumption, and beauty. His black and white works toe the line between the erotic and the pornographic. Whereas with Matisse everything is sensual: the hanging rugs, a studio full of artifacts, the odalisque, and the lavish interiors.

In her painting "Blue Rider" (2017), Belag reveals her kinship with Modernist masters. Referencing Kandinsky's cover of *Der Blaue Reiter* almanac of 1914, Belag paints a transparent cerulean blue figure in profile. The figure is entirely without features, maintaining a quasi-abstract status. The scale of the torso dominates the upper and mid-half of the painting and then trails off, contorting into an illegible body at the bottom half. The figure is outlined by a bright, opaque cadmium red line which nearly cuts it out of its deep crimson red background. The figure is solitary and lacks the overt exuberance on display in Kandinsky's painting of 1914. Rather, this work is much more contemplative.

"Ghost Writer" (2017), the painting from which the show receives its name, is at first striking in its austerity, and yet eventually draws us into an emotional reservoir. Here, Belag paints an incredibly simplified armchair in cadmium red and cobalt blue. Leaving the birch wood underneath exposed, the painting is provisional in nature. A few, blocky red lines form triangles making up the legs of the chair. The back of the chair billows and curves, indicating that it is a classical, Victorian era model. There is a profound silence that encases this still-life-meets-abstraction. It speaks the language of quiet domesticity, the household heirloom, yet reveals itself to be entirely an homage to the very "writer" who occupied it.

"Cave" (2017) is the most evocative and suggestive of all the works in this series. Rich, washy cobalt blue divides the upper left corner and descends to the bottom left and right corners. These fluid marks create a fold or enclosure. A small, ovoid bright red form attaches itself to the center of the enclosure. Belag leaves the rest of the birch wood exposed. With just two colors, there is a lot of breathing room in this painting, it is not exactly tentative, but not declarative either. "Cave" is a subtle painting with a quiet intimacy.



Fall

2016, oil on wood panel, 15 x 12 inches



Taste

2016, oil on wood panel, 16 x 12 inches



Run Around
2017, oil on wood panel, 22 x 30 inches



Red Strike
2017, oil on wood panel, 22 x30 inches



Pirate Jenny
2017, oil on linen, 48 x 56 inches



Ether

2017, oil on linen, 30 x 22 inches



Ship of Fools
2017, oil on linen, 22 x 30 inches



Full Circle
2017, oil on linen, 22 x 30 inches

This quiet intimacy is the subject matter here. The scale of the support, size of the marks, all seem to point to a personal narrative transmuted in a highly developed abstract language. Martin Buber wrote in *I and Thou*, "Through the *Thou* a man becomes *I*. That which confronts him comes and disappears, relational events condense, then are scattered, and in the change consciousness of the unchanging partner, of the *I*, grows clear, and each time stronger."¹

Belag's new paintings reaffirm this relational self-discovery. For Buber, the relationship between self and other, self and object, is one that is not separated by discrete boundaries. In like manner, with her the Ghost Writer series, Belag manages to evolve her painting style and merge both subject and approach. These are paintings which reference objects, people and places in a manner which carries the weight, profundity, the residue that is lived memory and shared intimacy.

¹ Buber, Martin: *I and Thou*. Ronald Gregor Smith, trans. Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2010. Page 28.

In memory of my husband, Russell Hardin

Special thanks to Jennifer Samet

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