Rūtė Merk
Promises

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How are new technologies changing bodies, their representation and the very concept of corporeality? What are the capabilities of the old medium of painting to reflect both the desires of our time and the promises of technology? Employing the classical genres of portrait and still life, in her paintings Rūtė Merk captures the conditions of the contemporary world, characterised bythe shifting boundaries between the material and the virtual, the natural and the artificial, and the concrete and the abstract.

Although Merk's portraits flirt with the history of painting, they are undoubtedly a testament to the era of tracksuit bottoms and business casual suits rather than vestments and regalia. Representative of today's pop culture, fashion and the specific habits of the millennials, they stem from the artist's impressions, fragmented memories, and a purposeful archaeology of digital culture. Seamless at first glance, these portraits are made up of a multitude of fragments of different bodies accumulated in the artist's personal archive of digital images. Ariya's face is borrowed from the character in the popular TV series Game of Thrones, while the rest of the body is anonymous; Jomantė is constructed from various image sources in an attempt to imagine the typical employee of a successful art gallery, andends up being named after the artist's best friend in school. Meanwhile, Yssa is a loosely interpreted portrait of a Belarusian DJ based in Berlin. Hovering in abstract backgrounds, these figures are characterised by weightlessness. They attest to the artist's effort to 'embody disembodiment', the effect suggestive of the constantly moving boundaries of the subject when faced with a perpetually mediated reality.

Several centuries ago, still life painters composed images of hunting trophies, ripe fruit and flower bouquets, as they sought to convey images of mortality,the cycle of life, and the wealth of the middle-class. In Merk's still lifes, we find consumer products that have become attributes of an aestheticized modern lifestyle and economic prosperity. The latte motif, enlarged to the extent it approaches abstraction, aspires to serve as an allegory of global economic networks and the anxious culture of productivity. The artist's paintings blur the distinction between the natural and the synthetic. Imagery such as blue orchids that do not exist in nature, or perfectly identical artificially bred fruit signify engineered interventions into the most intimate spheres of nature.

Two similarly composed portraits of Aki Ross, one of the first computer-generated film protagonists, demonstrate the development of the artist's style. In Spirits Within (2018), unlike the expressive, gestural Greta (2015), the colours, visual effects, figure modelling, and composition are reminiscent of images generated by digital image editing software intended for on-screen viewing, such as in video games and 3D animation. The dissolving, blurry, out-of-focus, strangely uncanny backgrounds also appear as if intended for the eyes of a machine rather than a human being.

The exhibition invites us to think not only about what we see but also how we see under the light of on-screen suns.

Rūtė Merk (b. 1991) is a Lithuanian painter based in Berlin. She graduated in painting from the Vilnius Academy of Arts and Munich Academy of Fine Arts. She was the recipient of the DAAD prize in 2023, and won the Audience Choice Award at the JCDecaux Young Painter Prize. Her work has been shown in solo and group exhibitions in New York, Shanghai, Berlin, Munich, Kyiv, Vilnius and elsewhere. Her works are included in the collections of MO Museum, Vilnius; M Woods, Beijing; ICA Miami, Miami; Musée d'art moderne et contemporain, Geneva; Sifang Art Museum, Nanjing; X Museum, Beijing.

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