



Anatomy of an artwork

Benjamin Senior's Portals: a day of carefree youth

The English painter creates fluid movements with the heightened symbolism of the everyday

Skye Sherwin

Play for today ...

With hula-hoops brandished high, fashionable threads and experimental hairstyles, the two girls in this 2016 painting by the London-based artist Benjamin Senior suggest metropolitan playtime.

Pattern recognition ...

Look longer at the painting, however, and things turn strange. There's the view from below, which makes the kids seem towering and statuesque. Meanwhile, the emphasis on pattern and formal arrangement – the curlicues of the bench, the hula hoop rings, the chiming colours and the sinuous echoes of the girls' bodies – lends the scene an odd, stilted air. The overall effect is less carefree youth than aesthetic control.

Sign of the times ...

There is a ritualistic vibe to their movements with the hoops that, like the painting itself, are potential portals to another world. The heightened symbolism of the everyday looks back to Stanley Spencer's biblical scenes in an English village. Yet here, and in some of Senior's other quietly sinister paintings, it is bodily beauty, not spiritual enlightenment, that dominates.



📷 Photograph: Andy Keate/Carl Freedman Gallery

Included in Slow Painting, Leeds Art Gallery, to 12 January