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Review: 40 Years of Sylvester Stallone's Paintings in France

BY NICHOLAS FORREST | MAY 18, 2015



Sylvester Stallone at the Galerie Gmurzynska Booth at Art Basel Miami Beach 2009
(Galerie Gmurzynska)

Hollywood screen legend Sylvester Stallone has opened a retrospective of his paintings at the Galerie Contemporaine du Musée de Nice. Titled “Real Love: Paintings 1975-2015,” the exhibition spans four decades of the film star’s painting practice from his earliest figurative works to his most recent large abstract canvases. Although Stallone is best known for his iconic roles in films such as Rocky and Rambo, as the title of his Nice retrospective suggests, it is fair to say that his first and “real” love is painting. Since childhood he has identified his true calling as a visual artist and has even stated that if he had a choice, he would spend his life painting and sculpting instead of starring in action movies.

The success of Stallone’s painting practice, as exposed in “Real Love,” lies in its authenticity, vulnerability, and immediacy. The informal, primal, and primitive nature of his highly expressive, highly individual aesthetic reveals Stallone to be an intuitive artist with an immense talent for expressing himself with startling clarity and honesty. And to his credit, he achieves all this while remaining unapologetically engaged with his status as a celebrity and movie star, as he has from the beginning of his painting career. In fact he uses his unique status, situation, and perspective to his advantage, as both an accessible entry point into his work and a fascinating and distinctive framework for his thoughts, feelings, and ideas. Drawing inspiration from his own unique history, which he transcribes and interprets with masterly skill, Stallone ventures boldly beyond his own singular space to explore a range of universal themes including suffering, despair, and hope. “There is a public face and a private face,” Stallone explains. “And I feel the same way about art. It’s a collage of emotions. And when you can transfer that onto the canvas, it’s an amazing feeling.”

In his early figurative works, as perhaps one would expect, Stallone engages with issues of fame and celebrity, exploring the boundaries between the public and the private as seen in the earliest painting on view, entitled “Finding Rocky” (1975), which precedes the script and release of Rocky the movie. Then beginning in the 2000s, there is a noticeable shift in his practice towards a reduced palette of black, white, and red which he uses to create potent abstract paintings that channel the physical presence of his screen characters. With his latest works, which are being shown for the first time in Nice, he combines “organic and geometric shapes in this robust black, white, and red palette” to create works “that further demonstrate his dialogue with modern painting,” according to [Galerie Gmurzynska](#), the Zürich-based commercial gallery that represents Stallone.

Stallone’s retrospective in Nice follows his critically acclaimed 2013 retrospective at the State Russian Museum in St. Petersburg, “[Sylvester Stallone. Painting. From 1975 Until Today](#).” In the curatorial statement, the Museum describes Stallone’s work as arising “out of an inner necessity” and encapsulating “the mystery of experience.” The landmark St. Petersburg retrospective initiated a critical dialogue with Stallone’s practice that continues in “Real Love,” which although is taking place less than two years after the St. Petersburg retrospective, is by no means too soon for a singular artist with such a distinctive and engaging practice. In the words of Galerie

Gmurzynska, “the works assembled for ‘Real Love,’ offer an exclusive and first deeper insight into Stallone’s powerful art over almost half a century while introducing a new definitive force to be reckoned with to the international art circuit.”

“Real Love: Paintings 1975-2015” is at the Galerie Contemporaine du Musée de Nice until May 30.