

# REGARDING ALLISON KATZ

by Sebastian Black

Allison Katz: *The Proposal*, 2011, oil and rice on canvas, 64 by 58 inches.



Weirdly, when I first saw this painting I felt the desire to sketch it. It was one of those literary/kitsch impulses that make you feel like a

young artist traveling through Italy in a BBC adaptation of a Victorian novel. My actual surroundings were a concrete storage facility in Newark, N.J., so instead of drawing I took out my phone and tapped photos until the feelings subsided. But again they burbled up, these atavistic hiccups, and I made some notes in an attempt to circumscribe them. However, this linguistic tourniquet also proved insufficient—I never got deeper than writing "Turquoise" and "Circle" and one phrase that I don't really understand now, which says "food's insane." Ultimately I succumbed and began to sketch a few light marks, eyelashes really, before I stopped, mildly embarrassed. Like the best art, this painting caused a cramp in my mimetic faculty which compelled me to ask that most basic question: how should one relate to objects?

Let me double way back. One of the favorite narratives of modernity—a movement whose propensity to self-narrativize is matched only by its proclivity to categorize—is the story of the creation of its categories. In this tale, fields of knowledge and production are verbally differentiated from one another. Fences are erected between science, philosophy, art, religion, and then the layer of shale beneath the newly autonomous fields is hydrofracked into still more distinct sections. Each segment, qua segment, is then used to expound the atomized cosmology which made it possible.

In the crooked little fragment called painting, this tale runs the gamut from quixotic to neurotic. So as I looked at this particular painting, I came to admire it because it looked so damned irresponsible. I was impressed by how thoroughly detached it seemed from the aforementioned narrative, from what Althusser called, in reference to ideological conditioning, "the inexorable circle which dominates the connexions between men, the connexions between objects and their men," and how it achieved this distance not through some dour form of negation but through a kind of joie de vivre. It seemed to portray "the circle of ideological existence"<sup>1</sup> as a decorative china plate, something to be privately smiled at in a hallway on one's way to the bathroom.

But then, of course, this plate is more than decor or artifice. It contains a meal of sorts: one giant cock (I'll leave the symbolic algebra to the viewer) and a healthy side of arborio rice which overflows its ideological limit, i.e., the plate, and covers the entire canvas. It was this rice which I think unnerved me most and which, when the owner of the painting politely vacated the room so I could think, I promptly touched. Now we're talking, said my hands.

Adorno—to stay with the As—said, "Artworks are alive in that they speak in a fashion that is denied to natural objects and the subjects who make them,"<sup>2</sup> and I feel this to be somewhat true as I write, touch, talk and look my way toward what is still ultimately only a partial understanding of this painting. And I think it is this artwork's strange language which, though it describes a cock, keeps making me think of my neighbors, the Monk Parakeets of Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn. Apparently they escaped from a cage at JFK years ago and colonized the highest spire of the gatehouse near the graveyard entrance. From nature to culture and back, these feathered interstices are classified as released exotics, and they speak in a beautiful hybrid cadence, exhibiting an instructive indifference to the funeral processions that daily pass them by. Though obviously you cannot exactly speak to them, you can look at them, and sometimes simply looking is enough.

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