

## Subtle Subversions

At a time when technology has the ability to blur the boundaries between truth and fiction, the question of what we are really looking at becomes increasingly profound. What is real anymore? Photographs, once considered infallible evidence, are no longer trusted as the wonders of Photo Shop become commonplace manipulations of the everyday. The uncertainties of our visual world are the subject of Anna Yuschuk's work as she explores how our suspicions of reality affect our sense of personal identity.

Literally blurring the line between painting and photography, Yuschuk's canvases are richly layered backdrops surrounding a central image that appears as a blurred black and white photograph. Referencing the live model and the effects of digital manipulation, Yuschuk translates both using the medium of oil, combining ambiguity with the seduction of the painted surface. Calling into question our very methods of communication, the use of paint challenges what we initially think to be a manipulated photographic image. In this sense, her work acts as a new form of photo-realism; painting that looks not like a perfect glossy snapshot, but like the altered, and ambiguous photographic images we are becoming accustomed to.

As the debate needlessly rages over the death of painting and its importance versus photography, Yuschuk quietly subverts the argument by creating paintings that are about the decline of photography, re-establishing painting as a medium of 'truth'. Primarily depicting the female form, Yuschuk uses the body as her medium of investigative reality. Through painting, the female body becomes a vehicle for both the formal concerns of paint surface, as well as an exploration of self identity. "Flesh was the reason oil painting was invented" said De Kooning, but Yuschuk's women are about more than formal engagements with mere physical flesh.

Writing about the work of Kiki Smith, Jessica Bradley states that 'the question of identity, the subject of intensive semiotic and psychoanalytic investigations throughout the 1980's, is now, once again, complexly compounded with that of corporeality.' Yuschuk, much like Smith, is concerned with corporeal uncertainties - the ambivalence inherent in women's bodies that make us both vulnerable and threatening. Yuschuk, however, is more concerned with the subtleties of this ambivalence and identity, using the dominant media of paint and canvas to subvert what we know and expect of the traditional nude.

In *Do I see what you see?* for example, a woman is on her hands and knees, looking back at us between her arms. A vulnerable position, Yuschuk's handling of the body enables this work to transcend the sexual as it becomes linked, again, to how we communicate. Not only is the title both playful and inviting - thus destabilizing the vulnerability - but the uncertainty of the medium (is this a photographic image?) also echoes our uncertainty of the sexualized female body. The question asked becomes unanswerable as her position hovers between the transgressive and the subjective; we are unsure of what we see and what the subject is trying to say.

The title pieces of the exhibition *Waiting Room* take the uncertainty of the subject still further. A transitional body in a frustratingly unknown narrative, the figure is seen in four positions inviting multiple readings. Holding her breasts, on her knees, lying down - we are given few clues as to what this woman may be waiting for, while the tights she wears destabilizes the natural state of the nude, reminding us that there are stages of nakedness that are often more revealing, yet also strangely de-sexualized. Again, the work conflates the sexual and the taboo with the feminine masquerade that exists in all women. Introspective, the woman examines herself, oblivious to the viewer. What concerns her may be medical, may be linked directly to the body, the breasts she holds, but it is not for us to engage.

In their exploration of the boundaries created between women and their own bodies, the space of disconnection between public and private corporeality, these works can be read in parallel to images created by Vanessa Beecroft. In contrast, however, to Beecroft's composed and aloof choreography, where women pose in the regulated manner of a fashion layout, Yuschuk's women look us in the eye, challenge us, kneel and writhe on the floor. If Beecroft's eerily perfect models subvert agency, creating a sense of surrogate integration that is all women (and consequently none), then it is Yuschuk's women who speak of the agency of self, of the private, interior body not revealed to the outside, even when one is completely unclothed.

Following closely in the tradition of Gerhard Richter's Photo Paintings from the 1960's, Yuschuk's technique echoes his play between paint and photo, while reminding us that our relationship to photography has become increasingly complex. Rather than copying photographs, Yuschuk's painting is about the inaccessible nature of identity and the myth of photographic objectivity. Of Richter's work Roald Nasgaard writes:

The painting develops as an object with palpable material characteristics to be seen parallel to other objects in the world; a condensed analogue of reality that, by posing as a photograph, arouses expectations of certainty, and, by being a painting, refuses them again. (*Gerhard Richter: Paintings*, Thames and Hudson, 1988, p.49)

For Yuschuk, as for Richter, there is more to say through the practice of painting, particularly of that which is unsaid and unknown. Refusing the certainties of photography, Yuschuk works within the inherent ambivalence of the painted surface, but without assuming that either this object, or the photograph itself, can speak of any form of condensed reality; rather that such uncertainty is inextricably linked to the ambivalence of her subjects, and of the subjects to themselves – a woman's relationship to her own body, and our relationship to viewing such bodies.

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