

Benjamin Senior

BRUCE HAINES, MAYFAIR,
LONDON

A girl with bobbed, bubblegum-blue hair in cropped indigo denims serves a man a coffee on a wooden board. The man – auburn hair, beard, green suede desert boots – reads a newspaper. Behind them, a young black man in a two-tone baseball jacket opens a curlicued iron gate to walk his whippet. The scene is a study in urban (and urbane) normality. Archly titled *La Rue* (The Street, all works 2016), the piece, like the four further new paintings in the eponymous exhibition at Bruce Haines, Mayfair, is a highly stylized combination of contemporary cosmopolitanism and slightly unfashionable painterly tradition: hipsters à la minor postimpressionist. Elsewhere, in *Portals*, a girl in turned-up shorts, whose cornrows meet in the depression between her shoulder blades, holds a hula-hoop. Behind her is a whorl of trees, autumnal-hued, and a park bench, the intricate ironwork of which glows absinthe-green where the sunlight hits it.

Umbrellas recur in these works, which makes sense given that Senior is based in London. So, too, do dogs, which makes its own kind of sense, structurally, as they are mostly of a pleasingly statuesque kind – pompom-tailed poodles and willowy whippets. Unlike in the paintings of Balthus (whose languid atmosphere Senior's work sometimes evokes) where cats suggest urges suppressed in the young girls they appear alongside, these dogs echo only their owner's elegant elongation.

In earlier works, Senior depicted bodies exercising – people practicing yoga postures in the park, swimmers diving, runners stretching – all engaged in a precise and rhythmic choreography of horizontals, verticals and obliques (legs raised parallel to the floor, straight backs, striped towels and swimming costumes). Gorgeous, those paintings unsettle because they're so taut and clean, almost approaching a Leni Riefenstahl fetishization of physical form. (This often equates

to an odd form of disinterest. As Edgar Degas once said to his dealer, Ambroise Vollard: 'People call me the painter of dancing girls. It has never occurred to them that my chief interest in dancers lies in rendering movement and painting pretty clothes.')

The paintings imply the narcissism, too, of this pursuit of self-improvement. The figures are absolutely absorbed in their own activities, with every body perfectly toned and impeccably clad.

The works in 'La Rue' are more open to storytelling than Senior's earlier paintings – more film still than still life. Yet, though they may at first appear less formally constrained, the compositions are, if anything, denser and more rigorous. In *Charlotte Rd*, for instance, the broad stripes on two umbrellas vie to direct the viewer's eye with a man's checked overcoat, the topiaried coat of a poodle, intricately rendered brickwork and mullioned windowpanes. It is testament to Senior's compositional skill that the effect is not chaos but beautifully measured calm – the stasis achieved by different forces pulling in equal and opposite directions.

That stillness is unsettling, too – odd, unnatural, as in the calm before the storm. (They are all carrying umbrellas, after all.) This strangeness is emphasized by the unconventional 'worm's-eye view' from which the works are painted. Borrowed from Andrea Mantegna, this form of perspective captures a scene from the very lowest point. The heels of shoes become important, as do the bases of table legs; everything seems statuesque, every building monumental. But then, Senior doesn't strive for realism; or, if he does, it's that of a painter such as Graham Little – a composite of advertising image, film vignette and *Harper's Bazaar* shoot: hazy, remembered or dreamed, familiarly non-specific. If Little paints the world as though through the dust of a 1950s powder puff, Senior is looking at it through the neon translucency of a boiled candy (recalled in the Haribo-coloured visors worn by some of his figures) – sweet, artificial, irresistible.

AMY SHERLOCK



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1
Nairy Baghramian
Scruff of the Neck (LL 23/24 & LR 26/27/28),
2016, installation view

2
Yuri Pattison, 'user, space',
2016, installation view

3
Benjamin Senior
Charlotte Rd, 2016, egg tempera on
cotton on plywood, 50 × 40 cm