

Gyan Shrosbree

**I Love You Because  
Your Pants Are Too Short**

Gyan Shrosbree

## **I Love You Because Your Pants Are Too Short**

March 3–March 31, 2013

Curated by Mary Laube

Essay by Brooke Chroman

*Times Club Editions* at Prairie Lights Books

IOWA CITY • 2013



### **"I Love You Because Your Pants Are Too Short"**

YOU MAY RECALL a painting by Antoine Watteau, which hangs in one's memory and on a wall at the Musée du Louvre. It's titled *Pierrot* (formerly known as *Gilles*) from 1718–19. The image of a clownish boy recalls historian Richard Martin, "Moon-faced, with pants too short, sleeves too long, gaudy pink ribbons on his slippers, and a white-flannel jacket in discord with his white-satin trousers, Watteau's *Gilles*" stares out from the canvas. He is "the buffoon subject." *Pierrot* is indeed an utterance of awkwardness. Yet this fragile boy, whose demeanor cuts through the formality of the brushwork he is made of, is astonishingly and quietly riveting.

Martin continues, "In 1985 art critic Sanford Schwartz wrote of *Pierrot* . . . : 'His face is as secretive as any by Leonardo, and there is a gravity to him that recalls Rembrandt. His blankness though, is what is fascinating. . . . He appears to know how awkward and uncomfortable he is—and, too, how his power comes from his willingness to be awkward and foolish. He is the first figure in art who, it seems, is one of us.'" It is precisely this power, which emerges from

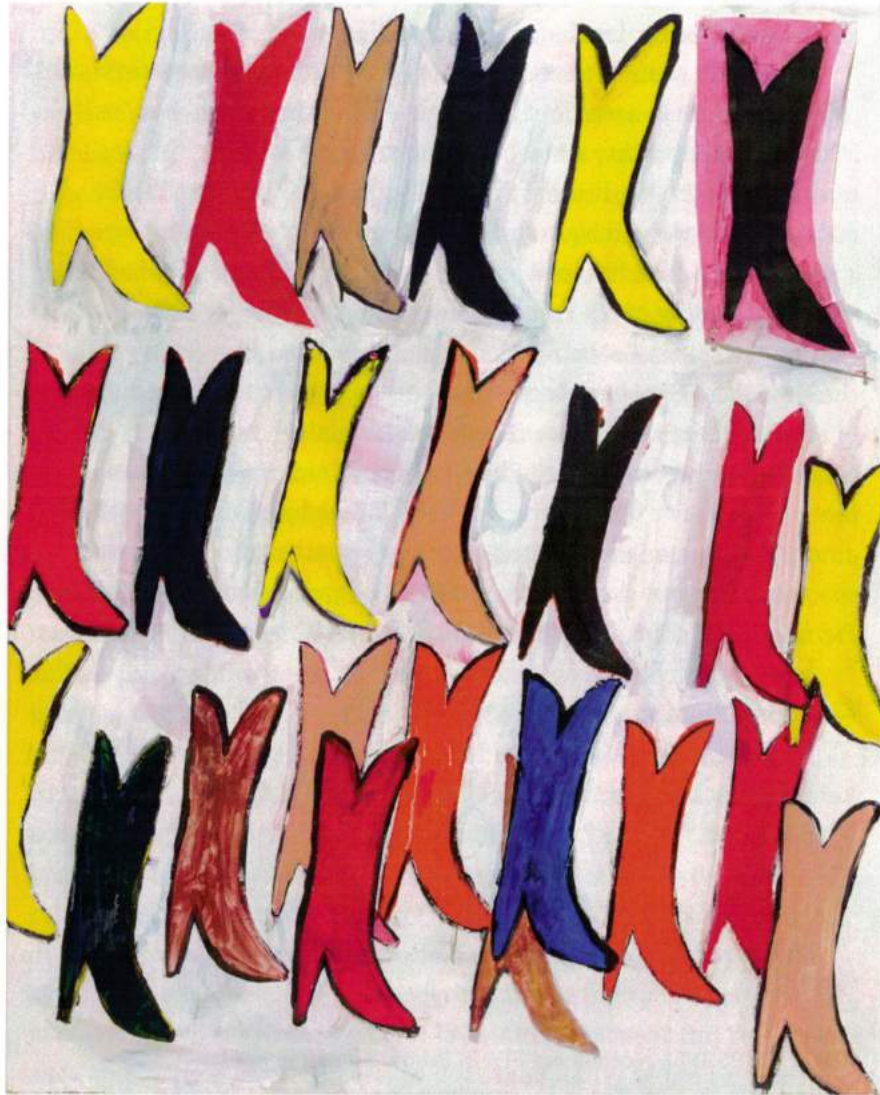
a kind of surrender to the vulnerability of humanness, from which *Pierrot* garners his strength.

The paintings of Gyan Shrosbree, not only recall the short-pants-feeling of Watteau's *Gilles*, they remind us that the dignity of humanness is often found in the beauty of awkwardness, the truth of frailty, and the acceptance of process as the end which is always becoming. Whether in the poised paws of a checkered cat, or the tilt of a white Kangol newsy, these works offer the possibility of a connection through the delicacy and strength of individual experience—like *Pierrot*, not in spite of his short pants, but because them. The paintings in this exhibition span a wide territory, both in time and content. However, it is this connecting thread of subjectivity—intersubjectivity, rather—that stitches together this compelling body of work, which unravels the mythology of idealism not just in the discourse of painting, but also in life.

In Shrosbree's work, *Stompin' In The Golden Muck*, painterly boots scatter the canvas in a push and pull between the murky whiteness of their background, between substance and absence. The feminized shoes are both objects of desire and abstract pattern, each an attempt at uniqueness, but also stuck in the cluster of a mass display. Critiquing not only the endless lure of consumer objects—that lovely golden muck—but also the mythology that seeks to separate the commercialism of pop culture with the supposed quest for purity in abstraction in art; the cool "objectlessness" of Modernist painting is now a fetishized commodity in its own right. Like *Pierrot*, these works assert that meaning and importance is found maybe more potently in peculiarities of the personal, the popular, the saccharine, and the vernacular than in the worn canons of idealism and the false dream of a universal beauty.

Again, the mark of individuality as a means to connection dominates the apparent wobble of the hand-stacked triangles in *Girls in Skirts #1* and *#2*. Teetering in candy colors and blunted pop





*Stompin' In The Golden Muck*

Acrylic paint and paper on stretched canvas, 30 x 66 inches, 2012

geometries, the paintings resist their own formality. The images fall into a decorative fringe, which expands the bounds of the canvas. Presenting the permeability between art and decoration, the canvas is turned into a sort of clothing for the structure of the frame, highlighting the artwork as an accessory for the wall. Riffing on the ridged illusions of Op-Art and seemingly inspired by 1920's Sonia Delaunay dresses, *Girls in Skirts* tease the sensual out of paint. The hard lines of geometric painting are now softened, human, and flitting with the decorative. The promise of a skirt is in the implication of what lies beneath. But of course, Shrosbree claims decoration as art, and the possibility of a fantasy is often more the climax than its reality. That "otherness" or "outsider" position of the clown, as well as the cliché which links the feminine and the decorative, is now front and center: the subject.

Ghosts of Watteau's imagery are maybe most easily seen in Shrosbree's *Suspects* series. Portraits of men with tag-line captions read as absurdist—yet all-too-real—dating profiles. With both care and skepticism, the portraits study a new mode of modern romance: Internet dating. Carefully articulated in acrylic paint, the suspects are rendered in the opposite medium of the snapshot, moment-to-moment culture of the Internet. Recalling the classical painted portrait meant to heroicize its typically male, here "suspect" sitter, each image examines how we choose to represent ourselves as desirable subjects in the changing language of technology. Within this process of representation, each suspect offers a feast of irony accompanied by certain tenderness in their rendering, in the frailty of human-ness, and maybe even the need for love. At the moment this reverence and vulnerability surfaces, so does the hilarity of the cartoonish clichés we come to define ourselves through. While *The Suspects* question if technology (be it that of paint or binary code) aides in connections or increases alienation, one almost can't help but connect with the "suspects"—though most likely not for the reasons or



*Girls With Skirts #1*

Acrylic paint, beads, glitter, and fabric on stretched canvas, 20 x 48 inches, 2011



looks they advertise. Instead, we find ourselves loving them for their absurd earnestness: for the cringe of candles and flowers.

When Schawartz says of *Pierrot*, he “is one of ‘us,’” Shrosbree’s paintings not only agree, but they also expand the territory of “us” in to the contemporary moment, by questioning: *who “us” is?* Her work reminds us that it is only in the last half-century that the female perspective has begun to find a prominent place in painting—a perspective which has long been silenced. That silence is embodied in the blank stare of the French clown, who may or may not know that his “otherness”—being everything the subject in painting of the time *should not have been*—is precisely what foretells the future of art. But that is not to say it is only a “feminine” experience concealed and revealed in the intersubjective narratives of Shrosbree’s work: it is a human one. For here, intersubjectivity is not the autonomous experience of the personal. It is rather the communal space between our subjectivities, where our gaze meets the gaze of *Pierrot*, or the stare of a cat in his checkered sailor coat.

—Brooke Chroman

Richard Martin and Harold Koda, *The Historical Mode*  
(New York: Rizzoli, 1989), 9–10.

GYAN SHROSBREE received her BFA in Painting from the Kansas City Art Institute, and her MFA in Painting from Cranbrook Academy of Art. Gyan is currently an Assistant Professor of Art in the Department of Fine Arts at Maharishi University of Management. She has exhibited in galleries throughout the United States. Her first book, *The Suspects* was published by Devibook in 2010. She lives and works in Fairfield, Iowa.