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## David Zwirner Adds 'Quintessentially European' Painter Victor Man to Its Roster

BY ALEX GREENBERGER

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Victor Man, *Titiriteros*, 2023.  
COURTESY DAVID ZWIRNER

**Victor Man** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/victor-man/>), a painter known for his portraits of people done in dark, greenish tones, has joined **David Zwirner** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/david-zwirner/>), one of the biggest galleries in the world. David Zwirner will bring Man's work to Art Basel Paris this month, then mount a solo show for him in London in 2025.

Man will continue to be represented by Gladstone Gallery and Galerie Max Hetzler, the former of which staged a solo show for him in New York earlier this year.

Born in Cluj, Romania, the artist makes contemplative paintings in which people are often shown alone. Some contain fantastical elements, with eyes that duplicate and mouths that emit blooming flowers, while others are highly naturalistic.

These paintings have a decidedly old-school look, evoking Picasso's Blue Period canvases and Renaissance art. "I am interested in painting from the perspective of a kind of continuity in the History of Art," Man has said.

In a statement, dealer David Zwirner said, "I love Victor Man's powerful and enigmatic paintings. To me, they are quintessentially European, firmly rooted in the history of Western painting and his deep appreciation for the Renaissance. His paintings remind me of my favorite poetry: fragments coalesce into open-ended narratives, the interiority of his subjects remain mysterious, and through his surprising iconography, he manages to collapse the continuum of time."

The artist joins the gallery as his market grows significantly. Last year, at Christie's London, a painting by Man was a hit, selling for \$2.2 million and surpassing its high estimate 11 times over.



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INTERVIEWS

# Victor Man by Neville Wakefield

November 14, 2016



## Flash Art





"Intervention #8," installation view at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam (2009). Courtesy Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen. Photography by Maarten Laupman.

**Neville Wakefield:** *I was intrigued by this idea of what an interview delivers.*

**Victor Man:** The expectations around it...

**NW:** *Exactly. That somehow the expectations that may be unfulfilled in the work can be substituted in the interview.*

**VM:** Yeah. When you do an interview you feel like you're in a ring of fire. A ring of fire in which you just have to stay as much in the middle in order not to get burned.

**NW:** *What were you saying earlier about Fellini?*

**VM:** It was about the idea of the interview or press conference. He was wondering about press conferences; why not, instead of talking, to just sit there, exchange smiles, and eventually presents too; this way we would all have so much more of a pleasant time together. We should exchange some presents.

**NW:** *I like that idea. I'm intrigued by this notion that you make work that is in some ways intentionally opaque and resistant to a singular reading, and yet you yield to an interview which invariably is looking for some kind of revelation through sound bite.*

**VM:** Yeah, I think that is the idea around a work that is, in a way, truly abstract. You don't know what you are actually looking at, you don't know what to do with it,



rather than just having to deal with its disorienting subject. You need some time to spend with it or wait to see more work to get a sense of what it might be all about. The idea of the interview is to find what you can't grasp directly from the work; also an interview for many people is more of an enjoyable reading than an academic text. It's hoping for some kind of revelation of what the artist is like; he becomes a subject. I don't know if this kind of confession can be a solution for the world.

**NW:** *It's a very catholic notion. Maybe I can be your priest.*

**VM:** Yeah, but then you have to promise not to tell anyone about my fears.

**NW:** [Laughs] *What are your fears at the moment?*

**VM:** About telling maybe too much in this interview, a declaration or confession. I'm going to Arezzo tomorrow to see the frescoes of Piero della Francesca, and coincidentally this trip is about something there that has to do with confession. Well, a kind of confession. Because there is this horse head in Piero's fresco and someone has carved upon his forehead a name, Giuseppe Sacchi. I was very intrigued by it. By what this gesture is, what this might try to confess. So I looked into it more and found that there was a painter named Giuseppe Sacchi; it's crazy to imagine that he inscribed his name over the horse's forehead. He was the son of a famous baroque painter, Andrea Sacchi. Giuseppe died very young so he never fulfilled his artistic dreams, if there were some. But what's left is this weird scenario that he might have been the one who made the graffiti over Piero della Francesca's work, as if on the forehead of a Golem.



**NW:** *Wow. Are you interested in the graffiti itself or more in the way one's identity is written over another?*

**VM:** I'm interested in finding out more about why someone would write his name over the forehead of a horse; what he was thinking of or trying to achieve by doing that. Imagine there was a painter who actually did this, to a masterpiece. But maybe it's something more complex, and might have to do with gaining a sort of power from it. Like with a Golem. However, maybe I'm completely wrong and his gesture was quite the opposite — it might have been a kind of reverence.

**NW:** *It's interesting what is held in a signature, the amount of information. I'm thinking about the way in which artistic identity is condensed. The way that perhaps people understand the work of Victor Man as belonging to, or being representative of, a certain type of painting or a certain type of installation. It's interesting the extent to which all that information is held in the signature, even when the signature is a style.*

**VM:** What you try to do is to locate what is fiction and what is fact.

**NW:** *Is that a distinction that matters to you?*

**VM:** Well, I think it's something the work can provoke. I would say it doesn't matter for me what is fiction and what's fact, because in the end it's part of what we are talking about here. If you are lead in a certain way you take something else away with it. In the end it's not so interesting to have an answer which is interesting to hear. You take something which might be from very near to you, very personal, very private, and you transform it into something else, you transform it into a fiction. You go with it. And it becomes what it becomes. But in the end, who cares?

**NW:** *The audience cares. It's interesting because we came at this talking about opacity and how your paintings resist meaning, and then I'm asking you to bring meaning to them through this interview and through this process of discovering more about you and more about what you think. Does autobiographical detail matter to you?*

**VM:** I would like to stay in the place of shadow because it doesn't matter at all, and sometimes it's funny how certain people can identify with certain aspects of the work and they think I have a very clear connection to what the subject matter of some work is. It happened to me in Miami; there was this guy dressed as a drag queen and he came up to me trying to insinuate that we shared this common fetish. I turned red. It's like when you go to a movie and you identify with the hero; when you leave you feel you are strong enough to try the same karate tricks you saw earlier. Or when you have a baby and you are confronted with buying a pushchair, you suddenly start noticing all the different pushchairs on the street... what kind of wheels they have, the forms, the sizes... these things you just wouldn't previously be sensitive to.

**NW:** *It's the doors of perception. Most of the brain's activity is excluding visual stimulus, taking it away; to use your example, you don't see the pushchairs until you need to see them and then you start to identify with them.*

**VM:** And suddenly it becomes a preoccupation, and it can turn into a passion!



Untitled (2007). Courtesy the Artist and Gladstone, New York.

**NW:** *I think it's also about the particular way the empire of signs operates. Looking at your work, what I gain from it are these archetypal images — but they don't seem attached to the archetypes that I necessarily know.*

**VM:** They are kind of residual things. You are left with them and you just don't know what to do with them. They gain this quality of the leftover. You try to look back but you don't really know where it has come from. So you can't really push it back into it's own niche.

**NW:** *Right, there's a discarded quality to them, a twilight quality that suggests to me that they had some use value but now they have some other meaning. And I'm never clear what that meaning is.*

**VM:** Then we ask ourselves the question, when does disorientation become clear here?

**NW:** *Yeah. What are the circumstances you find yourself most disorientated in? Do you look for circumstances that are disorientating in life?*

**VM:** Of course. I'm always disoriented.

**NW:** *How do you find this disorientation? Do you seek it artificially through drugs or naturally through landscape and loss?*

**VM:** No, I'm disorientated day by day. I have to go and do everything on my own... sometimes it's too disorienting. Everyday I try to set up a practice and establish a frame within which I live, besides the times when I travel. This frame is like a guideline on the road.

**NW:** *Do you paint everyday?*

**VM:** I try. I can't say that I paint everyday but I'm living with it every day. I'm dealing with other kinds of works that are not directly objects or installations but somehow come together. It's like living in a village with these things around you, and then sometimes you allow yourself to go on a trip. You experience other things that make you want to return to your daily frame with other ideas. There are artists who are very productive. They continually produce and that formulates the way their art is. There are other kinds of artists who are really living with the work and it takes a long time to get to a form, and it takes a lot of canceling to reach it by permanently canceling things. And sometimes you have to live with these things for a good amount of time in order to be sure they can keep the same energy from the beginning, which we know can easily be lost.

**NW:** *Or maybe fortunately... Is the work then about killing time? And, if so, is that simply another way of preserving it?*

**VM:** You see, the work is more like a mirror; it can only continue as long as you look into it. This is the best thing that "killing time" can offer — its reflection — and you can always turn around.

**NW:** *Is that then the revelation that the interview has been leading to all along?*

**VM:** I would say it's more of an attempt to fill a gap left open between truth and falsity. A sort of Jabberwocky.

*Neville Wakefield is Senior Curatorial Advisor at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, a MoMA affiliate.*

*Victor Man was born in 1974 in Cluj, Romania, where he lives and works.*

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Featured in  
**Issue 200**

# Victor Man Revisits the Art Historical Canon

An exhibition at Gladstone Gallery, New York, shows the artist’s attempt to break out of step with time

D   BY DAVID GEERS IN REVIEWS | 29 NOV 18



‘The contemporary,’ wrote the philosopher Giorgio Agamben, ‘is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but [...] its darkness.’ For the Romanian painter Victor Man, such atemporal darkness is a signature style. Like other painters hailing from Cluj – Adrian Ghenie and Serban Savu among them – Man foregrounds a melancholic vision tintured by his country’s totalitarian history. Yet unlike them, Man’s sensibility displays a more otherworldly, and at times psychoanalytic, dimension coursing with subterranean energies. His show ‘Flowering Ego’ at Gladstone Gallery delves into these dark waters with the artist’s characteristically enigmatic aplomb.

Inspired by Rilke’s first and second *Duino Elegies* (1923), the exhibition brings together eight allusive works. *R with Turtle* (2018) pictures the artist’s infant daughter; the painting’s delicately scumbled surface vibrates with jade greens and snowy white textures. While the turtle in front of the swathed newborn lays on its back, the child holds a ring, conjuring regal depictions of the infant Christ. *Weltinnenraum* (2017), Rilke’s term for the space of inner emotion, shows a young woman emerging from an architectonic background painted in subtly variegated shades. Behind her, a decorous symbol pierces the work’s planes with resonant ultramarine and viridian, as foliage and the profile of a fox inscribe its right edge. Confronting us from within the frame, the woman is at once familiar and forever removed, hovering indeterminately between past and present, portrait and allegory, likeness and memory.



Victor Man, 'Flowering Ego', 2018, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels; photography: David Regen

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Like Rilke, Man blurs the line between external phenomena and internal impressions, transforming his figures into haunting ciphers. Among these, a trio of *Flowering Ego* paintings (all 2017) depicts a black-clad crow-headed creature evoking a medieval masque. Is it the Freudian Superego garbed in the robes of religious persecution? The angel from Rilke's *Elegies* or a carnivalesque spectre from an occult pageant? Echoes of Pieter Bruegel the Elder and Hieronymus Bosch abound here; the splintered arcs of one painting and the sprouting flowers in another resemble a hallucinatory church fresco.

Much recent art has revisited the canon with nostalgic longing, satisfying the art world's appetite for hagiography. In this context, however, by eschewing an identifiable painterly style and collapsing references from different eras, Man's work can also be read as a gesture of refusal – an attempt to break out of step with time, and art history, in a kind of dreamy reverie. His extensive output, imbued with a surreal, woozy atmosphere, recalls artists as varied as Edvard Munch, Franz von Stuck, Paul Gauguin and Balthus – whose echoes reverberate in *Red and Dark Haired Sisters* (2017), for example. Sumptuously painted in dusky greens, blues and vibrant orange, the work depicts two girls, one clasping the other from behind. Though the scene may show an embrace, it also doubles uncannily. Is the occluded figure a ghost? The Unconscious as a shadowy Other? As always in Man's work, the answers recede elusively, refracted within a dazzling display of painterly prowess and art historical ricochet.



Victor Man, 'Flowering Ego', 2018, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels; photography: David Regen

Still, Man offers something of a denouement in *Moonlight (all nations flag)* (2018), in which a woman appears to give birth to a small skull. Like much of Man's oeuvre, the painting is rife with art historical allusions, most notably Gustave Courbet's *The Origin of the World* (1866). However, unlike Courbet, Man conflates this evocation of birth with life's inevitable conclusion, aligning him with Sigmund Freud, who argued that Eros worked in tandem with Thanatos – the death drive directing all life back to an inorganic state. Life's ultimate goal, in other words, is to die; the trick is to do it on our own terms. This, Man suggests, is the darkness that settles over every age – past, future, and contemporary.

**Victor Man, 'Flowering Ego' runs at Gladstone Gallery until 22 December 2018.**

*Main image: Victor Man, 'Flowering Ego', 2018, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels; photography: David Regen*