

# Independent

## Rute Merk on Technologized Subjectivity

by Francesca Gavin  
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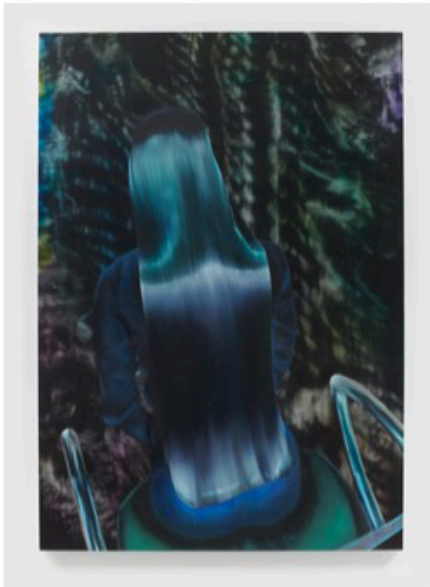
How can painting be transformed by our relationship to the digital? In the work of Berlin based, Lithuanian painter Rute Merk, the compositions and concepts of academic painting are fused with the textures, layering, and tools of contemporary technology. Just as cubism explored the intersection of the object and space, so Merk's simulated glitches and digital textures bleed into her figures. Her approach is part of a wider attempt to look at what she describes as "work-leisure living, prosthetic cosmetics and inhuman patterns."

Painting itself was a strange choice of media. "When I started studying painting over 10 years ago the "death of painting" belief was still popular," she points out. Now the medium has proven that it is an ideal way for her to juggle "historical legacy and social inappropriateness."

Merk was born in a small town in Lithuania. "I didn't fit in. Art was the shortest escape from there, first mentally and then physically," she recalls. She studied in Vilnius then Munich, and has exhibited extensively in both cities as well as in Shanghai. At Independent, Merk is presenting a set of portrait canvases and a smaller still life titled *Eclipse*. These works follow the footsteps of those in Merk's recent exhibitions *SS20*, *Solitaire* and *Стрільцяка*, whilst shifting in nuance to a more visually complex vocabulary.



Rute Merk, *Eclipse*, 2021, Oil on linen, 27 x 18 inches (69 x 46 cm), Courtesy of the artist and Downs & Ross, New York Photo: Phoebe D'Heurle



Rute Merk, *Terica*, 2021, Oil on linen, 78 3/4 x 55 inches (200 x 140 cm), Courtesy of the artist and Downs & Ross, New York Photo: Phoebe D'Heurle

Merk's approach is noteworthy. The figurative parts of her work are always based on digital materials. For the artist, however, this source imagery is already embedded with complex levels of information and cultural residue. "The process involves two different temporalities. Firstly, a folder of images gets accumulated through luck and attention, whilst studio time is the one of urgency and decisions." As she points out, "Being mediated and already conditional, a photographic digital image is a complex and universal source."

Personal biography, work life and technology are not the only influences on Merk's practice. She is currently drawn to elements of Eastern European social realist painting, as well as the graphic languages and patterns that emerge in nature. Science fiction and gaming are also ongoing inspirations. "It's mainly through my obsession with Aki Ross, a first and iconic digital actress from sci-fi film *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*," Merk explains. "Together with some computer game characters it was an attempt to explore and express human figuration in a post-digital, de-naturalized way."

Her methodology was initially inspired by the work of Luc Tuymans—though aesthetically her work feels very different. His pastel, newspaper-like blur is replaced by Merk's dark, more chiaroscuro approach to portraiture. Alien, atmospheric elements surround her characters. "They represent nothing in particular, but are not without structure. Natural and inhuman patterns are a distant inspiration for these elements," she notes. "I consider it controlled repetition, machine-like movements made by hand, yet de-humanized through blurring and smoothing."

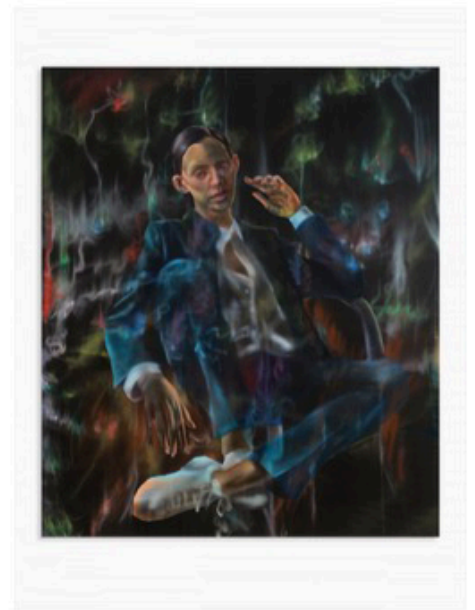
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Her figures, such as those in *Linnet* and *Luned*, are often wearing tailored clothes. This refers to what she calls 'work-leisure', the blurring between life and work, which also bleeds into her still life work of a swivel chair – a kind of figureless portrait. The object aims to demonstrate the experience of the increased blurring of boundaries between work and play under the conditions of cognitive capitalism. "Work-leisure is more than just a clothing style," Merk muses.

There is a strong fluidity of gender in the characters she portrays, reflecting her own feelings around attraction and desire. "It is beauty. I am unable to portray someone I cannot admire or relate to. I need characters to obsess me," Merk points out. She has used the phrase 'technologized subjectivity' in the past, to describe the kind of identity she is trying to depict. "I look for words to name a figure which is not necessarily humanistic. Something other, or more abstract, possibly some kind of alien-ness." Her figures are often alone, a reflection of our networked solitariness.

Computer aesthetics have fed into the form stylization of her characters. Desire and beauty in Merk's work is not natural, for example, in her representation of hair. "I'm interested in hair extensions as prosthetic cosmetics. It's a manifestation of affirmative artificiality, against its sometimes socially over-fetishized naturalness and organic chauvinism," she explains.



Rute Merk, *Linnet*, 2021, Oil on linen 73 × 65 inches (185 × 165 cm), Image courtesy of the artist and Downs & Ross, New York



Rute Merk, *BALENCIAGA, SS20, Look 89*, 2019, Oil on canvas, 86 1/2 × 86 1/2 inches (220 × 220 cm), Courtesy of the artist and Downs & Ross, New York Photo: Daniel Tema

The positions of figures and compositions echo art historical portraiture of mannerists, like Agnolo Bronzino, or *streamline moderne* icon Tamara de Lempicka. Her oil on canvas paintings also follow a conventional scale of subject matter, and that representational familiarity means that, when she deviates from form, it is even more effective. Merk's work is firmly in the now. "If my painting subverts portraiture, it is through certain formal innovations, for example, the ones coming from video games or computer graphics."

"Form is political," she notes. Her figures emerge from a post social / online avatar context. "Growing up coincided with the booming of social media, so that is my natural environment, more so than newspaper photographs or TV," the artist explains. "At first, I was interested in social media as a historical document reflecting society. Then I recognized its aspects of gamification and commercialization."

Fashion continues to be a fundamental trope in Merk's work, for example her depiction of fellow Eastern European Demna Gvasalia's collaborative work at Balenciaga. Her painting *BALENCIAGA, SS20, Look 89* (2019) responded to the brand's catwalk stills at Balenciaga's invitation. "Portraiture without fashion is unrealistic. I understood this early on," Merk explains. "My take was from the perspective of my practice – I could not do an illustration." The circulation of Balenciaga's images is a particularly interesting choice, as the brand consciously plays with the context of hyper-capitalism, globalization and the digital."