

LOUCHE OPS

Jessie Darnell

Spectator

5 April - 17 May

Louche Ops is proud to present Jessie Darnell's exhibit *Spectator*.

The source images for Darnell's recent paintings come from the paid personal ads in pre-internet dating magazines intended to facilitate casual sexual encounters between strangers. The use of photography in these ads which are hand annotated, analog selfies that are cheaply reprinted, conveys suggestion over resolution. One can imagine that what was exposed and what was redacted, had as much to do with the kinks of amateur photography as it did with an editorial expression of the photographer's desires.

Time is an essential material to these images. Besides dropping the film off at a photo lab and having to go back and forth to one's p/o box to look for replies, an ensuing correspondence might take place over weeks or months, or end abruptly without explanation, or worse, become menacing. The ultimate part of the waiting game would commence at some interstate motel, strangers anticipating one another with only a minimal set of clues regarding who to expect. One can imagine that the thrill wouldn't come simply from pursuing these brief ecstatic occasions, but from a reckless surrender to the great mortal risk within the arrangement.

Darnell was born into a time when the immediacy of digital interface was an inherent form of communication with either friends or strangers. One could say that the internet, the smartphone and proliferation of social networks and dating apps did nothing but accelerate the intervals of lag time between the signals. This might be technically accurate, but the elimination of this experience of time is no minor detail. It's an overhaul, a behavioral reconditioning through an erasure of these margins where the subtext of fantasies had space to accrue. This curious relation to time both experienced and lost, the fantasy of a past that cites its own negations and yearns for its opposite, psychologically and historically, reappears in various ways through the works in this show.

The images Darnell selects to work from show women photographing themselves within their apartments, bedrooms, dressed in their own lingerie, their possessions staged, communicating aspects of their personality or sexual identities. The titles of the paintings sound like they could be identification codes for prisoners; IDAHO A-7420C, WASHINGTON H203/560. What is both ironic and tender in these anonymous, sexually explicit photos is embedded in the exchange of what is exposed and what is withheld. In some images, the availability of the sexual body is laid

starkly bare, the figure almost reducing themselves to a shadowy frame for the presentation of their genitals, breasts or butts; what Warhol somewhat childishly called *sex parts*. Many of the photographers figure themselves with their backs turned to the camera. Almost always, the subject's face is redacted, covered, painted or scratched out ostensibly preserving the anonymity of these women. It's a pragmatic defacement but also one that's difficult not to read as being indebted to a kind of primal violence or shame. Even in many paleolithic cave paintings, the faces of human hunters were rendered as the heads of other animals, leading to generations of anthropological speculation as to whether or not picturing a recognizably human face may have been taboo for some of our ancestors. It's impossible to know or to psychologize whose gaze these pictures are taken for or aimed towards and attempting to guess feels condescending and unrewarding. It reads more as a panoramic, even schizophrenic gaze, and this uncertainty is the closest thing to a punctum which opens them up for the painter as an active subject. It feels like there is a disquieting doubling, in the artist's own relation to time and medium, as it relates to her subjects.

These situations are painted in a format not so dissimilar from traditions in which men have painted women, if not as much in recent decades, for a few hundred years prior. In Darnell's paintings the resemblances often appear to be French. While the scenarios and subject matter might conjure Sade's *Philosophy of the Bedroom* or Sickert's francophile portraits of women on beds, the staged isolation of the figures seem to refer to something slightly more formalized, such as Degas' bathers, or the various paintings of women in rooms by the Nabis, Vuillard in particular, with his emphasis on domestic interior spaces that appear to shrink and close in upon their subjects, conflating them into the various patterns of middle class interior decor. Of course, the position of the gaze in relation to the subject is repositioned here and Darnell, while inhabiting the aesthetic communiqué of a tradition where men picture women, could be seen as being closer to the women who had photographed themselves for these guides for erotic meeting. But this, too, would be a vulgarly convenient simplification. She is not these women in her paintings anymore than Pierre Bonnard is his wife in the bathtub. Identification as subject and projection of subject are not being offered for a simple unbraiding. If the licks of the brush look French, her use of painting as an identification machine might owe more to the rambunctious permissions of Karen Kilimnik.

The anxiety that accompanies photography as a technology, that diminishes one's personhood through an exposure of the body as an object, is as old as the medium. To be fair, all visual representation and displaced verisimilitudes, have in most societies, at one time or another, been met with superstition and repressive responses, from censorship to destruction, whether during the Reformation or the current politically motivated evaluations and flaggings of images on Meta.

Darnell's paintings put forward an anxious, occasionally brutal, occasionally elegant, shorthand, not only for a confusion between representation and objectification, but more importantly, for the unjustifiable, unreasonable and persistent impulse to confuse these things. Or at least, they seem unwilling to pretend that these things can be so easily separated simply because many would prefer to think that this could be so.

Intentions and gestures are often taken at face value today even when the machines that produce the daily trough of imagery are popularly understood to be untrustworthy, to a degree of gross comedic absurdity. The daily feed is a zoetrope of our species' perversions, state sponsored snuff, empowered gray faces espousing hate speech, vivisection and acutely unsensual fornication; pornographically intoxicated while, oddly, sexually repressed. It's as if the vapors of psychoanalysis or any other form of suggestive or expansive inquiry have attained a level of stigma previously reserved for supernatural forces, seances and black masses, as an implicating and possibly outing mechanism that might expose one's more specific, inevitable interests in the darker powers of sexuality. The sickness may be ours as a whole or (if you're a real freak) theirs as a whole, but most everyone seems to be frightened to picture themselves, by themselves, in a place where anyone else might see them being, or going, or coming. There has always been a kind of deathliness in picturing people, whether that's in the picturing of others or oneself.

A small painting by Manet from 1880 *le Suicidé* portrays a deceased man spread out on a bed, with a gunshot in his chest and a pistol dangling from his hand, half of his face exposed. Isn't suicide the ultimate selfie? There isn't much to indicate narrative instruction, but one senses the half cropped portrait on the wall behind the corpse might complete the figure.

- James Krone