

Standing
proud
since 1949

ArtReview



Renzo Martens

Shirin Neshat Haneda Sumiko

Rosa Aiello Lynda Benglis

Alan Turner *I wanted to make things that were ordinary extraordinary*

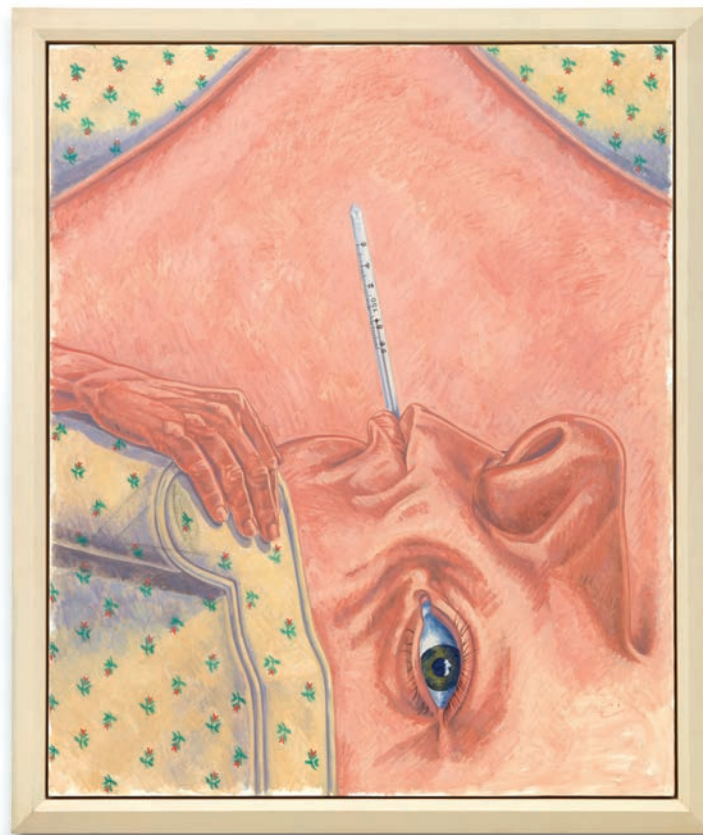
Sadie Coles HQ, London 4 September – 23 October

It doesn't take long for the human body to estrange itself under one's gaze. Look at your hands awhile. They're admirably functional, marvels of evolution, yes; they're also clawlike things, inset with continually growing plates of keratin, at the end of long, bendable stalks, your arms. Or consider what you're using to see said hands with, wet rotatable orbs nestled in twin holes above your nose – Jesus, noses are weird – positioned level with gristly and bumpy hearing devices that, particularly if you're a man, sprout more hair as you get old. Such, as the exhibition title might suggest, is the tenor of the eight chalky, midsize paintings here by Alan

Turner, made between 1986 and 1990, when the American artist was in his mid-forties, and being shown a year after his death. On one level, this is the no-artist-left-behind effect of commercial galleries' ongoing scramble for inventory – Turner seems like the kind of wilfully idiosyncratic journeyman painter whose star faded several decades ago and who might have been rediscovered in the yellowing pages of an old Whitney Biennial catalogue. On this evidence, though, he's eminently deserving of having his oeuvre revisited.

Midway between Cubism and Surrealism – the latter's recent vogueishness among

younger painters navigating a notably peculiar era probably isn't incidental to this showing – a painting like *Basin Bath* (1989) asks what a bathing female figure would look like if it were rendered as a hierarchy of interesting aspects, seen sequentially, subject to ontological slippage and unconcerned with conventional forms of beauty. The result is a torso that bumps out into what could be a breast or a nose, inset with a single, huge, sideways-facing eye and a forward-facing mouth below it. To one side, a bent knee is cupped by an oversize hand. This 'body', meanwhile, is tucked into the compact washbasin of the title. Turner, who studied



Couch Couch, 1988, oil on canvas, 168 × 142 × 6 cm (framed).

© the estate of the artist.

Courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London

mathematics before art, paints his scrambled scenario in an affectless, objective, almost illustrative manner. This is the weird way we see the weird things that we are, he appears to aver, though not without affection.

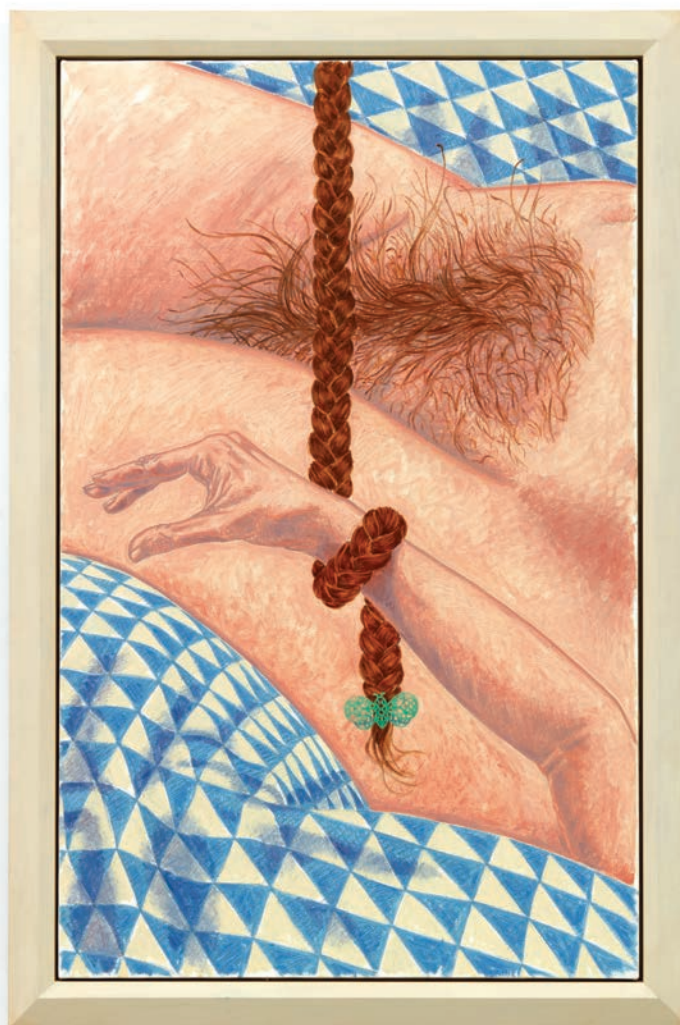
That tonal mix is redoubled in a sickbed scene like *Couch Couch* (1988), which jigsaws together views of a figure on a yellow-patterned armchair, the pinkish body seemingly assuming the shape of the seat. Inside this lozenge-shaped chunk of flesh, facial features cram together via tenuous internal logic: an upwards-facing mouth sucks on a thermometer, its rounded end redoubled in the extended cornea of the eye right next to it. The contemporary associations of a painting about sickness and temperature-taking don't hurt – and the gallery has positioned this painting as the one that faces you upon entering – but they don't lead the painting

towards a narrative resolution. Rather, it feels like Turner, after weirding out while staring, has taken body parts as the starting point for a workable painterly composition; it looks like a person, it looks like a pink manta ray. When they're assembled wrongly like this, the painting itself seems out of sorts, waiting for recovery. Is it worth pointing out here how stridently unfashionable this kind of work – applying the perceptual lessons of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque while retaining relative legibility, in the twilight era of a painting revival that mostly focused on Neo-Expressionism – would have been at the time of its making?

Turner can be saucier. Against the patterned backdrop of a blue-and-white-checkered duvet, *Barrette* (1988) focuses on a nude woman's midsection, her unkempt

brown pubic hair and upper thighs. Descending from the top of the painting, a ropelike brown braid wraps itself around a slender bare arm – whose small proportions don't fit the thighs, and which seems to be enacting some kind of shadow-play – and culminates in the green hairclip of the title, like a genteel game of bondage with Rapunzel. It's a figurative image that detaches, in the absence of much sense, into a play of rhymes: the diagonals of thigh, arm, duvet pattern; the verticals of braid and the canvas's sides – and one that plaits sexiness and ugliness. For Turner, those probably weren't separable. Our bodies are at once deeply strange and desirable, and the very way we see them, or rub along by not really seeing them, is itself bizarre. And all of this, in the end, might just be material for a painting.

Martin Herbert



Barrette, 1988, oil on canvas, 152 × 102 × 6 cm (framed).

© the estate of the artist.

Courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London