

The Place In Between Where One Can Dream and Imagine.

Stockholm-based artist Joakim Ojanen creates delightful paintings, works on paper and ceramic sculptures that are quirky and compassionate. He talks about *A Show for the Lonely Distant Baby Souls* as “a celebration of the human being,” stating, “Let the stupid feelings take over. Get mad, get angry, get drunk, get happy, get sad! Find a friend, give them your heart, smoke a cigarette, look up in the blue sky, suck a flower, enjoy the day but also cry. Please don’t forget to cry. There’s many of us, we can make miracles together, beautiful things! But most of the time it’s hard to understand each other, that’s OK but just please be nice.”

The works are animal-human hybrids personified to describe topsy turvy emotions and situations that are difficult to process and understand, especially in today’s pandemic ridden world. In the paintings, Ojanen’s idiosyncratic characters frolic – hugging, whispering, smiling and for the most part, seem to be having a good time in their own little world. They stand or sit on a green horizontal expanse of ground against a subtle and sometimes cloud filled blue sky. These nonspecific, generic landscapes (some with rainbows, others with trees, plants and flowers) are pleasant and inviting locations for Ojanen’s characters to experience unconventional, often surprising and at times, a bit unsettling interactions.

Ojanen’s titles direct and often elucidate the goings on in the imagery in hilarious and endearing ways. In the painting *Ooooh more wine, this will be fine after all* (page 8) tears of deep burgundy wine drip from a boy’s eyes into crystal stemware he holds out to collect them. He kneels innocently on the grass with legs bent-back, a red apple by his side. *When you dance in the air like that I’m like WTF?! I THINK I LOVE YOU BOO!!* (page 17) shows a seated spectator with raised hands in a blue t-shirt dotted with clouds that match the background. He watches a blue bodied, pink winged, smiling human-bug (butterfly) hybrid dance, its red shoes elevated above the green grass. Many of Ojanen’s charcoal and oil and acrylic works are

packed with intertwined, long beaked, bulging-eyed figures that have irregularly shaped heads and thin, long limbs that twist and turn as they become conduits between the disparate characters.

In many ways, the drawings and paintings beg to be seen from all directions and Ojanen fulfills this desire by transforming his painted figures into sculptures. While Ojanen’s drawn and painted hybrids express states of anger and joy, it is his three-dimensional ceramic works that bring these feelings to life. Situated on top of a large table painted a light sky blue are more than twenty multi-colored glazed creatures. These whimsical works are simultaneously cunning and naive. Their expressive beak-like mouths and sad eyes look up and out across the table, waiting to be recognized or even embraced. Perhaps content at first glance, they are in fact lonely and isolated. This mélange of characters face all directions on the table which is bordered by an intricate metal cut-out featuring downward pointing fragments from Ojanen’s menagerie that also functions as a strange barrier.

It is hard to resist having affection for *I miss the ocean!* (page 70) a small yellow glazed ceramic creature with a long sad frown and green flower-petal trimmed eyes. The back-to-back figures in *Everything has two sides. There isn’t always one good side, sometimes both can be bad I remembered this morning. The trick is to find that third side* (page 48-49) perhaps best illustrate the push/pull, animal/human, happy/sad dichotomy that permeates much of Ojanen’s work. In these disconcerting times, these sculptures and paintings offer hope and humor while also recognizing struggle and hardship. Though cute, the works are neither simple nor simplistic. They are about that third side, the place that exists in between – where one can dream and imagine that everything will be OK.

Jody Zellen, Los Angeles, October 2020