

Mathew Cerletty

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Rivington Arms, New York,
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Review by João Ribas

Is there a more pervasive heuristic in contemporary art than the alter ego? Raymond Pettibon has the untidy 'Gumby', Matt Mullican a trance-induced 'that person' and Slater Bradley a celebrity-impersonating 'doppelganger'. Something about the possibility of simultaneity – occupying a dimorphic body or a fantasy of plural selves – opens up creativity otherwise confined within a single transparent ego. New York-based painter Mathew Cerletty tries the alter ego on for his second solo show, using it as a pictorial theme. The perfecting of a double image is a fitting essay for this technically accomplished painter, testing his proficiency with the challenge of strict duplication.

Self-image has been a theme in Cerletty's work, and his bold, often decorative style – owing a debt to Eric Fischl, Sean Landers, and Margherita Manzelli – is particularly suited to light-hearted portraiture. Cerletty can offset carefully cultivated narcissism with a flippant irony. But where previous work indulged in projections of fantasy, Cerletty forgoes the 'sex-tableaux'. Committing himself to the restraints of symmetry, he pares – or pairs – down to essentials.

The five paintings in 'Alter Ego' revolve around a lone male figure that closely resembles the artist. With immaculately painted hair and strikingly worked hands, the figure stands in contrast to a background of tilted broad stripes rather than the overly detailed patterns of previous portraits. This core figure/motif is repeated, reworked and reconfigured across all the paintings: standing listlessly



(*Sea of Tranquility*, all works 2004), stiffly supported by a high shelf (*The Faux Pas*) side by side with its mirror image (*Blind Man's Bluff*) or caught in tense posture with a clone (*Too Bad So Sad*).

This approach trades narrative and wry humour for remarkable detail. But the flustered realism of *Too Bad, So Sad* goes beyond 'spot the difference'. The figure's striped shirt, contrasting with the horizontal background, is immaculately rendered and then copied exactly, as are the supple fingers painted in flawlessly matching hues. The mechanical repetition of the figure forces an intense process of reduction from Cerletty, distilling colour and gesture to arrive at startling verisimilitude. That he can then repeat this carefully calculated image, in all its bathetic emotion, is part of the seductive appeal.

Cerletty is fastidious, but not formulaic. In fact, he gives himself ample leeway in disturbing exactitude, allowing his sardonic style to come through. The paintings of single figures, accenting human detail by reducing clothing to elongated white robes, are riddled with 'imperfections'. *The Faux Pas* and *The Left-Handed Compliment* contrast 'dashed' and heavily elaborated elements, reproducing irregular features like oddly coloured lips and unsightly freckles. Yet even as the concision required to copy an image serves as a showcase for Cerletty's aptitude, it is no replacement for the irony and adolescent pathos that has made his paintings so engaging.

Above: Mathew Cerletty, *Too Bad, So Sad*, 2004, oil on canvas, 11.8 x 243.8cm