



You could talk about pattern and composition. London-based painter Benjamin Senior's paintings are full of patterns and composition – tessellating, mid-century-feeling modernist geometrics on the walls of swimming pools or on the floors of gymnasia. Here, Senior's subjects – athletic-looking women, often – pose, stretch, dive, do sit-ups or exercise with hula hoops, fitness balls and other gym accessories. Elsewhere in Senior's quietly perverse world, men and women stand about in autumnal light in patterned overcoats and hats, and we see them as if through the ornate ironwork of a gate or a balcony railing. There's something not quite right about Senior's calm and pleasant urbanity, though. It's as if everything depicted has been deployed like pieces in a weird game where painterly composition has become a narcissistic obsession: swimmers dive at precise angles to intersect with the curves of background elements; the outline of a head follows the scrolling line of a wrought-iron tendril; gym balls are held aloft by carefully arranged pairs of legwarmer-clad legs.

Senior's paintings turn the imagined point-of-view of a painting – our eyes 'over here', and

the world 'over there' – into something awkwardly, creepily self-conscious. There's a voyeur's pleasure somewhere in this fetishistic attention to the choreographed poses of lithe bodies set in taut action or casual repose. And yet at the same time there's a utopian echo to these healthy, happy people, who seem to live in a world so elegant that every moment, however banal, is always perfectly arranged. No work here, just play. Naturalism merges with design, and the rhetoric of composition is taken to an absurd extreme. The history of realist painting always carried the hidden pleasures of composition, while abstract art thought to do away with the image in the name of 'pure' form. But Senior lets abstraction's ideal of flat design clash with the illusion of depth, each contradicting the other, both tangled in a strange embrace. Somewhere in Senior's paintings is the question of who, in a painting, the human figure addresses, of whether that figure is a subject or an object, of who is looked at and who does the looking. A question about the nature of this peculiar screen we call a painting, and the world we see upon it.

Rings VII (Light and Distance), 2014,
egg tempera on cotton on plywood, 60 x 50 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Bolte Lang, Zürich

Benjamin Senior selected by J.J. Charlesworth