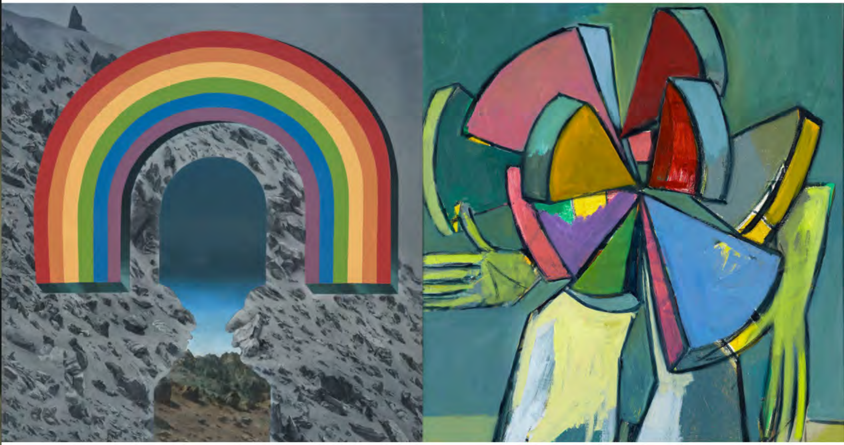

Ana Milenkovic / Ansel Krut

Artists in conversation: painters Ansel Krut and Ana Milenkovic talk art school, creative block and finding your style

Words by Jenny Brewer, Thursday 16 February 2017

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Jenny Brewer

All artists have their heroes, but if you met them, what would you ask? This is what happened when Ana Milenkovic met Ansel Krut. Ana is an exciting emerging artist from Belgrade, based in London, who last year won the Griffin Art Prize and is currently carrying out her residency at the Griffin Gallery. One of her major influences, and artistic heroes, is Ansel Krut, a renowned South Africa-born, London-based painter who is currently showing as part of the Saatchi Gallery's Painters' Painters *show. The two met in Cafe Oto in Dalston, and this is an edited transcript of their fascinatingly frank conversation.*

Ana: First I want to ask you about the style of your paintings. You said you like the flatness of cartoons because they're approachable, but your paintings are quite ambiguous and complex, so are you trying to elevate cartoons, or undermine painting canons?

Ansel: I think when I say cartoons I mean outline. Sometimes what you want with a painting is that first hit. The simplicity of an outline can give you that. It's potent. If you put a picture of Mickey Mouse next to the Mona Lisa, you wouldn't be able to look at the Mona Lisa. It requires time, it's complex and subtle.

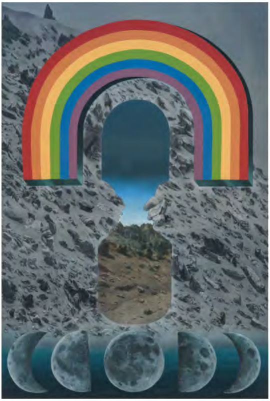
Whereas Mickey Mouse is there. It draws your eye immediately. It's not my job to elevate cartoons. I'm not sure I'm in the business of undermining anything. I'm interested in the idea of painted language, and to some extent the failure of language.

Ana: That explains a lot. I have the same attitude. I think if I want to say something I say it. If I want to paint something, I paint it. I think artists are the only people who are constantly asked to explain something verbally, whereas you wouldn't ask a politician to make a drawing of what they're trying to say.

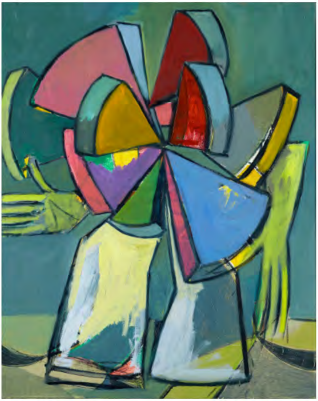
Ansel: Politicians should draw more. So should curators. I used to work at the National Gallery, and I kept saying that the curators should draw because it's only by drawing that you get a different kind of insight. Drawing is a parallel language in a way.

Ana: It's just difficult to explain that to people who aren't used to thinking visually, and accepting information without it being written down.

Ansel: The difficulty of verbalising painted language is very much in your work. You seem concerned with balance, as well as the alternative, things falling over, gravity, weight and space. Again it's difficult to put that into words.



Ana Milenkovic



Ansel Krut

Ana: My country has a really bad reputation, which is understandable.

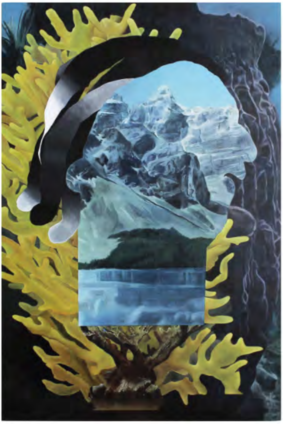
Ansel: *Your* country has a bad reputation!

Ana: That's the connection! I sometimes feel that people ask me about my work and always look for dark narrative, even though I can't see it. I don't think my paintings are about my past. My past was nice, my background was calm. But I feel like people are disappointed when I don't bring up a terrible war story from my childhood. You probably witnessed racial segregation in South Africa. Do people read your work differently in different places? Would someone from South Africa see the same thing as someone in the UK?

Ansel: I didn't want to be a political painter. When I was growing up in South Africa, everything was political and freighted. I wanted to be a painter in the purest sense, I didn't want to have to deal with stuff, but it's going to be part of the work anyway. Growing up in apartheid gives you a way of thinking about the world because it's such a fraught environment. I'm not necessarily full of dark thoughts but I do feel a sense of discomfort about being in the world, at odds with it. It would probably take many years of therapy to excavate all that!

Ana: It's funny because no one knows that. I think you've done a good job of avoiding branding. Students and other painters know your work, but they know nothing about you apart from your paintings. I constantly feel as if people want to brand me as an 'eastern European artist working in London'. You avoid that well.

Ansel: I've lived here longer than I ever lived in South Africa. I think people like categories, and it makes them feel comfortable. I'm not entirely against it. My first responsibility is to the painting, and at a certain point you want to make it available to people. It's interesting the baggage people bring to it. I had an exhibition recently and half the people said the work was melancholy and slow, and the other half said it was energetic and full of life.



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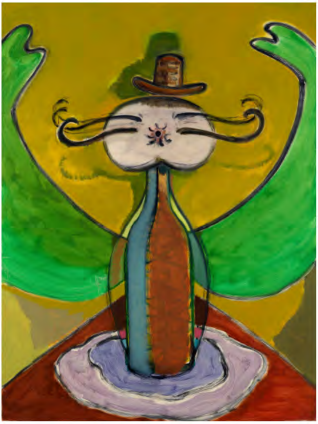

Ansel Krut

Ana: How do you title your work?

Ansel: I try to make it basic and descriptive, one that just tells you what's there. Partly to remind me which painting it is. I used to go for much more elaborate titles, I'd make long lists of titles and stick one on the painting. Now I don't want to be too directive. I like to open a small doorway to allow people some kind of access to the painting.

Ana: You're not guiding your viewers. You just mention something that's so obvious that it's up to them to interpret.

Ansel: Thing is it's not obvious. I know a lot of people, particularly non artists, who are terrified of looking at art because they have to think of something clever to say. Just state the obvious. If you look at a painting and say there's a lot of blue in the painting, that's the start of a whole discussion about the kind of blue, what the blue is doing, what it's next to, its relationship to the colours around it, what blue means culturally, how people see blue. State the obvious, because it's not always obvious to everybody.

Ana: It's interesting that people have to gain a lot of confidence through education just to be spontaneous. I think that's what art schools are good for. I have many issues with art schools. I recently graduated and it was amazing but I'm not sure it worked as an educational institution. It was great for the freedom to experiment and play around, but I get the feeling that the average art student is not a striving youngster. Many people do postgraduate studies when they're young professionals with significant savings, trying to get a ticket into the art market. Was it different when you were studying?

Ansel: Oh it was completely different. When I finished my MA in 1986, none of us expected to have a career in art. We thought you painted away in your studio for 12 years and maybe had one exhibition, and supported yourself doing odd jobs, maybe a bit of teaching or practical work. That was it. There were artists who broke through, like Bacon and Freud, all those artists who were just slightly ahead of us, who were seen as so stellar and unattainable. For us, you were lucky if you could just make your work.

One of my kids did a foundation course in art and had to decide whether to pursue that or 3D animation. I held back but eventually my other daughter asked me to say what I felt. And I came down so strongly for an art school education, I really surprised myself. I said, going to university isn't about getting a job, it's about opening up the sense of possibility. It was ridiculous, I was so idealistic.

Ana: They then have the problem of choosing an art school that offers such an education.

Ansel: What they should offer is an intangible sense of possibility, that you can be in the world and curious about it and responsive to it, and that's ok. At its best it makes you think it's ok to be in the position of curiosity.

Ana: I studied in Serbia as well and there's no art market there whatsoever, but my studies were so meaningful. You just go into the studio, you know there's nothing waiting for you outside. Then you just do your thing. We had zero expectations, we weren't thinking about that, my creativity was going wild. When I came to London there were so many other things I had to focus on, I actually felt liberated after leaving art school.

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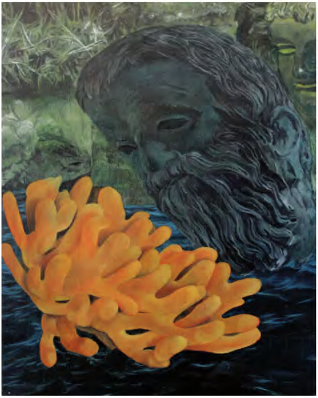
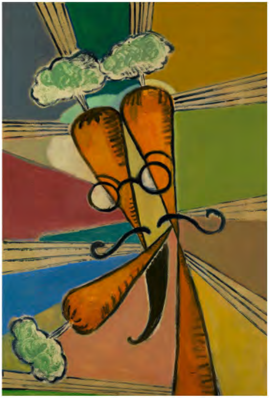
Ansel Krut



Ana Milenkovic



Ansel Krut

Ansel: I started off going to medical school and after a couple of years it became clear it wasn't the place for me. I went to art school and it was like I'd been living in a foreign country all my life and suddenly I was speaking the language. I wasn't very good at it, because it took me a while to understand what was being asked of me. But I saw how the world was structured. It was such a distinct moment for me. It was a moment of epiphany and clarity. Before that everything had been clouded.

Ana: I'm interested in that moment when you decided to go to art school.

Ansel: I'd always wanted to but there were pressure for me to go to medical school. My mother had wanted to be an artist but needed to support the family, same with her father.

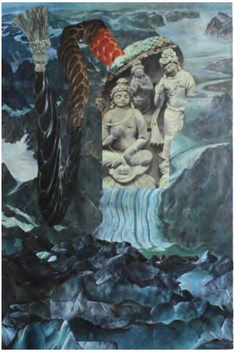
Ana: The funny thing is I come from a family of doctors and they hated the idea of me going to medical school, they insisted I do something else. I had all the options open apart from medical school.

Ansel: Why?

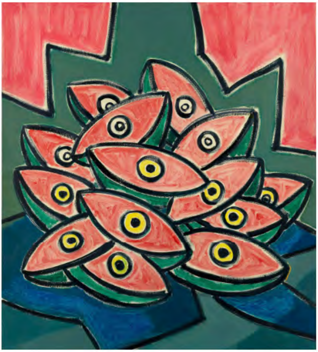
Ana: I think they wanted me to do something less devastating.

Ansel: They didn't think, oh my god if you become an artist you'll never make a living?

Ana: They loved the idea of not knowing what comes next. I think it's because in Serbia, what's usual is you start your work when you're 25 and you retire in the same company. Pretty much your life is predictable. My parents wanted me to have more than one option.



Ana Milenkovic



Ansel Krut

I'm interested to know more about how your work has developed since then, your use of cartoon style as a means to convey emotion. How did you come to find this approach to painting?

Ansel: A lot of people struggle to find a way of working and need to work through a whole series of styles, and there's something attractive about the speed of cartoons because it allows you access to a language of expression and figuration. But as you say, it's more complex than that.

Ana: I've been working on one painting for nine months and I'm kind of losing control. I can't stop working on it.

Ansel: I think this is an issue for a lot of artists. Have you ever read Balzac's *The Unknown Masterpiece*? It's about a painter who gets trapped in this. Painting is so seductive, it just wants to lead you off into this world of mystery and sensuality, and for me that's a big danger. Before I came to the Royal College, I had a studio in Paris for a bit and I was just obsessed with painting, I'd paint for 16 hours a day every day. I was in Paris for Christ's sake, and I didn't see it! And I made terrible work! Because I was never able to step back. I almost had a nervous breakdown because I was just scraping down paintings and starting again. I got nowhere, I just lost the plot.

"I went to art school and it was like I'd been living in a foreign country all my life and suddenly I was speaking the language."

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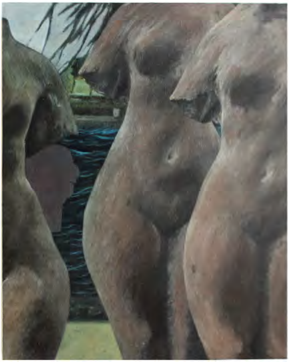
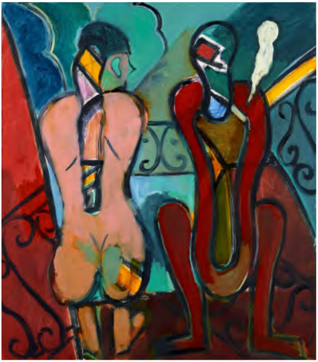




Ansel: The other problem is if you're trying to paint a masterpiece, you're probably trying to paint someone else's masterpiece, because your own vision of what a masterpiece is is evanescent. So I just try to make the best painting I can, and if someone comes along afterwards and says it's a masterpiece I'll be very happy. I don't know I'd recognise it even if I made it. Sometimes you look back at your work and think, my god that's the good one. You lose objectivity, you're so in it that you can't see it.

Ana: So you leave paintings for a while and come back to them. Do you think if you picked up the paintings you don't like six months later, they could become something else?

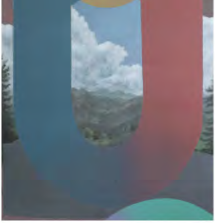
Ansel: For me there's a window of availability. I'll be thinking differently about the world then. Marcus Lupertz, the German painter, he said you should always leave paintings for a year, not to come back to them but to see if they're any good. If they're still interesting after a year, they're good paintings.

Ana: His work is mad though. I like him for that, he's very unpredictable.

Ansel: Just think someone of that generation, who's very established, is still saying "basically I don't know. I don't know how good it is".

Ana: I think I have a problem with letting go.

Ansel: You need a strategy for it. Do another one, do the same painting next to it. You have to look after yourself a little bit, it can be damaging to be trapped and get obsessed with one piece. It's not necessarily going to resolve itself. You can end up chasing phantoms.



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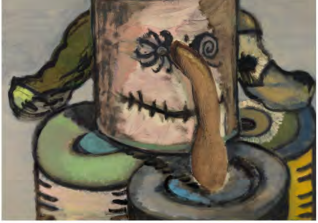


Ansel Krut

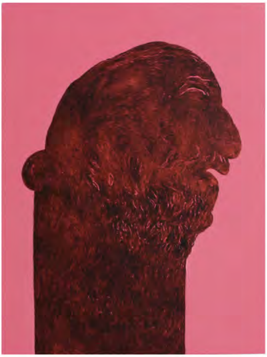
Ana: Your painting *Napoleon On Elba* (above right), is my favourite I think it's brilliant. I just read *Crime and Punishment*, which is about a young killer who is devastated because he realised that his sense of guilt means he's not as great as Napoleon. I looked at your painting again and it looked really moralising for me. Napoleon wasn't a great guy, so I wanted to know if you have an issue with Napoleon's legacy?

Ansel: When I made that painting it went into the reject pile. I didn't value it at all. Now I quite like it. Sometimes you just don't know what it is you're doing. I wasn't interested so much in Napoleon's legacy as the absurdity of power, eminence and grandeur. I just thought, let's take something at the other extreme, three toilet rolls and a turd, and recreate the same grandeur and pick up on the contradictions of him. He's got this strange fixed smile on his face even though he's made out of toilet rolls. It's about the maintenance of an external face.

Ana: You seem to recognise the psychology of your characters.

Ansel: That's funny because I always find that the two groups of people interested in my paintings, apart from artists, are children and psychotherapists.

Ana Milenkovic's residency at the Griffin Gallery runs until 28 April 2017.
Painter's Painters runs at the Saatchi Gallery until 28 February 2017.



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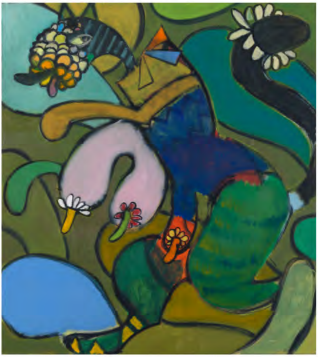

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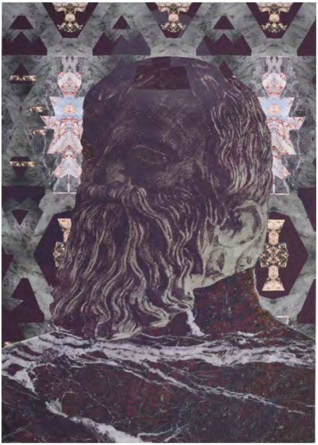

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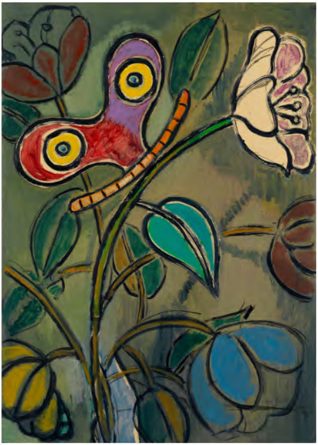

Ansel Krut

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