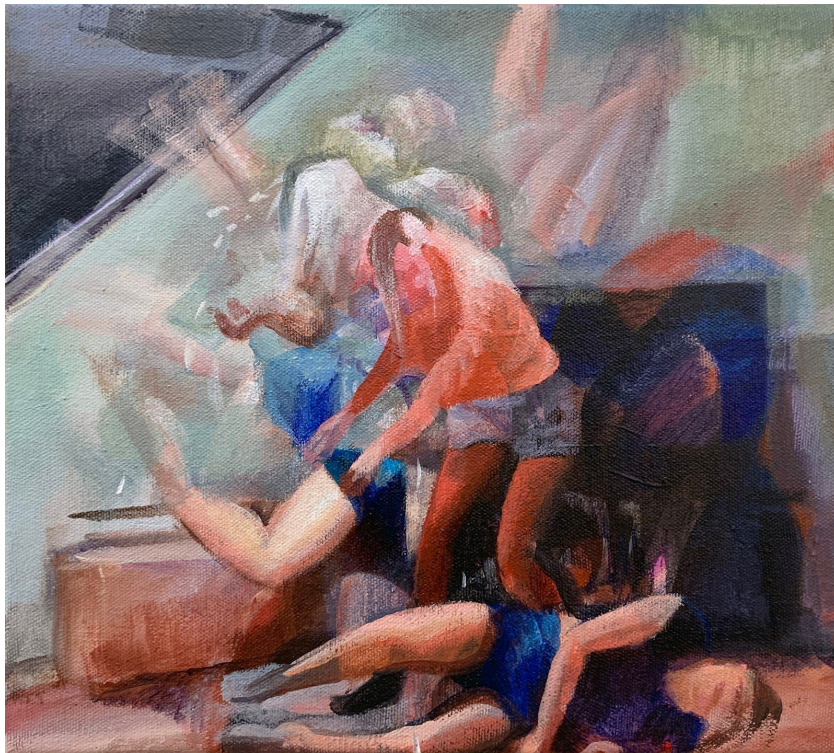


## Dead or Sleeping: Claudia Bitran's Exhibition, *Be Drunk* at Walter Storms Galerie

My Renaissance art teacher, Peter Porcal, would pose the same dramatic question when pointing to a resting figure, "Dead or Sleeping?!" A collective giggle would follow. I laughed uncomfortably when I first saw the culmination of Claudia Bitran's work for her first solo exhibition in Europe over Zoom, thinking to myself, "Inebriated or Liberated?!" My eyes scanned the paintings destined for Walter Storms Galerie, Munich, through the computer screen, hanging on the wall of her basement studio in Brooklyn. I jumped from one vulnerable body to another—each somehow simultaneously limp and frenetic—slowly becoming literate in a world of ominously stretched time where one can trace the movement of figures slumping, spewing, splashing.



All 31 paintings created in 2020 are agents of reenactment. Based on internet found footage, Bitran employs a stop motion painting technique to arrive at new videos that as slippery translations embrace ambiguity and transcend resolution. They belong to another dimension with their own simple logic: when the video is finished, the canvas is finished. Thanks to this method, the paintings reveal no answers beyond the seconds long videos that are defined by their lack of conclusion. Think Christian Marclay's *The Clock*, but if

he used film footage destined for the burn pile. Or sad bloopers.

Here emerges a fundamental distinction that separates Bitran from the tradition of artists appropriating from the canon. She forces one to confront aspects of culture that are usually hidden. These moments are intimate, disturbing, and feel more inevitable than theatrical in terms of coming of age. A theme she has been interested in for most of her young career. I ask myself if a hierarchy exists in *Be Drunk*. Is one medium in the service of the other? Do the videos stand a chance against dozens of gem-like 11"x10" inch paintings that seem to hang at a polite social distance from one another, drawing you into their singular orbits?



I forget this question immediately when I look at my phone. Bitran in being highly attuned to this moment with its obvious necessity for a work of art to achieve perfection on screen, alongside the realization that so much work made in 2020 was seen only online, has posted many of her videos on Instagram where they return to the modest interface as prodigal children. They are remarkably effective there because the gif length videos come from this purgatory of images that are floating, waiting, and morally relative. Bitran appropriates from various corners of the internet, hunting for accidents that flirt with tragedy. The nature of appropriation, remix, and personal redistribution shows that these works have much in common with Hito Steyerl's *Poor Image*, as they provide "a snapshot of the affective condition of the crowd, its neurosis, paranoia, and fear, as well as its craving for intensity, fun, and distraction" (Steyerl, *eFlux Journal* #10, 2009).

The palpable desire for freedom is intensified through Bitran's arrival at moving images using layers of paint. The physical compression of time mirrors the state of being drunk. The excess reads as an attempt to deepen a false sought after feeling of liberation; one that is elusive amidst the blurred labours of school, work, and social networking. The limbo is the burden of being a teenager.

To somersault back to the paintings, because one must, I want to talk about what I find so compelling, taking into consideration the year in which they were made, a year full of so much



pain. To put it simply, it is the humane lens. Bitran watches people watching people. She slows down her own looking by repeatedly viewing videos that were captured quickly: a diving figure defying gravity; an immovable figure vomiting into a garbage can. I think of Dana Schutz's *Sneeze*, 2002, a monument to evacuation, but the seconds captured in Bitran's works are potentially ruinous. What complicates a voyeuristic interpretation is the fact that the artist takes these subjects achingly seriously. As facts. More often than not she depicts people at their most vulnerable, take for example the blond woman laying on the floor, wearing short purple shorts. Untouched.

A Degas-esque foot dangles top left, doubling the anonymity Bitran conjures; firstly by removing the individuality of the young woman on the floor through the sumptuously sterilizing paint strokes that also obscure her face; secondly by choosing to include a disembodied limb that operates as a stand in for the person holding the phone. This reminder of the original witness-with the power to press record, to upload, to share (don't we all have this ability?)- makes us more than uneasy. We want everything to be okay. Reassurance. This is where the videos provide a tonic, perhaps turning that humane lens towards the viewer (and this is why we cannot separate out the mediums). The gif-like looping on Instagram negates both the possibility of beginnings, and of resolutions, this time having to do with happy endings and not pixels. This effect is tenfold standing at the monitor within Walter Storms Galerie, watching them play through back to back. They feel more excessive, and there is a perverse comfort there. Being inundated is our natural state, and the title of the exhibition stands as a testament to this notion.



*Be Drunk*, is named after Charles Baudelaire's poem (1869) that offers a PG-13 list of things to consume in superabundance: "the wind, the wave, the star, the bird, the clock, everything that is flying, everything that is groaning, everything that is rolling, everything that is singing, everything that is speaking..." (Baudelaire, *Le Spleen de Paris*, 1869). Perhaps leaning on this text was the result of Bitran searching for a buoy herself. Optimism is work. *Be Drunk* is the oldest reference I have known the artist to use. Here I confess that Bitran is no stranger to using the icons of pop culture as vehicles for spiritual rites of passage, though she reimagines them through cardboard and hot glue. Her eternal side project has been an epic multimedia, multilingual, gender fucking, remake of James Cameron's *Titanic*, which was partially shown at the Museo de Artes Visuales, Santiago, Chile. In *Be Drunk* Bitran rhymes the contemporary grotesque with 19th c.

subjects of esteem and wonder, pairing a young woman shotgunning a beer with “virtue”, and a parasailing accident with “the wind.” The poem provides a basic structure, but also an excuse for respite, as is the case with the artist’s version of “the star,” so long as you identify with the seagull and not the starfish. Without this framework would the artist have allowed herself to paint a bird that consoles us merely through its doing what a bird does? Maybe we can’t help what we do.



Looking across the images, I had a desire to partake in a similar morbid curiosity as those looking for answers during the Covid-19 pandemic by seeking headlines from the time of the Spanish flu outbreak of 1918. I looked to what was happening in France in the 1960s, when Baudelaire’s poem was written (the same decade that he died). The Cobden-Chevalier Free Trade treaty was signed between the UK and France, the Convention of Peking was signed by China, Britain, and France, the Second Opium War ended, and the earliest sound recording of a song was made by a typesetter,

Edouard-Leon de Martinville, called *Au clair de la lune (In the moonlight)*. It was made with a phonoautographer, 17 years before Thomas Edison invented the phonograph. Be drunk on the moon? I bring this up because there is something wonderfully curious, and deeply innovative about a typesetter inventing a means to study soundwaves on a piece of paper blackened by an oil lamp. A tool that could record sound visually, but that could not reverse the process and play images audibly seems to exist to remind us that time moves forward. Ghosts in machines endure.

Claudia Bitran’s exhibition continues at Walter Storms Galerie until February 13th, 2021.

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