

Jen DeNike *If She Hollers*
Anat Ebgi, Los Angeles 14 November – 19 December

‘The Pimp’ lures you in. ‘The Boxer’, blindfolded, kisses you with his fist. ‘The Cat’ mostly just chills in your pool. The trio of eponymous videos (all works 2015) by American artist Jen DeNike stand back-to-back on adorned metal stands, coming together like a strange tree and surrounded by photographs, mostly drawn from onscreen, all of it waxing atmospheric about gender and place in mysterious stories.

The gowned Pimp luxuriates in a tricked-out garage, pinked, catwalked and draped with a silver curtain, vaping, with lidded eyes, a Wonderland caterpillar’s smoke trailing while a distorted sax purrs a few midnight notes. In a montage of scenes, hustlers contort and gyrate on the chequered catwalk that tongues out of the garage and into the night. Rubbing lustily against the wall, the dancers resist clear binaries, their amorphous appearances ranging from femmy ladies to a butch sailor, an opiated drag show happening in a suburban garage posed as luxury Amsterdam window brothel.

The Boxer opens with a young bare-chested fellow getting blindfolded and set into a ring with a half-dozen or so opponents, also all blindfolded. They search and find with their gloved fists some other boxer or boxers to scrum. The pacing flows like an underwater ballet, punctured with bursts of fast, punchy sweat storms. As it ends, one boxer plants into the mat, another pants, still standing but without any other outward indications of victory.

The last movie of the series, *The Cat*, makes for the weirdest. A grown man clad in a Cheshire Cat onesie languid as he prances, plays and paddles in the rippling sun-dappled cyan of pool after pool in what appear to be Southern California backyards, each locale cut with a numbered film leader. It concludes at the last pool (backdropped with a killer view of Los Angeles) when our protagonist meets another swimmer. This new character is clad only in a yellow bathing suit and the

painted grin of the Cheshire on his lips. Is what follows lusty wrestling or a fight? Hard to tell, but the yellow-suited doppelganger prevails as he shoulders his opponent/partner off-camera.

The artist and director of these movies titled her exhibition *If She Hollers*, drawing from Chester Himes’s hardboiled Los Angeles novel of race, labour and sexual violence from 1945, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*. In the book, a black labourer struggles with racism and rage in the Port of LA. It might be notable here that almost all the players in DeNike’s dramas are people of colour and primarily black. The race politics of Himes mingles with numerous Lewis Carroll references and gender-bending played out in mostly stony long shots and half speeds. DeNike’s blended trilogy holds this disparate melange together stylistically with its fluid weirdness, quietly absurd bends and glimpses of outright cinematographic beauty.

Andrew Berardini



If She Hollers, 2015 (installation view). Photo: Michael Underwood.
Courtesy the artist and Anat Ebgi, Los Angeles