

ILYA LIPKIN

GRADUALLY THEN SUDDENLY

03.07 – 07.08.2021

The eight images in this exhibition depict various highly aestheticized stages of a workout. Captured with analogue materials and printed on high-gloss paper, the photos follow an androgynous female figure exercising. Obscured partially by out-of-focus gym equipment in the foreground, as if hidden, the viewer is privileged to spy on the subject from a multitude of perspectives. In one, we hover above her like a fly, in the next, we look up at her colossal frame. The tranquility of the subject and her toplessness are out of place in the environment of the pictures – at least in any contemporary real world equivalent. Her solitude and free rein of the facility, and her dewy, un-contorted face, confess that this scene is a carefully constructed fantasy.

The character within this fantasy is an amalgam of male and female beauty standards, the convergence of an idealised, Greco-Roman body with the contemporary dissolution of sex identification. And yet, these new works reference and, arguably, reenact the trope of the male photographer “peering into” the unknowing female subject’s sanctuary. This haven is typically a projected and inaccurate sexual fantasy of female solitude, centered around the gratification of he who imagines it. Ilya Lipkin maintains the voyeurism and artifice of a male vision played back to him by the opposite sex, though the dominant ‘male’ presence in the artist’s simulation is now in question. There is nothing in the character’s behavior which indicates that a male gaze is desired or welcome. The woman in the fantasy towers over the viewer.

The subject admires herself in the mirror, sculpts her own body. There is no indication of a recipient for this erotic(ized) performance. The sexual dimension of these images isn’t homo or hetero, but auto-sexual. The mirrored surface of the photographic paper echoes the gym’s mirror present in several of the images. A nod to both the feedback loop of narcissistic self observation dominating contemporary culture as well as the art historical trope of depicting female vanity. Simultaneously, this gloss hermetically seals our subject, separating her once and for all from the viewer, and designating her as either the recipient or the avatar for the onlookers fantasy. Aspiration and attraction are neighbors, and speak the same language of desire and curiosity. Imagining an alternative physical and social reality, i.e. to inhabit another body, either through penetration or becoming, doesn’t necessitate dysphoria. Ilya Lipkin’s constructed autoerotic fantasy removes intercourse completely, so that to invite oneself into the scene would be to inhabit the other role. The artist invites us to imagine ourselves crossing the spectrum.

- Esme Thompson Turcotte