

1 “Follow me”... do you feel like following people these days? A banker’s advice? A politician’s pleas to vote for him? How about a trend (oh no, not a trend)? Of course, you can always follow a young temptress (or her male counterpart) into bed. That’s what the painting illustrating Sylvester Engbrox’s exhibition catalogue seems to show. But haven’t you had enough of that already? Aren’t you tired of living in an over-eroticised world that’s constantly telling you “follow me”, where advertisements lead you on, where in a single click you can see girls, thousands of them, doing the wildest things on the Internet, where the media feed us a steady diet of stories about people who’ve ‘transgressed’ limits, fulfilled fantasies or overstepped boundaries? *“We’re living in an age of exhibition of sensual pleasure,”* psychoanalyst Charles Melman says in *L’Homme sans gravité* (Denoël). At work or at home, we must not only show how much ‘fun’ we’re having, but also, perhaps, point the way to others : *“Do as I do and follow me”...*

2 So we readily follow Sylvester... but the artist does not ask us to come along on a bawdy journey or an aesthetic, titillating little jaunt. Admittedly, he paints sexy, alluring young women and uses eye-catching imagery – vintage Volkswagen minibuses, Greek beaches and hotels straight out of a travel brochure, virile Teutons sporting moustaches and bell-bottom trousers, Boeing jet planes flying in the sun, Japanese ‘salary men’ clutching their attaché cases, etc. But it is as though his characters, eyes downcast and arms dangling, are stuck in a state of suspended animation. *(Continued on page .)*

A muted melancholy washes over people and places. Something seems immobilised, frozen. Edward Hopper and his absent human figures, lost in small-town streets and hotels, are the first things that come to mind. Sylvester might be considered a modern-day Hopper. Just as Hopper, a sort of anti-Norman Rockwell, depicted the dark side of the American dream, revealing the creepiness lurking behind ‘the American way of life’, Sylvester portrays the dark side of our ‘über-glamorous’ consumer society. His settings recall the venomous atmosphere of David Lynch’s films; his characters exude “the weariness of being oneself” that sociologist Alain Ehrenberg discussed in *La Fatigue d’être soi* (Odile Jacob). *“There are two sides to that weariness,”* says philosopher Balthasar Thomass. *“First, we are tired*

of being what we are, weary of our weaknesses and limitations. We would like to be somebody else. Second, we are sick of the constant effort to become somebody else, to correspond to a perfect role model, which also eventually makes us feel tired..." As is often the case, awareness of a problem is the first step towards solving it. The mere fact of displaying weariness communicates a by no means insignificant energy. Why? Because bringing truth to light is always joyous.

3 “Why does Sylvester use so many images from the 1970s?” I asked one of his best friends at a sidewalk café in Belleville, a neighbourhood in northeast Paris. *“I think that’s when his earliest images of happiness took shape,”* came the reply. *“As a teenager, he went on holiday in Greece with his parents. Sylvester even had experiences of communal life with them. They were hippie types...”* That may be the first time he glimpsed naked bodies and Boeing jets glinting in the sun, signs of a Utopia on Earth – the society of happiness? – that has obsessed him ever since. Does his work express a desire to recapture his earliest emotions and at the same time to exorcise them? *(Continued on page .)*

4 Sylvester is something of a bomb disposal expert. He takes the thrilling erotic charge out of the alienating clichés around us. Like us, since childhood he has been bombarded by millions, billions, of titillating images, depictions of well-being, pleasure and enjoyment, pictures that say “follow me”, that attract, that arouse but that are necessarily disappointing (all of us have experienced the cruel difference between fantasy and reality). In a way, he co-ops and defuses them. All of a sudden, what he shows is not just a naked body making us drool but a tired human being, neither good nor bad, happy nor sad, with a vacant stare on her face (there are no particular meanings, or rather, everyone reads whatever he or she wants to into the painting, and that is very important). He restores the figures’ simple humanity. That may not seem like much at first, but it makes us feel great. It is soothing and confronts us with the pure presence of the World.

5 Like a homeopathic doctor, Sylvester fights fire with fire. He does the same thing with the hot-

looking girl as he does with the Greek hotel that looks too good to be true, the seedy street that is too alluring, the too-perfect sunset, the too-spectacular car race – deconstruct an alienating image. Of course he could show us fat ladies peeling potatoes. That would also put a damper on our passions. But what makes Sylvester so interesting is that he starts out with material that messes up our heads, and then defuses it. Like 17th century moralist writers, such as La Rochefoucauld, he depicts our passions to help us overcome them better. Bret Easton Ellis did the same thing in *Less Than Zero* (Vintage), portraying decadent young people and drug addicts without judging them or providing an interpretation. He just shows them as they are and makes us aware that the beautiful, disturbing image masks a more complex reality: *(Continued on page .)*

people who are not only sadder, lonelier and more surprising than we thought, but also not as terrible or scary (because all that glitters frightens us a little, doesn't it?). It might be said that Sylvester is Bret Easton Ellis's counterpart in painting. Sylvester says, "Follow me" but it's not the 'follow me' of a prostitute and, in any case, has nothing more to offer us than 'follow me' in the sense of "get my drift?"

6 Sylvester and contemporary art. *"What point is Sylvester trying to make when he suspends meaning?"* That is when we're caught in a perpetually signifying infernal circle that always wants people and things to have something to say to us. Take contemporary art. Nowadays it seems that most works must come with a note explaining them. A message accompanies the least installation, the smallest sawed-up shark. Otherwise we may not 'understand' everything and miss the artist's 'point'. Critics, moreover, always say more or less the same thing: the purpose of these works is to 'challenge our ideas'. For a long time the author of these lines worked at a trendy magazine that often focuses on contemporary art. Every artist always 'challenges our ideas'. That statement would be followed by a long-winded, unconvincing intellectual-philosophical speech. And an odd fact came to light: contemporary art, where anything is possible, including the boldest propositions, is also home to the stiffest, most conventional critical discourse. For a long time Sylvester was blocked by that post-academicism, the terrifying seriousness that seems to rule in certain artistic circles. *"For years I no longer dared to paint,"* he says. *"I got rid of my insecurity by composing music on the computer,*

sampling cuts of works I swiped from other people to form a musical collage. One day I asked myself: 'Why don't I do the same thing with the images swimming in my head?' " Just as music immediately appeals to the senses, Sylvester's figurative, emotional paintings can be felt right away. They can do without commentary, starting with this one. Moreover, Sylvester asked me to write about anything but him. That goal has been brilliantly achieved. *(Continued on page .)*

7 Still, Sylvester is a bit mad. *"For years I've been collecting blurry pictures clipped out of TV magazines, pornography from the net, pictograms of corny old movies and ads torn out of magazines,"* he says. The bloke is a walking image bank, a rubbish bin amassing all the crude, fuzzy, pixelated images the sub-culture vomits. He carefully sorts them and puts them in cardboard boxes or on his hard drive. What does he do with them? *"Most of the time, nothing,"* he says. *"Then one day, years later, a scene, a glance or a naked body comes back to haunt me. Several images are superimposed on each other. It starts turning into an obsession with me. I see the overall image taking shape in my brain. When that happens, I can be talking on the phone, shopping or looking after my children. I can't get it out of my mind until I paint it."* Haunted by the cheap, glossy images that shape our everyday imagination but that we no longer notice, he feels compelled to act. Sylvester puts life back into clichés, breathes fresh air into the dead matter cluttering up our skulls and clears the cobwebs out of our heads. Visual stereotypes – a lascivious woman in the style of Gena Rowlands, a solitary man walking along the road, two ragazzi riding motor scooters – are no longer a dead, hackneyed language. They speak to us anew and demand that we sit up and take notice of them. Looking at them makes us feel attentive, understanding and empathetic. Sylvester leads us to love the scorned, the neglected, and the too-often seen. That's a typically pop process, which is much more spiritual than we think. Saint Sylvester, paint for us. *(Continued on page .)*

8 Sylvester is a married father of two. He paints outrageously sexual, wistful images (at first glance, because we know they are nothing of the kind) but leads the most conventional lifestyle imaginable. It's not to displease us. It seems to lend credence to the idea that many artists are haunted by

fantasies that do not necessarily have repercussions on their private lives. If they could act out their obsessions, they wouldn't paint. That's called sublimation. How can one not think of all those 20th-century artists, Surrealists and others, who, although they painted or described the effects of unbridled sexual passion and eroticism, led quite mundane family lives? Contemporary art's biggest stars often come across as champion transgressors : Jeff Koons sleeping with Cicciolina, Sophie Calle exhibiting her private life, Orlan reshaping her body, etc. There is something disturbing about the fact that people focus so much on that aspect of their lives : it turns them into rock stars acting out all their fantasies and fulfilling all their desires. We know reality is quite another matter : the most outrageous rockers – Lou Reed, Mick Jagger, Johnny Rotten – wouldn't be alive today if they hadn't been at least a little careful. We know where to find truly transgressive people : gutters, mental hospitals, and drug and alcohol rehab centres are full of them. They don't have time to create.

Sylvester does. *(Continued on page .)*

9 Sylvester could not care less about figures. Do the lone male or female figures that seem so central in many of his paintings really matter to him ? Sometimes they look like screens on which different, transparent, pixelated images are mixed, superimposed and projected, leading our gaze astray – like his settings. Everything – the branches of a tree, patterns on fabric – becomes an intertwining network of abstract forms, plant-like arabesques taking up as much room as the human figure they surround, if not more. *“Sylvester Engbrox paints what is between things as much as the things themselves,”* critic Jean-Luc Chalumeau said in 2008. The result is paintings without meaning that viewers can interpret to their liking. That may be how the expression 'follow me' should be understood: as an invitation for viewers to penetrate the picture with their eyes.

10 Sylvester speaks: *“I don't know why I paint. I feel the need to, that's all. If an image triggers an intense feeling inside me, I have to put it on canvas. Otherwise, why choose painting? It's hard work. I*

feel like telling the viewer, 'Step into this world, which I don't understand. Let's go see. Project whatever you want onto it, help me understand.' In other words, follow him.

Patrick Williams, 2010