

## Sam McKinniss

TEAM GALLERY

The young figurative painter Sam McKinniss selected the source images for his solo show “Egyptian Violet” at Team Gallery and translated them onto canvas—rendering them lush and more fiery, finding menace in their dark areas, simplifying them slightly with his signature sentimental panache—all before the November presidential election. His beautiful paintings of celebrities, flowers, a swan, and a dolphin, which come in small or big but not medium sizes, were hanging in the gallery on Election Day, and on the terrible day after. His work fulfilled its obligation to hang there until the following Saturday, which was also the day that I tried to take a stab at its (new) meaning.

The defining work of McKinniss’s show, on the far wall facing you as you entered, was *Prince*, 2016, a massive eight-by-seven-foot portrait of the pop star derived from the iconic artwork for his 1984 album and film *Purple Rain*. McKinniss has said he began painting it the day after the beloved musician’s death on April 21. There’s something charmingly tasteless in that gesture: It’s sacrilegious, hubristic, or just too soon, especially coming from McKinniss, who, however sincere he may be, is naturally insouciant. His show was a collection of smart-ass oil-and-acrylic enshrinements of his screen-grabbed personal preferences—for things such as Princess Leia, Snoop Dogg, Whitney Houston, and Henri Fantin-Latour’s flamboyant dahlias. McKinniss belongs in a lineage of sexy figuration, after such greats as Elizabeth Peyton and Billy Sullivan, but while their work profits from a certain “off” glamour, with wonderfully fussy or stilted moments, McKinniss is simply good—well-trained, confident, displaying an uncommon facility with paint punctuated by controlled moments of *jolie laide* sophistication. So, the emotionalism of his canvases is high-pitched but not very vulnerable, which also makes it seem at least partly ironic. But would it be possible for an American artist to paint Prince on April 22 ironically, in an emotional state not overtaken by, or at least tinged with, grief? I hope not.

Obama’s at-the-time innocuous statement of preemptive consolation, delivered on November 8, as America did or did not head for the polls, that “the sun will rise in the morning” no matter the election’s outcome, seems in retrospect a desperate appeal to the power of visual pleasure in the absence of any plausible silver lining. The mere continued existence of the solar system is no reason to go on; the hope of once more staying up or out all night to witness an orange or fuchsia sunrise may be. If one thing can be agreed upon vis-à-vis visual pleasure in the dreadful postmortem, it is that we share a greediness for an efficacious hit of it, but it might have been better for our president to reference *Purple Rain*—that mournful and exhilarating Reagan-era multimedia masterpiece authored by an effeminate black genius—as a reminder that where fascism exists, antifascism does too.

McKinniss’s funny, flowery, theoretical press release points to the “symbiotic intimations of seduction and dread” in his work, “a conflation positioned here as ‘queer.’” In “Egyptian Violet”—a show the artist named for a favorite purple pigment, the color connecting the unconnected images in a camp celebration or grieving of complicated symbols—I think that’s true. It also strikes me that the word *queer*, so cozy on the page these days, just got tossed back into the streets where it gained its once-radical luster. It’s a time to insist on insouciance, bad taste, poor taste, gay taste, on remaining who you were before as a new regime changes the stakes.

—Johanna Fateman

Sam McKinniss,  
*Prince*, 2016,  
oil and acrylic on  
canvas, 96 × 84".

