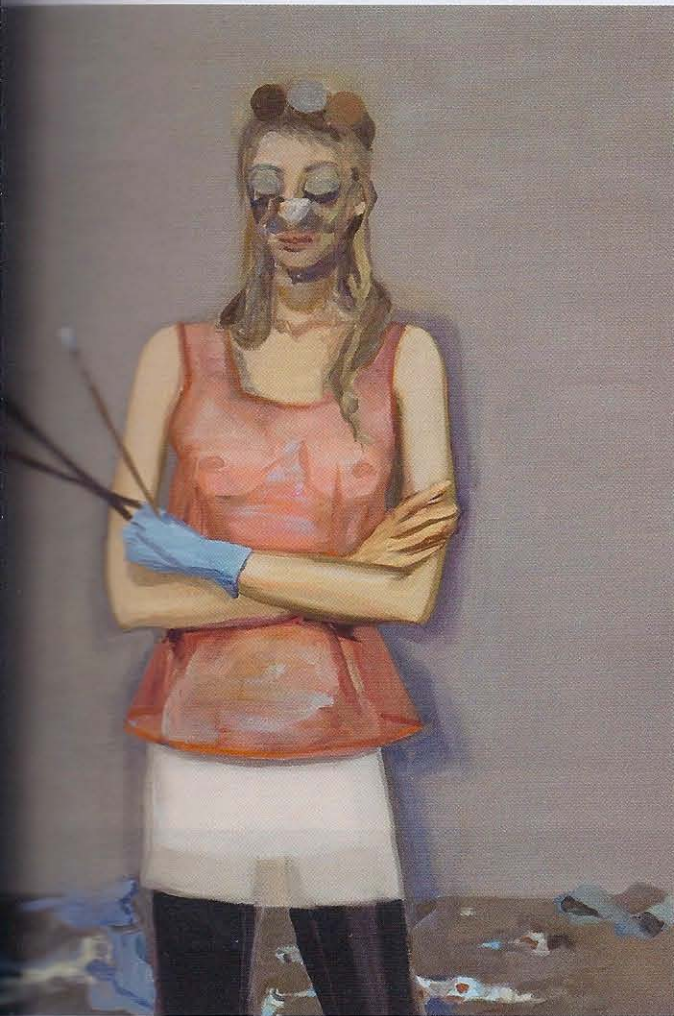


# Someone Something Nothing

SOME THOUGHTS ON  
JANET WERNER'S RECENT PAINTINGS

by John Kissick





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1. Janet Werner, *Crying Girl*, 2010, 78.7 x 68.3 cm. Collection of the artist. Photography: Paul Litherland.

2. *Dreamer*, 2012, 170.1 x 139.7 cm. Private collection. Photography: Guy L'Heureux.

3. *deMille*, 2010, 96.5 x 81.2 cm. Private collection. Photography: Guy L'Heureux.

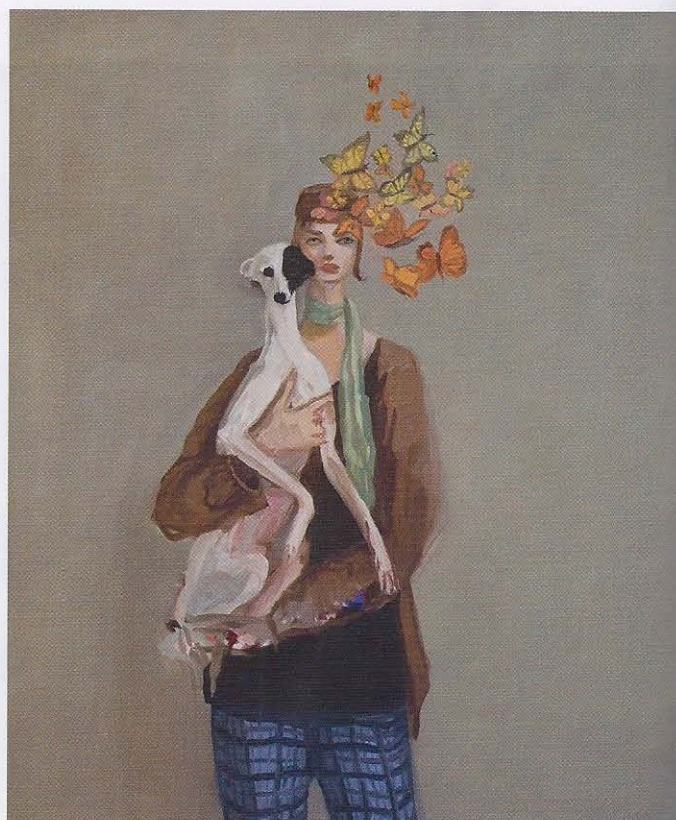
John Singer Sargent once quipped that “a portrait is a painting with something wrong with the mouth.” I’m guessing that this was just his smug way of saying that despite the rather obvious vacuity of most of his subjects, his technical virtuosity assured his status as artist, rather than portraitist. Since the days of Sargent, painting has spent much of its time in the land of “wrong with the mouth,” as technique has given way to a variety of other pictorial strategies for both theoretically and pictorially fucking up a face. Mind you, it still appears that at least on some fundamental level, the issue of *likeness*—that somewhat banal act of painting someone with two eyes placed roughly symmetrically on a head, ears at approximately the same level, two nostrils, one forehead, maybe a chin for those who have one—continues to be a basic prerequisite for what we commonly call the portrait, as well as the art-that-transcends-portrait portrait. Convention, for what it is worth these days, suggests that a portrait is an image of someone, as opposed to something or nothing. In other words, there is some sort of fuzzy implication that when we are looking at a portrait we are tacitly acknowledging a soul or a self somewhere back in the production of the work, or a shell of a self or, God forbid—a representation of a shell of a self—of someone. There are, of course, numerous examples of portraits of absolutely nothing (Warhol comes to mind) and portraits of probably something (Baselitz). There are also paintings of faces and bodies that are never called portraits, either because they are coolly and ironically about portraiture, as opposed to being portraits, or they are your run-of-the-mill, horrifically rendered images of multiple pierced art-school models, which, I guess, can make them about portraiture or not, depending on your persuasion.

So given my “someone” test, it is certainly a stretch to call Montreal-based artist Janet Werner a portraitist, or her big, compelling and uncompromising paintings of women portraits, in the conventional sense of the





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word. First and foremost, Werner's works are undeniably paintings; paintings about painting as a practice, painting as a way of viewing and engaging the world, painting as a dialogue and critique. Her sledgehammer approach to scale and confident, even tough handling of materials suggest the artist's critical sightlines are firmly fixed on the discourse of contemporary art rather than the making of any particular likenesses of someone. But there is also something to Janet Werner's work that is truly odd, and that oddness comes in part from the very fact that somewhere in the painting process, she is still painting someone. And to complicate matters further, that someone often flips back and forth between being something and nothing. In this way, Werner as artist seems to ask basic questions about the notion of a subject in contemporary painting.

### ON SOMEONE

Janet Werner's recent paintings are a case in point. They are, for lack of a better description, pictures of women. The figures are typically situated in the middle of the canvas, stuck on top of what is usually a barren, or at least indistinct background, mostly devoid of context or specificities. The figures are in essence types: stylized, distorted and caricatured to the point of being more signifiers of personages than actual people. At times they are absurd, even ludicrous in appearance: bug-eyed, squished, microcephalic, macrocephalic, *Venus of Willendorf*-ish. Some are monstrous, others ridiculous; but just about every one is peculiar. As the artist writes in a recent statement: "In the newest paintings there is a kind of violence, an argument between beauty and the grotesque and the figure has become the site of contest." In truth, they are usually more Frankenstein than fashion model and the artist goes to great length to drive that point home through a variety of cuts, pastes, squeezes and painterly dissembling. So, given this seemingly purposeful avoidance of anything remotely close to likeness, why is it so hard to look at these works and not implicate real, breathing subjects into these bodies?



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1. *Folding Woman*, 2009, 167.6 x 134.6 cm. Private collection. Photography: Guy L'Heureux.

2. *Mile Ender*, 2010, 170.1 x 139.7 cm. Private collection. Photography: Guy L'Heureux.

3. "Another Perfect Day," installation view, College Art Galleries, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon. Photography: Grant Kernan.

4. *Lucy*, 2011, 220.9 x 167.6 cm. Private Collection. Photography: Guy L'Heureux.

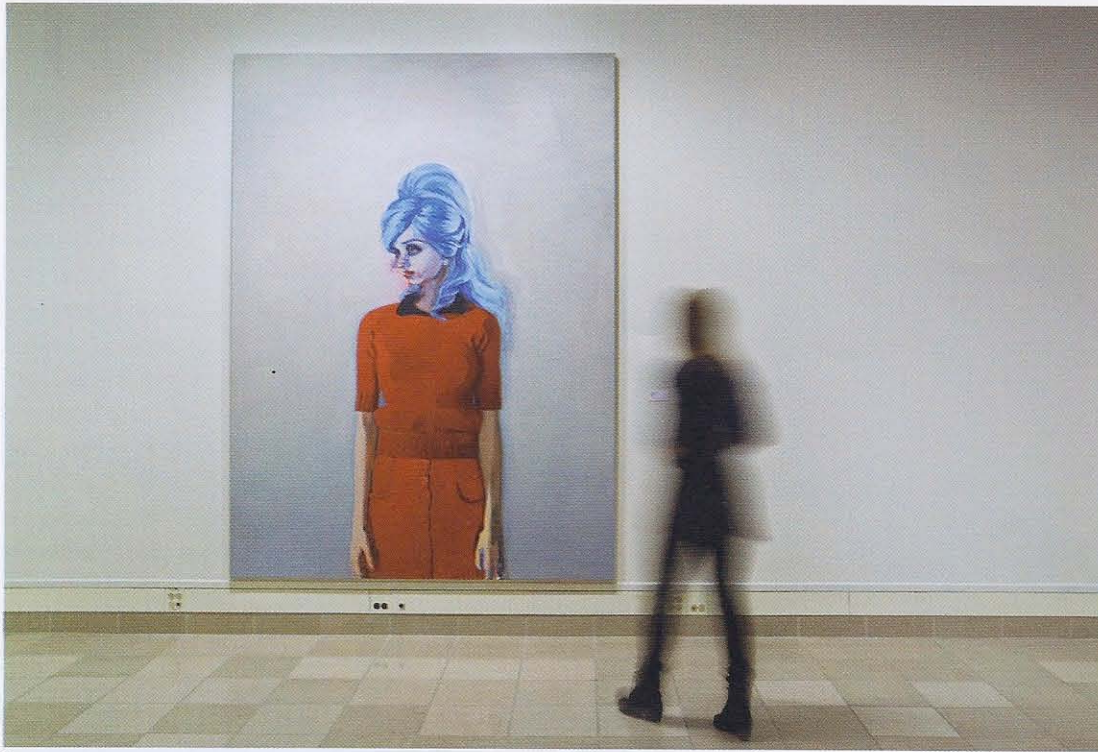




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There is something complicated and confounding in Werner's construction of these paintings. At their best, they seem both mind-bogglingly generic and yet extremely specific—as if when you consider the subject, you don't just know her type, you actually know her, whomever she is, which is totally ridiculous, as I have yet to meet a woman with a head three times the size of a normal head, even on the best of medications. "There is the subtle suggestion of witchcraft in these portraits" the artist writes, "though it is not clear if these beings are the ones casting spells or the ones upon whom the spell is cast." In part, this uncanny quality is the result of a well calibrated dance between caricature and paint, where certain facial or bodily specificities are forcefully articulated within a field, which can appear as off-handed generalities. Take for instance the eyes, the supposed windows into the soul: in Werner's paintings, even the simplest black saucers of paint have emotional impact. We ascribe meaning to the figure through and by them: vacant, forceful, dreamy, defiant, frightened, aloof. They signify a self—a subject—somewhere deep within all the distortion, even if





1. "Another Perfect Day," installation view, College Art Galleries, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon. Photography: Grant Kernan.

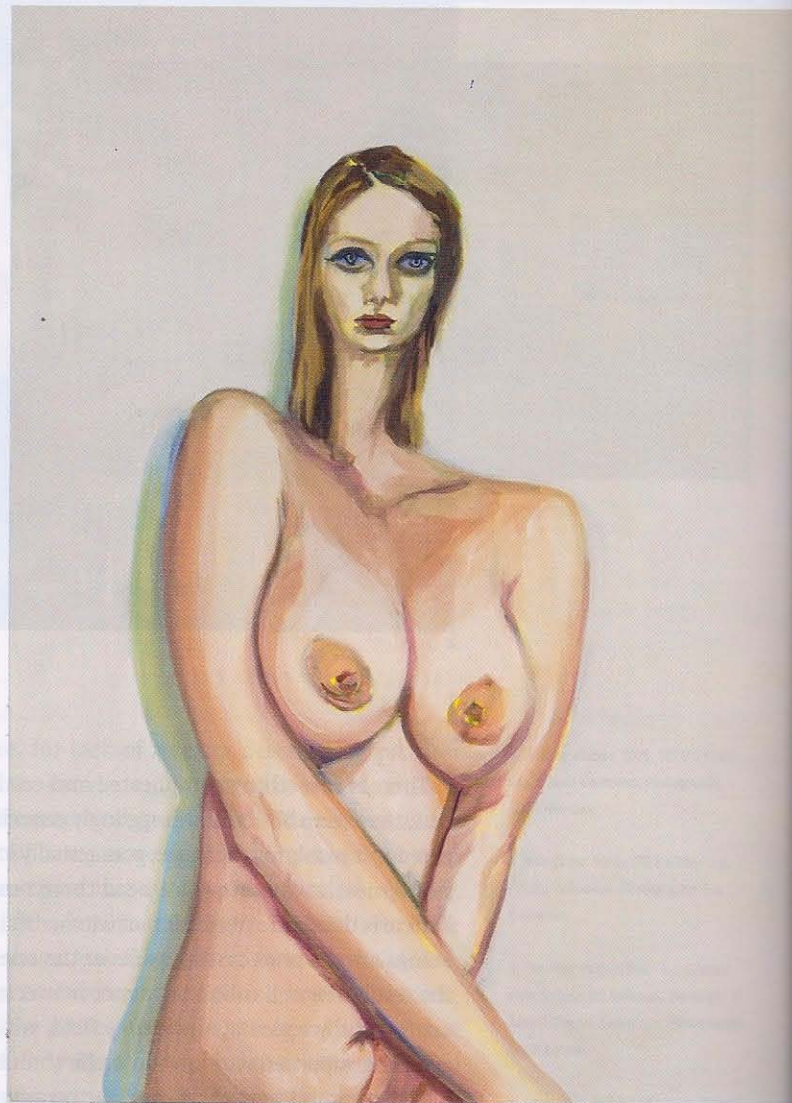
2. *Sheila*, 2011, 139.7 x 111.7 cm. Courtesy Parisian Laundry. Photography: Guy L'Heureux.

3. *Aging Ballerina Waving Goodbye*, 2011, 195.5 x 167.6 cm. Collection of the artist. Photography: Guy L'Heureux.

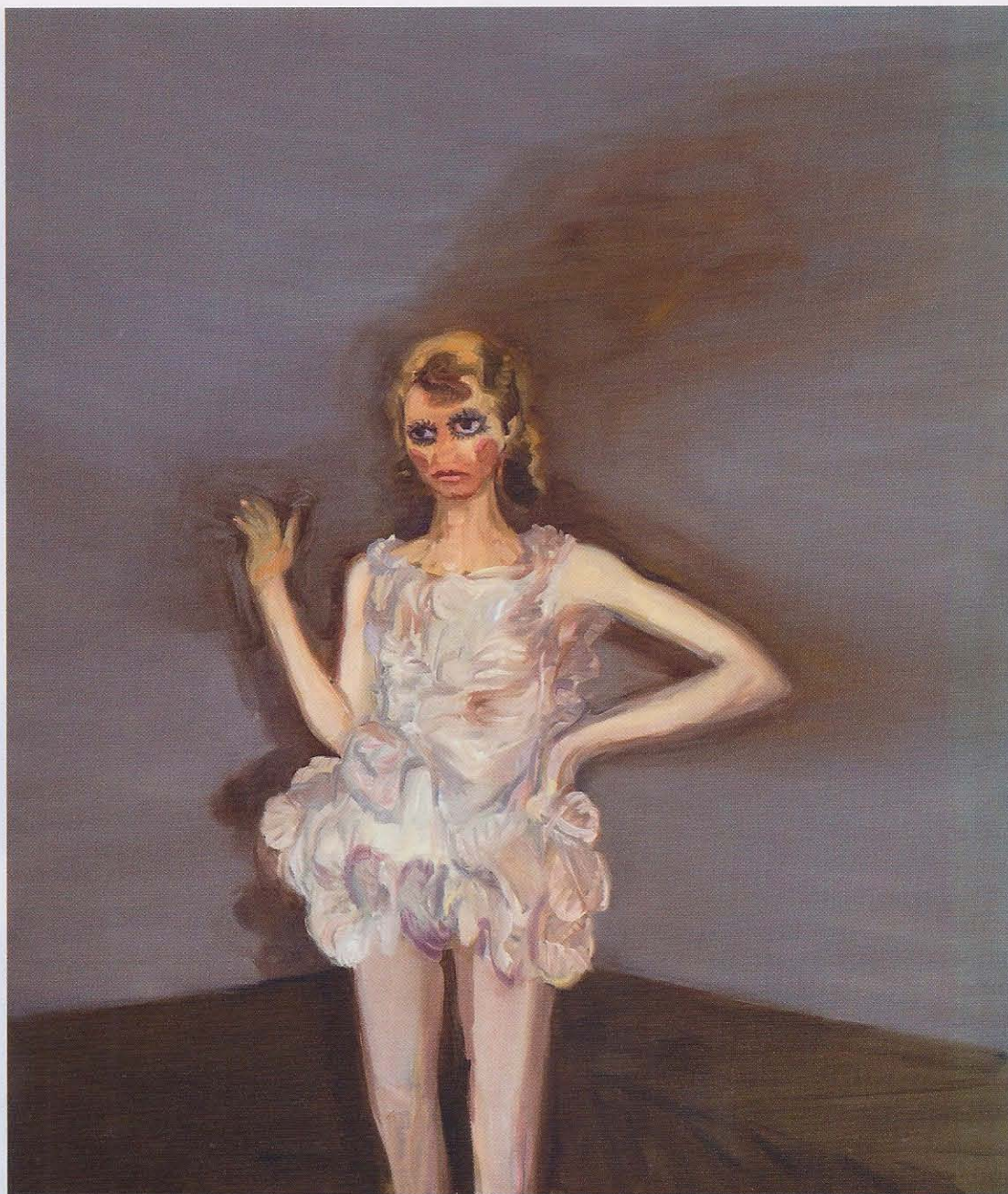
that self is clearly lost, which it often is in Werner's work. In many of those eyes you can sense the pleading, desperate words of John Hurt in David Lynch's extraordinary *Elephant Man*: "I am not an animal...I am a human being!"

### ON SOMETHING

What exactly is a monster? If we take it as part human, part animal, or sort of human but missing a soul, then we are not so far away from many of Janet Werner's subjects. The more distorted of the artist's portraits take delight in, not so much, deconstructing the body as downright mangling it. Messing with the body is hardly new; we have been living with the concept for over 100 years. But what separates Janet Werner's paintings from that of Picasso or deKooning or even Cecily Brown is that they still feel, somewhat awkwardly, like portraits. And like all the best monsters they retain just enough humanity, just enough credibility as corporeal beings, to implicate us in all the horror. Frankenstein, after all, was a mess made up of what were once, one assumes, beautiful parts, and a werewolf is, tragically, just a couple of rogue chromosomes away from being a sleek and attractive canine. So too are many of Werner's most compelling paintings. Essentially pieced together bits of what were once images of women, mercilessly squeezed through the objectifying lens of fashion and glued back together with what at times appears little more than the sheer force of paint, these things exist in a distinct realm,







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somewhere between us and not us. Or better, they are what were the bits and pieces of all of us, reanimated but somehow terribly wrong. But what makes paintings such as *DeMille*, 2010, and *Dreamer*, 2012, so provocative and visually demanding is not so much the image as the stitching together itself. Here, paint is the messy glue that binds it all together; it is both the skin and the guts of these images. It is paint that turns what is essentially an assemblage of meaningless parts into a viable, if at times horrific, whole. And while it forcefully asserts the presence of Werner the artist into the mix, it also oddly allows the figures a certain degree of autonomy from their master. After all, the ladies that inhabit these works are neither expressionist extensions of the artist's psyche nor the remnants of a cut and paste culture; they are a Mary Shelley mashup of the two. Barely viable, they look somewhere between a Photoshop experiment gone terribly wrong and a totem of a previous age. They are in essence, portraits of something.

### ON NOTHING

It is pretty hard—no, impossible—to make paintings about nothing. Even a painting about nothing is a painting about nothing, which is, I guess, at the end of the day, better than nothing. The only way to get anywhere close to nothing is to disassemble someone or something, to work backward from subject to object







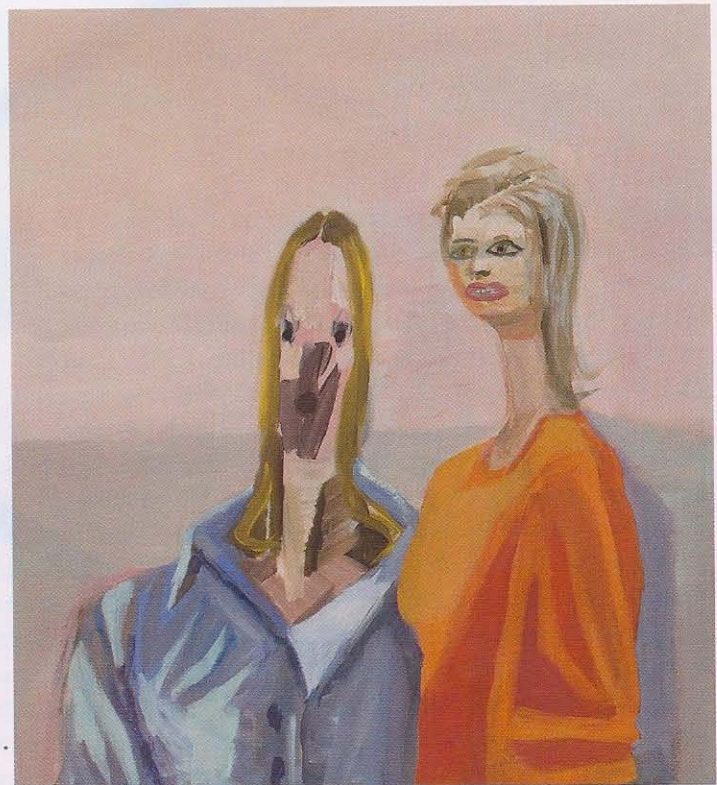


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1. *Twins*, 2012, 220.9 x 167.6 cm.  
 Courtesy Parisian Laundry, Montreal.  
 All photography pages 52–53: Guy  
 Chénouet.

2. *Back*, 2011, 50.8 x 40.6 cm.  
 Private collection.

3. *Sisters*, 2012, 55.8 x 50.8 cm.  
 Collection of the artist.



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with a big soul-sucking vacuum cleaner that strips away everything but the shell. And of course, even a shell is something, when it comes to portraits.

The quality of vacancy or absence is one that permeates much of today's rendering of the figure. The stupefied gaze and empty head is one of those tried and true signifiers of now, that's why we love zombies. And yes, there are moments in some of Janet Werner's paintings where the stupefied zombie look rears its ugly head, literally. But let's be clear, zombies are still something. To get from a zombie to something approximating nothing requires a bit more work; it requires a more radical collapsing-in of the image, and with it the rupturing of the portrait's tenuous relationship with that important someone or something. In Janet Werner's work this often involves an act of severe compression: a squeezing down or shrinking, a rendering of the imaged body. Implosion comes to Werner's figures the same way it did for Fred Flintstone when he'd get embarrassed and shrink down to almost nothing and would visually disappear. There are multiple instances in Werner's new painting where the head is barely there at all, as in *Folding Woman*, 2009; at other times, in works such as *Heap of Flowers*, 2010, the heads are little more than pinheads atop massive displays of flowers and gowns. So when the head disappears—or at least gives the impression it is disappearing—so too goes any lingering suggestion of a self occupying those bodies. This deliberate process of obscuring the face to objectify the body is, of course, a preferred strategy of pornographers. In such images, the body becomes essentially an empty vessel, devoid of distinctness or individuality. As human beings they become, if not exactly nothing, then very little of anything.

### PICTURES OF SOMEONE/SOMETHING/NOTHING

As a body of work, the cumulative effect of Janet Werner's paintings on the viewer is one of anxiety. Someone hangs next to something, which is flanked by nothing, only to butt up against someone else. Each new work under- and overscores the other. Moving from painting to painting we are left with little alternative but to measure the subtle slippages of the soul, where the individual slides back and forth between potential and annihilation. It is in this dialogue between Werner's cast of characters—between monsters and smart-suited business women, pinheads and dogfaces—that something important happens: we come face to face (or face to part face) with the fleeting notion of the subject both in art and in our contemporary world. And in Werner's valley of "wrong with the mouth" it is ultimately the artist's visual distortions and painterly accretions that make these portraits resonate as art. ■

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