

## The Gun that Shot Ambition: On Nadav Weissman's Paintings

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“This man who had returned home,” wrote Robert Musil on the man-without-qualities, “could not remember any time in his life that had not been animated by his determination to become a man of importance; it was as though Ulrich had been born with this wish. It is true that such an urge may be a sign of vanity and stupidity; it is no less true, however, that it is a very fine and proper desire, without which there would probably not be many men of importance.”<sup>1</sup>

The figure recurring in Nadav Weissman's paintings is also, in a way, a hero-without-qualities, who invests his entire self in an attempt to move one rung up the ladder and reach greatness. The head of this male figure is swollen from all that ambition to climb; his relatively small body moves forward and up. The figure's facial features, the thinning and somewhat receding hairline, the loose belly and strained movements reveal a pale young man in the prime of his life, who puffs out his cheeks and blows pink gum-bubbles while paving his way. He is standing on the head of another figure, exactly like him, and on his own shoulders climbs yet another lookalike. The labor of climbing becomes a horse ride of sorts where the hair of each figure on the ladder functions as reins held by the figure thereabove; this human pyramid is equal in height to a long-legged horse marked number 28. “Going over from the cavalry to civil engineering Ulrich merely changed horses,” Musil described the efforts of his protagonist to “hunt” prominence for himself – “The new horse had limbs of steel and ran ten times as fast.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, trans. Eithne Wilkins & Ernst Kaiser (London: Picador, 1954), vol. 1, chap. IX, “First of three attempts at becoming a man of importance,” p. 35.

[...] even today, if they [people] want to make themselves out to be something special they mount, not a skyscraper, but the high horse...”<sup>2</sup>

Weissman’s duplicated protagonist is not only “mounted on the horse” taking part in the race, but he also holds in his hand a rifle or a revolver, which he always points straight ahead toward an unidentified target. Naked women too participate in this odd procession, which constantly progresses onward, their breasts are pointy, their legs – ultra-thin, and they are armed with a purse slung over their shoulder. Each sex and its respective weaponry, these figures march within a circus-like arena, either pink or turquoise, which is also populated by dogs, balls and acrobats. However, the more you look at them, the more these paintings transform from a colorful-caricature happening into a melancholic allegory about the human condition: at some indefinite moment in time, it seems that ambition itself had been shot, the puffed cheeks had been deflated, the gum-bubble had burst (like the soap bubbles in Vanitas paintings), and the victim remained shot and abandoned.

Nadav Weissman offers us painting with narrative-allegorical foundations, verging on the grotesque rather than the comical. Bearing the literary title *The Lover’s Home*, the second series of paintings too, relies on the same foundations which, this time, strive to make an allegory about love’s destiny through the space in which it was woven. Unlike the ambition procession that takes place against crowdedness and noise, the lover’s home is revealed to be empty of its inhabitants, and all that remains – in memory shreds, distorted perspective and orange silence – are the glowing crystal chandelier and some toys on the floor. It is the combination between a playful child-like world and an adult consciousness that recognizes the gap between love and its realization, that lends this domestic emptiness its allegorical and emotional power.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., chap. X, “The second attempt. First developments in the moral philosophy of being a Man Without Qualities,” p. 36-37.