

Olivia Mole: *A Bear Shits in the Woods*

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*I don't believe in reincarnation because I refuse to come back as a bug or as a rabbit!*¹

Is the Pope Catholic? Does the sun rise in the east? Does a one-legged duck swim in a circle? Do you get wet in the rain? Yes, according to Olivia Mole—*A Bear Shits in the Woods*. Or, well maybe. For her first solo exhibition at Gattopardo, the London-born, Los Angeles-based artist offers up the latest incarnation of an ongoing project of the same name. At various moments in the past two years, *ABSITW* has manifested as drawings, installations, performances, and sculptural objects, and here, it coalesces as a video work for the first time.

Across her various media, Mole employs a cast of recurring characters, often derived from familiar totems and tropes in pop and consumer culture. They are protean by nature, always able to fit a wide range of formats and adapt to the size of their container. Most recently, members of her repertoire have frolicked across digital billboards on Hollywood Boulevard,² made hand-drawn mischief in the margins of a museum exhibition catalog,³ and—as plushy, stuffed sculptures that approximate bloated humanoids—reclined in camping chairs at a Santa Barbara garage-gallery.⁴

In *A Bear Shits in the Woods*, three of Mole's characters cavort in live action across the same number of video channels, looped and projected onto two gallery walls and a large, black, bulging, inflatable screen. The project's title, a dead-end rhetorical question turned into a declarative, turns on our idea of the obvious, and the circular logic of common sense. Indeed, *ABSITW* starts with a routine setup and familiar cast of characters; the ostensible setting is a cabin in the woods, one of horror's and lore's favorite home bases, often staged as a hermetic refuge from a dark and foreboding forest. As for her three players, these are by no means their breakout roles. "Bear" is modeled after Charmin Bear, the toilet-paper company mascot, native to every home-goods aisle of every grocery store in America; Skeletor, or "Skelly," has had a long, storied career as He-Man's main villain in the Masters of the Universe comic franchise; "Tree" is, well, a human's costume of a tree—an idea of a very ubiquitous idea, boiled down to its most obvious signifiers.

¹Jodi Long, in the music video for New Order's "Bizarre Love Triangle," dir. Robert Longo, 1986.

²Olivia Mole, *Hollywood Lowlifes*, 2022. In conjunction with *Lifes*, the Hammer Museum, 2022.

³Volume accompanying *Lifes*, the Hammer Museum, 2022. Ed. Aram Moshayedi. Hammer Museum/Delmonico Books.

⁴Olivia Mole with Ian Byers-Gamber, *Cuddle Puddle*, Riviera Parking, 2021.

If Mole's raw material is the hardened clay of clichés, *A Bear Shits in the Woods* breaks it apart, makes it pliable, and sculpts it into a multitude of things heretofore unseen. The video's "cabin" setting—staged in a corner of Mole's studio—does not resemble any type of rustic dwelling. In the room is a beige, blow-up, (casting?) couch, and a few scattered decorations on stark white walls. Bear is a roar from his cheery, branded original; his fur is scraggy and polyester, and humanoid hands and feet poke out. Skelly's six-pack has been painted on, as has his face. Tree's costume is even more elemental and shoe-string, with a large brown sheath for a trunk capped by a few fake branches bearing autumnal leaves. Each is inhabited by a human performer, though we never see a face or a lick of bare skin. It's as if there are no "insides" to their outsides—only artifice all the way down.

Throughout the video's half-hour duration, Bear, Skeletor, and Tree mingle as separate, stable forms, conversing and dancing with each other in their Sartrean enclosure. But they also slip into states of entropy, the edges between them often blurring. In a slow-motion strip-tease set to the instrumental track of New Order's 1986 hit *Bizarre Love Triangle*—itself warped and distended almost beyond recognition—three Trees disrobe to reveal three Bears within; the Bears then shed their fur and out spring Skeletors. In another scene, three Bears overturn the inflatable couch and writhe around on the floor, Skeletor suits poking through the fur. Skeletor draws genitalia on Bear's face with Sharpie; Tree stands in a corner. The three take turns playing the drums.

A Bear Shits in the Woods belongs to a genus of video art that preys primarily on television, subsisting on a diet of reality TV, commercials, cartoons, music videos. Akin to the work of Ryan Trecartin, Alex Bag, Paul McCarthy, and Charles Atlas, among others, Mole's work digests these materials and craps out something just as schizoid, a construct of constructs. All performances within these formats understand their dependence on the camera, a relation that Atlas dubbed "media dance."⁵ There is no ontology beyond the lens, no authenticity to trove, no face behind Skeletor's mask. Perhaps that is the "woods" outside Mole's studio-cum-cabin, a shadowy realm never seen, never pictured, a void of human meaning.

-Juliana Halpert

⁵ "Charles Atlas," n.d. The Museum of Modern Art.