

Poka-Yio – *SneakerHead* at Anna Pappas Gallery, Sept 2022

SneakerHead is a suite of nine oil paintings (all 100 x 100 cm, 2022), a sculpture of multiple larger than life-size model of a sneaker and a video animation, from prolific Athenian artist and curator, Poka-Yio. Noted in recent times for themes drawn from the culture and marketing of sexual attraction, *SneakerHead* takes its cue from the slang term 'sneakerhead', for someone addicted to collecting brands of sneakers, with flagging fashionable status through choice of pristine footwear. For the artist this shallow victim exchanges their identity for their sneakers, in effect exchanges sneakers for their head (hence the change in spelling).

Painting is the artist's preferred medium, although he has also become well known for performance, installation and video, painting retains a more intuitive, personal engagement for him. Since the artist readily admits to being a sneakerhead himself, the treatment acquires added interest. The paintings do not situate sneakers in particular social situations or related to other status symbols, but initially isolate a single sneaker upon a painterly ground, with vigorous modulation to pale, largely monochromatic grounds. The sneaker, viewed in profile preserves the basics of its brand design, although, a little comically, scarcely suggests the contours of a foot by them and pointedly contrasts with the dispersed or unfocused surrounding. It is the freer, more gestural surrounding that comes to stand for the rest of the person. We have a sneaker design as the sole focus of an 'unfortunate' portrait.

The paintings develop this idea in two ways. The first is through the addition of a casually rendered phallus and emoticons in *SneakerHead 5* and *SneakerHead 8*, underlining a masculine identity and to some extent the contrast between strict product design and the looser, more expressive qualities of painting. The combination is undeniably awkward as a composition, no doubt deliberately so. Again, the sneaker assumes the role of an impoverished personality, now beset by male sexual urges and glib emotive signals, or possibly relaying them. The second strand to the work appears in *SneakerHead 6* in which a single sneaker is augmented by others and fragments. Significantly, brand design all but vanishes and the background becomes far darker, more animated, sneakers now merging with the gestural turmoil. In these circumstances, the SneakerHead seemingly struggles with company or options, with anything less than an obvious brand. On this point, *SneakerHead 9* offers the telling caption, 'Melancholia'.

There is one further feature to the works worth noting. That is the artist's preference for the Nike logo of a large 'tick' – the Air brand. This is something used in an earlier series from 2017 with a slightly different theme, 'Cat People', where incidentally, white sneakers also appeared. Nike of course derives from the Greek goddess of victory – occasionally is coupled with Athena – and surely reminds us of the premium the artist has placed upon a strong Greek, indeed, Athenian voice in the contemporary art world, through his administration of the Athens Biennale and local teaching posts. It is no surprise that such a popular global brand should disclose rich local resonances, should inspire new insights into its marketing and attraction.

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