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Janet Werner's Truer Subject, the Women Unseen

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Janet Werner, "Performer", 2014.

It's interesting that Janet Werner graduated in the same class as John Currin. It shouldn't be remarkable, as they're both sturied and fully-arrived painters. But touring her recent show, I think of Werner's formation next to Currin, and how it underscores the discrepancy between the two, and the markers they've set for figurative painting and its potential.

Werner asks me a question, climbing the stairs from Parisian Laundry's basement, where an emerging photo artist was given an opportunity beneath her show. She asks, what do I think about photography? It's a rare question for its open-endedness. I consider, and then try to quote something I read fifteen years ago, where David Hockney criticized Annie Leibovitz for only ever altering her subjects, and not her lens. I prefer photography that troubles its very form, I say. Werner murmurs something, maybe an agreement.

Later, as we pick over squash pasta in the Mile-End (and deep cold) of Montreal, not far from Werner's studio, I'm reminded of this distinction, as it helps define her success. Where Currin plays with his sitters, his technique describing something perfect in all its strangeness (I think of Leibovitz coating Meryl Streep in cold cream, a sloppy mime), Werner bends her "lens" to her will. The affect happens in the of offing, with her, the brush a warped shutter, a disturbed print. Her sitter comes second, and her treatment first.



Janet Werner, "Double," 2014.



Janet Werner, "Carey," 2014.

Of course, Werner's treatment is entwined with her subject, women, who form a complicated sitter, a body politic. And because of this (and her source material in fashion magazines) we're encouraged to take it personally when Werner folds a face, blurs a mouth, or doubles an eye. These are, then, comments on womanhood, our feminine contradictions and self-denial, our reflexive assertions of postulated will. We are these women, suffering under the weight of large hats, absurd decorations, our shirts open, our expressions eclipsed, our horizons blank. We pose for an open lens, which we defy and aggress and all the while lean in to.

It's a sad business, really. Comically so. But where Werner's wilting – or briefly buoyed – femmes mock for a camera whose film, all this time, is the artist's truer subject, their "stills," in a sense, get battered, too. Nothing – not her subject, not her medium – is treated without punishment, without moving hurt and fallen form.

Werner operates in a pulsing chroma, as though deflecting attention through flirtation. She has, over the course of her career, moved from pale and sallow palettes to deep pinks, round blues, over-ripe oranges, and torpid yellow hues. But it's her brushstrokes that should be watched. They circle singular features, they pronounce eruptions and fantastical lies. They do strange things, unkind, whimsical, rueful, and eclipsing. Cloisonné lines frame vacant stares, sometimes, but more often, faces go rubbed-out, folded in, or masked.

Modeled after a Picabia painting – a couple dancing nude on a beach – Werner's *Untitled (After Picabia)*, 2014, attempts something looser, something new ("an excuse to do something more abstract," she says). Beside it sits a larger portrait (*Pet*, 2014) whose subject tilts a bit. Her head is made of flowers and candy-colored elaborations and the leaning is the least of her notable attractions. Werner comments on the first painting, citing her delight in relinquishing control. Then she regards the second, and when I mention the tilt – not the head full of flowers, not the forward bosom – she exclaims, "That was the whole point! The tilt," she says. Werner wanted to convey unease, something a head full of flora couldn't do. She reflects for a moment, and says, "I haven't done the big painting I want to make yet."

While her portraits can't escape an assignment of feminine trouble (their nagging politic, their unsure abdication), Werner's constant subject is one that's nearly missing. She frequently leaves an erased line, a taken-back figure, a specter of a different or a disappeared girl, the one she didn't turn up. Her unresolved women – the ones rescinded – leave a trace that rings the ones that stayed. And it's more interesting than a simply-achieved palimpsest, a suggestion of process (think of De Kooning's erasure by Rauschenberg, a comment less on negation than authorship itself). Where Werner used to paint vacant women (color-field backlighting for girls without distinction), she now produces protagonists who suggest our shared anxiety, because our alternates are never far from view. These are our women, and also the ones that could have been. These are the ones we are and the ones we lost or shed.

In W. Somerset Maugham's tortured study of unrequited love, *Of Human Bondage*, he writes, "It is an illusion that youth is happy, an illusion of those who have lost it; but the young know they are wretched for they are full of the truthless ideal which have been instilled into them, and each time they come in contact with the real, they are bruised and wounded. It looks as if they were victims of a conspiracy."

Werner's women are bruised and shy and masked and giddy, conspiratorially doubled to defeat their firm assignment. But where Werner's paintings can read like a yearbook of unseated prom queens, it's her treatment, and not their folly, that reminds us of our "truthless ideal." The reprised marks, erased features, blotted-out and undone faces, form the best part of Werner's paintings: the stuff that goes rescinded, but not entirely disappeared. Here is our regret and our potential. Our opportunity for a new ideal.



Janet Werner, "Untitled (After Picabia)," 2014.



Janet Werner, "Pet," 2014.