

Vittorio Brodmann
PRESS



Define the relationship
By Pablo Larios

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FOCUS

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Vittorio Brodmann, *Daddy issues*, 2012, Öl auf Leinwand, 40 × 94 cm, Courtesy: the artist and Gregor Staiger, Zürich

What kind of rooms are we in? How can we be round and yet sunk squarely in the corner, trapped and drunk. And why's that man's arm in my face? And if he's a man, why does he have hooves? The discoloured, distended subjects of Vittorio Brodmann's paintings are often people. But it's rarely clear where one dysmorphic body ends and another begins, in crowded phantasmagoric canvases like *Crush with eyeliner* (2013), for example. Set, it seems, in imaginary spaces of psychoanalytic conflict, these liquid figures are in fraught states of emotional turmoil, metamorphosing into objects and back into body parts – like Freudian slips rendered visual, fervid and flushed.

What about Freud, anyway? For all his fuss about what our twisted minds look like, he forgot to ask about our bodies. Brodmann was born near Basel, Switzerland, studied in Geneva, and lives and works in Vienna, where his first institutional solo show opened at the 21er Haus last autumn. The city he now calls home may account for the painter's proximity to the Ur-daddy of 'daddy issues', to borrow the name of a painting from 2012. A squat, frumpy, newspaper-carrying thing in *Scratch a bohemian, find a bourgeois* (2013) chides a familiar mixing of haute-bourgeois haughtiness and clichés of avant-gardeism. As a whole, the works recall the frenetic, colourful tavern or cabaret scenes of Ernst Kirchner or Jeanne Mammen – painters who documented the social with moody mockery.

It's that same vaudeville comedy of human relations that Brodmann's paintings tease out. They do so via a haze of bodily free-association and slapstick collisions. There's a quasi-narrativity to the paintings, often depicting moments of fall-out or precipitation: a man's about to get punched in *Down the sleeve* (2013) while in *As they say in show business* (2013) a short, raisin-shaped person enters or exits a room flanked by a shocked-looking cohort. Brodmann is interested in the word 'relationship' in its social as well as its formal sense: how might human relationships, their conflicts

and their fusions, be expressed via loaded gestures, elbows and expressions; yet always, too, in their formal relations of colour and shape? The artist finds processes of resemblance from within his paintings themselves, often using a network of visual similes: a woman's cocktail dress in *Untitled* (2013) also looks like a large shoe and her nose sags to form the eye of a man next to her, an eye that turns back into a nipple – hers but, somehow, also his. It's this uncertain mutability that allows his canvases to be more than caricatures. While his figures are exaggerated and often whimsical, the results are never stereotypical, and rarely only funny or sad – an ambivalence demonstrated in the video *Comedy in the Cellar (On Tour)* (2014) shown recently in a group show at the Badischer Kunstverein depicting with a self-conscious wink a series of the artist's often unsuccessful stand-up comedy routines.



Vittorio Brodmann, *Crush with eyeliner*, 2013, Öl auf Leinwand, 120 × 90 cm

Viewing Brodmann's smallish, rectangular canvases means getting up close and entering a stream of visual puns. Aren't bodies sort of like bottles? Liquid filled, upright and rounded, bottles have necks, too; when bodies pass out, they lie on their sides, under a table, like discarded beer bottles. Other times, in these canvases, one has the sense that something big or awkward has just transpired, but the crowd has looked away, or has made itself scarce. In *Blame your parents* (2013), a watery-eyed naked figure lies plopped on his stomach with the red nose of an alcoholic. Off-centre and closely cropped, he seems to have been thrown out of something; a restaurant, an argument, a relationship. It's a poignant, post-altercation moment familiar from, say, the details of grossness in *The Ren & Stimpy Show* (1991–96) or the adult cartoonishness of *Fritz the Cat* (1965–72). But these small, store-bought, standard-format canvases also recall Japanese 'floating world' ukiyo-e genre prints. Made for quick and inexpensive distribution among an emerging mercantile middle class in the Edo period, those prints depicted transient, eroticized scenes of pleasure-seeking actors, courtesans, monsters – the impermanent things that float into each other before floating past. Recently I asked Brodmann why it is that I find the dimensions of his paintings familiar. Often smaller and differently proportioned from traditional canvases, I remarked they looked more like screens. Brodmann nodded, saying that the dimensions often match those of consumer electronics: the 4×3 aspect ratio, for example. They might also recall the shape of small windows, except that there are no windows in Brodmann's interiors. The rooms – and there almost always are rooms – are often rendered in harsh, membraneous pinks and reds, as if filled with blood or lipstick or marinara sauce. The character's inner relationships, too, connote claustrophobia or entrapment; their spaces seem locked or sealed. Which may explain the necessity of those figures to escape in turn – to metamorphose into rams or trannies or ghouls.

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