

How far can one ‘body of work’ be stretched? How much variation can you mix into a theme and have it still hold? This latest batch of paintings, objects, and etcetera by Whitney Claflin has me wondering about the limits of cohesion, and then on top of that, about why I (and maybe most of us) have this fussy impulse to seek out cohesion in the first place. Because here, Whitney has largely refuted the idea that things should gel. Instead, each work establishes its own orbit. It’s something like all the units in a big, old apartment building: they’re structured by the same foundations, but each has its own distinct vibe. Or to hew closer to the exhibition’s title, more Halloweens means more costumes: a Monster Mash collides far-flung mythologies and arrives at its own new composite. Dracula is not The Mummy, and yet they’re still of a piece at their party.

The din of neighborhood plurality scores the classic bohemian vision of city street life, and the soft juxtapositions from block to block – the possibility of surprise – is part of what’s lost in the SweetGreenization of a city like New York. In Whitney’s show, there’s a familiar yearning for the time of this lost messy Otherwise, and a love for its traces that remain with us today. It crops up in knowingly Boho-kitsch signifiers such as Whitney’s repurposed empty wine bottles, plastic bags, cheap lighting solutions, and her canvases themselves, which are sometimes recycled from past attempts at painting, whether her own or others’. They suggest some modest riposte to the demand for newness, and an ambivalence to primary markets in an age built on waste.

But the ghost of past Otherwises is all the more pronounced in Whitney’s depictions of three iconic, subcultural male music stars: a painting of a young Morrissey, a projection of the eternally young Kurt Cobain, and a found streetlamp poster for the the still-young rapper Fetty Luciano. The jury is out on whether we can be nostalgic for Summer 2018 yet, but the legacy of Def Jam, and for guerrilla postering campaigns themselves, now criminalized in New York, seem to safely make the cut.

The inclusion of Fetty underscores just how in the past these effigies of Moz and Cobain really are at this point, since a whole generation of rappers even younger than him have fully digested alternative rock’s cosmology and infused emo and punk aesthetics into hip-hop, catapulting their composite of these formerly subcultural genres into the mainstream. Whitney and I share a love of Lil Peep, one lost rapper of this “SoundCloud” wave, who was known for his earnest, thoughtful sampling of legacy acts like Brand New, The Microphones, and Mineral, refracting them with trap percussion and his snarling, Xan’d-out vocals. Often the sampled bands were perplexed or offended by their appropriation, signaling an intergenerational feud over authorship. Soft-spoken, brooding, and white, Peep was shorthanded by press as his generation’s Cobain, a fact that he acknowledged by titling a track on his mixtape Hellboy after the Nirvana frontman. But then the very next track is

titled “Gucci Mane,” and it voices its namesake’s influence even more lovingly. Somehow the graft holds. Peep’s many tattoos added up with a similar ethos of wide-ranging, scattershot moodboarding; Whitney’s canvases share some of this spirit, particularly in their light, sporadic inscriptions of brushwork and their sudden interjections of collage, emulating the cultivated chaos of the Feed.

Whitney is interested in figures like Cobain as the subcultural phenomena they originally were *and* as the upcycled, memefied icons-without- borders that they have become in our outsideless era. Take her painting of the Dickies logo: a grubby carbon transfer of a legacy workwear brand associated with ’90’s slackers, yet it’s polished with so much enamel that it takes on a strange, glossy regality, not unlike the brand’s actual collabs with Opening Ceremony and Supreme, or Whitney’s repurposing of an empty Kahlua shooter as a boutique fragrance bottle, or Peep’s amplification of, say, a Modest Mouse track from 1996. Yet all this repurposing is not without cost. Upcycling is the cousin of upzoning, and always looming in Whitney’s art is the specter of precarity, with the ever- tightening noose of American cities’ cost of living. One painting in the show depicts a price tag from Academy Records, which used to have a great dollar bin; the painting shows that, as of October 2019, the “Academy Price” can only be two dollars.

Nick Irvin, January 29, 2020

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