

CONTEMPORARY FINE ARTS

# ELLA KRUGLYANSKAYA

## BACKGROUNDS

17. JUNE – 2 AUGUST 2025

Contemporary Fine Arts is pleased to present their first solo exhibition by Ella Kruglyanskaya at their Basel gallery during Art Basel. *Backgrounds* is the second part of a trilogy that began earlier this year with a presentation at Thomas Dane Gallery in London and will conclude at Bortolami Gallery in New York later this year. The exhibition is accompanied by the following text by Emily LaBarge:

It is a truth universally unacknowledged that a painting is the only place in the world in which a foreground and a background both do and do not exist. They are a matter of categorical illusion, purported difference, framing, composition: a field of plain, matte gold (Byzantine, medieval); a misty landscape, city view, architectural enclosure (Renaissance, Baroque); more of the same, but sweeping, evolved linear perspective, sometimes sublime, gothic, supernatural, emotionally charged views of nature (Romantic); back to basics, naturalism, unidealized figures and situations, things as they are, we might say (Realism); and after that things get a bit fuzzy, or blurry, literally, as you might know, but eventually backgrounds leave entirely and then come back, though only if you want them to. But they all always and forever happen in the same place, on the same level: a painting is a flat surface. What you see is what you get, but you have to look carefully, because “reality” is not a given, and an artist’s job (calling, vocation, trickery, desire, pleasure, game, way to kill the time, to make life bearable) is to make you ask why and how and wonder what you might do about it, if anything.

A text happens in parts, too, and this is the second of three, for number two of three shows, but let’s face it, an artist doesn’t work in “shows,” not really, even if that’s how we see and understand their work in the moment it is produced. (Hard to think of another option, if you won’t accept “online” [and I won’t] as a place.) Like a *cinéaste*, an artist has an *oeuvre*, and you can’t really see it all at once, even though that’s actually how it happens: everything all at once, a whole life, many hours and days and years, numerous lives frozen into particulars, scenes, ideas, jokes, details, colours, shapes, figures, abstractions, foregrounds, backgrounds. That’s how the world enters a work of art: as something small, something funny, maybe, not as a worldview or a survival strategy or a great explanation for the cosmos, which is anyway (at the best of times) unfathomable. In every background (but not every foreground), a shadow – which shows where illumination resides, usually outside of the frame, somewhere in the world of the artist – reveals rather than conceals. Especially when there isn’t a shadow at all.

Can you sign for this small bunch of radishes, miss? It includes both varieties (breakfast and cherry belle), which have been scattered across a flattened tableaux in sfumato shades, but still retain their spicy, churlish energy. It’s not clear where they are, energetically drawn in simple but precise lines, suspended in a dove grey background – there’s that word again, but see: it can mean whatever you want! – that seems to press and angle up towards the viewer, but only once you pay attention to the fact that its lower half fades away, brushstrokes visible on canvas and then gone, just white, with the artist’s signature across the lower quarter of the painting: Ella Kruglyanskaya.

There it is again, or part of it at least: “ELL” – on a daring diagonal, slanted away from us into the distance like a 1980s film credit or an energetic graphic design, both over and under a curvaceous

odalisque drawn in loose strokes of pewter grey. Her slender waist and her rounded bottom are elegantly shaded and contoured, only to dissolve into scribbles; her flesh is given weight and density with a butter yellow wash only to evanesce into the pale background of the canvas. We do not see the odalisque's head or shoulders, nor her feet, like we do not see the "A" of the artist's given name, which means it becomes, spoken aloud, *elle*, as in *she, her, herself* in French. The title of the work, *Birth of Venus* (2025), becomes a punch line of sorts: Ell(a) has given birth to ell(e) with the barest of means, one of which dominates the foreground: a paint brush – its bristles stained with creamy yellow, its red handle faintly smudged with other colours, from other paintings – lies flattened against the visual plane, as if we are looking directly down at it where it rests between uses. Ell(a), ell(e), she, the painter, has taken a break mid-delivery of the ultimate prototypical female, she, Venus, who slants and slips away from our eye into the near distance.

Other paintings are replete with punning odalisques, in which Kruglyanskaya turns the classic art historical trope of the coy and retiring female into a self-aware trope verging on abstraction. *Odalisque with Spring Onions* (2025) rhymes its nude subject with a bunch of, well, spring onions, whose white bulbs mirror her rounded curved behind; *Odalisque on Pillow* (2024) gives us the cold shoulder, nearly her whole back turned as she reaches for her mandolin, but really her body is a field of magenta lines, as though her corporeality resists itself, wishes to become a different kind of painting entirely, unburdened of verisimilitude, background and foreground; *Odalisque in Blue* (2024) is just that, another woman, another mandolin, this time sparsely sketched in flat atmosphere of radiant Klein blue, her form made more solid in places by a gauzy scarf, with coloured shapes like Matisse paper cutouts floating in the blue ether around her. The only solid component of this image, which reminds us of its made-ness by including a colour calibration chart at its upper edge, is a lemon. Solid in that it casts a shadow, meaning it participates in a kind of foreground and background from which the woman, with her sinuous gaze and her flattened form, exempts herself.

In other paintings, brushes trailing primary colours, red, blue, yellow, with one exception of pink, dog the figures of women on the move – paint over their bodies in thick strokes, chase them down the street, remind them (and us) that they are pictures, paintings, made things, foreground and background all at once. Much like, though it purposefully disassembles, *Borrowed Sky* (2021) – the closest we get to realism in Kruglyanskaya's array of backgrounds for *Backgrounds*. Believe what you will, in this borrowed sky that could be plucked from an art historical period shared with, for instance, Manet, or Ingres, masters of lemons and odalisques, or maybe something more personal, closer to home, like a long-admired work by a painter from Mariupol – a reminder that "style" is a coat artists slip on and off at will, and that painting is also a kind of consolation. There's no further away from or closer to the viewer, that's only in your mind. Which is not to say that's a bad thing.

Emily LaBarge is a Canadian writer based in London. Her work has appeared in Artforum, Bookforum, the London Review of Books, frieze, and the Paris Review, among other publications. She is a regular contributor to the New York Times and 4Columns. *Dog Days*, her first book, will be published in the UK by Peninsula Press in 2025. Excerpts appeared in the winter 2023 issue of Granta and the autumn 2023 issue of Mousse.