

KEVIN KAVANAGH

Sonia Shiel

What we talk about when we don't talk about love

Text by Chris Clarke

Dear Sonia,

In his 1923 epistolary novel *Zoo, or Letters Not About Love*, Viktor Shklovsky was instructed by Elsa Triolet that, in order to continue their correspondence, he must refrain from declaring his affection for her: "Don't write me only about your love. Don't make wild scenes on the telephone. Don't rant and rave. You're managing to poison my days. I need freedom - I refuse to account for my actions to anyone!" So instead he writes about the weather, the publisher Zinovy Grzhebin, the animals in the zoo ("In Berlin, as everyone knows, the Russians live around the zoo."), ocean liners, the painter Ivan Puni ("Paintings devour him. It is so hard to work! These things are born like children."), different models of automobiles, the ability to hold a fork, and, of course, inevitably, love.

Your conditions for writing about this new series of paintings aren't quite as stringent; rather, in pointing out their connection to Shklovsky, you say: "please don't feel any pressure to write about the show in any specific or definitive way [...] don't feel like you have to explain the work." I was thus momentarily tempted not to mention this story, to abide by and incorporate the restrictions imposed upon Schlovsky in my own way. But the anecdote felt too appropriate to the works, too serendipitous in their affinity with Triolet's criteria. Like the book, they skirt around the edges, alluding to particular scenarios and situations, inferring and insinuating without saying anything straight out. Are these titles propositions - *when we are big, when we make plans, when we are hopeful* - with the repetition of speculative imaginings recalling the sense of yearning, of promises held close, that runs through Zoo's letters? They seem to forecast - and wish for - a shared future, an eventual reconciliation or reunion.

Shklovsky is also known as the proponent of defamiliarisation - *ostranenie* - from his 1917 text *Art as Technique*. Here, he encourages artists to 'make strange' the mundane, the everyday, the known, and, in the process, to break with habitualisation, "an effect of dulled perceptions, perceptions which have been clouded by routine, by culture." (the quote is from Simon Watney's essay 'Making Strange: The Shattered Mirror.') There is a hint of this in Letter twenty-two of *Zoo*: "At the next stage in art, psychological motivation wears out. It must be changed, 'estranged.'" This tactic also finds form in your canvases, as detached limbs, distant bodies, and glimpses of hands and legs disturb placid fields of pattern and colour. Two pairs of hands, tantalisingly visible from the edges of the frame, draw ripples in the painted surface, carving out streams that reveal the deep green water below. An oblong cloud of cobalt blue connects opposite fingers stretching out from symmetrical window frames. Legs dangle from above, bisecting an array of angular objects and parallel lines. Veils of transparent colour and half-formed figures are vaguely perceptible and cut off at their wrists and ankles. I peer into the skim of diaphanous pinks and browns, the elongated geometry of concentric blue rings, and the scuffed, mottled background of earth tones, and pick out a pair of kicking legs, as if partially occluded by a beach umbrella.

What about the title? *The Dangers of Happy*, in its marriage of two, seemingly incompatible, grammatically unwieldy, descriptions, is ambiguous. Is this what Shklovsky would have felt, issuing his indirect declarations of love without anticipation of response or reciprocity? Is the happiness, then, comprised of not knowing? And isn't this condition integral to any act of communication, of making something and putting it out there, and then seeing what happens next, how it is received? What do you think?

Chris