

Art Review:

Daniel Sinsel

In recent years people have been disappearing from Daniel Sinsel's paintings, replaced by objects that explore the suggestive tension in materials and spaces. Is this really all thanks to the magic of pasta making?

By Laura McLean-Ferris

In the classic magic trick the magician shows us his silk handkerchief. He whirls it around, makes the fabric ripple in the air. He drapes it over something – his hand, a top hat – and waves a magic wand, then whips the silk away. To the delight of the audience, a white dove or an equally snowy rabbit appears. All this time a living creature with a fast heartbeat has been hiding in the magician's sleeve. The eyes have been deceived, but only insofar as they have also been seduced by the language of the performance: fluttering silk, the covering and revealing of a living thing. The language of the actions creates pleasure and tension. Looking at the works of Daniel Sinsel, whose paintings revel in deploying a *trompe l'oeil* technique – that particularly painterly feat of visual deception – one wonders if they might belong to another age, before special effects, when people still believed physical forms of magic. Indeed, the German-born, London-based artist says that sometimes he likes to imagine that he inhabits an alternative present in which Modernism and abstraction had never existed.

A recent untitled painting of Sinsel's depicts the interior of a shallow box or recess that is rendered in a shade of pale apple-green. Inside we can see a wooden stick, propped up at an angle, resting on a bed of rumpled white silk. The juxtaposition exists to highlight contrasts: soft and hard, skin and bone, fluid and rigid, passive and active. You can find similar dynamics in paintings such as Titian's *Diana and Actaeon* (1556–9), for example. The drama of the scene, in which Actaeon discovers the goddess bathing, is heightened for the viewer by the theatrical way in which it is revealed, extensive pink drapery pulled to the side, and by how Actaeon's arm and the quiver of arrows on his back are raised, angled upward, creating points of tension. "What I like so much as a viewer of a Renaissance painting", says Sinsel, "is that I can treat it both as a material object and as a set of depictions". In Sinsel's paintings this set of pictorial devices functions on its own, stripped of everything but the most basic dramatic apparatus: pointy stick and drapery.

On the day we meet, Sinsel is creating a seamless fabric sculpture. It is a large, architectural structure, resembling soft floppy columns or pillars between small ceiling and base sections (a similar conflation of hardness and softness), and it is constructed entirely from continuous sections of raw silk. Rather than sewing sections together, he says, he has – with some assistance – been handweaving the tiny

silken threads, so that there won't be any joins in the sculpture when it is complete, just a continuous, sealed surface. A person in the same studio building who regularly works with fabric recently saw what Sinsel was doing and stood there, incredulous. Are you mad? Why don't you just use a sewing machine?, she had asked. Sinsel shifts about uncomfortably as he tells this story. He says that it's at such moments that he also wonders why he is taking so much trouble. But he seems clear that the sculpture wouldn't be right if the seams were exposed, like a weakness.

This is partly, perhaps, due to the role that sight plays within Sinsel's paintings. Peeking and trying to look under things, peering at cuts, punctures, slices and slits, forms part of the pleasure in looking at them; the eye takes an active, physical role here, as though it might be able to behave more like a mouth or a hand. Another untitled painting from 2008 describes a pale jade wall with a neat shallow recess or cubbyhole in it. There is terracotta underpainting beneath the green, creating the impression of aged painted wood or tile. Lying in the recess are some lumpy shapes resting beneath yellow fabric that appears heavy, thick and glossy. What's under there? It looks faintly like a penis and balls, but then again, it's a bit of a jokey tease, leaving enough room for doubt. It's actually, Sinsel informs me, pasta draped on eggs and swedes (is that a vegetable in your pocket, or are you just pleased to see me?). In a related sculptural work, a lone egg balancing atop a copper rod is covered with a tiny sheet of draped pastalike fabric made from flour and glue, so that it looks like a tiny ghost floating in midair. Both of these works have something comic to them, something ever so slightly pathetic, silly and sad, as though there is something hiding under the covers, waiting to be discovered.

However, it's also the alchemy of turning one material into a representation of another material that informs Sinsel's attitude. "I think about how magical it is to describe a material with another material", he says. "Possibly by means of something as simple as ground soil and oil. I like the poetic potential of the relationship of the material used to the material it describes." He tries to work with natural substances whose construction he can understand: silk, oil paints and pigment, eggs, pine tar, rabbit-skin glue, pasta. He strongly rejects plastic paints that have been developed in a lab, or preprimed and stretched canvases for painting on – the kind that you can buy, standard size, wrapped in plastic. The magic of transmutation is compromised by these kinds of materials, Sinsel suggests; there is something too literal about paint made with acrylic that is produced exclusively for painting. "I guess it affects the range of what one can invent with these materials", he says. "The paintings become very literal this way." Which is to say, if one found the right shade of green to paint a blade of grass, one could just use that premade colour instead of trying to create something that physically emulates the visual qualities of grass. "A well-known example is that of painting flesh", Sinsel explains. "Skin could be painted with a flesh tint or could be made up with layers of paints that try and imitate a skinlike surface, with underlying colder greens or blues, transparent layers of whites or browns or reds on top."

of what makes looking at Sinsel's paintings a sensuous activity. References to food, such as painted and sculptural elements that resemble chocolate bars or pasta, have made regular appearances in his work in recent years, coinciding with the abandonment of the human subjects that characterised his work up until then. Where previous paintings regularly featured highly sexualised images of men and boys, exploring a violent kind of erotics played out on bodies and faces painted on bright expanses of colour, it now appears that the erotics being explored are those of spaces, objects and architectures. Indeed, Sinsel describes making his first pasta works as a turning point: so much was he enjoying making tortelloni at home that he tried to replicate the experience in the studio, as a way of tricking himself into making new work. He cut circles from linen, the material that he usually paints on, and began wrapping and folding them as though they were pasta shapes and fixing them to a painting's surface in groups at different stages in the folding process. He also began to make sheets of fresh pasta and set them up as drapery for still life paintings, as seen in the painting of the covered eggs. For Sinsel, a sheet of fresh yellow pasta dough builds "a satisfying bridge between drapery and flesh. It carries erotic and sensual potential that I now find more subtle and suggestive. It represents a shift in my work from the more overtly sexual to a more universal and suggestive, dormant eroticism." Indeed the tortelloni pieces look like they could be orifices, and as we see them presented in a step-by-step sequence, we can imagine the tactile process of their creation. Paintings themselves often appear to have slits or cuts in them, or to be made by weaving – an in-out movement. They remain highly sexual images, but there is a sense in which the viewer also creates this element of the painting as she looks at it: the eye travels in and out of various spaces, real and imagined.

This innuendo in Sinsel's work allows a kind of light bawdy humour – bundles of nuts make regular appearances in his paintings, for example – but within a strange and pervasive atmosphere of stillness, of closed rooms and objects waiting to be used. There's a white painting that resembles a windowpane that is also a wall – a completely sealed white claustrophobic space. Another regular motif is an unplayable flute with no mouth or finger holes, a phallic object perhaps, but also a melancholy one.

That said, in one painting, three flutes seem to be moving in and out of slits in the canvas, performing a kind of visual music rather than an aural one. Somehow, if there is magic here, it is not just that of the painter's sleight-of-hand convincing us that one material is another; perhaps too there is the magic that allows us to participate in bringing these dormant painted objects to vital, sensual life. If we imagine for a second that we ourselves can whip the covers off, throw the windows open and let the dove fly from the sleeve, then another strange kind of magic has happened.

Work by Daniel Sinsel is on view at the Chisenhale Gallery, London, 28 January – 13 March