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ARTFORUM

Janet Werner: Parisian Laundry

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Janet Werner, *Sorcerer*, 2016, oil on canvas, 75 x 60".

Janet Werner is known for her fun house of female figures. Bending source material from fashion magazines and other forms of popular culture to her imagination, Werner typically distorts both classical and corporate ideals of beauty. Yet what prevents even her quirkiest compositions from becoming mere kitsch is the Canadian painter's virtuosic technique. Having mastered the medium, Werner seems to have tasked herself with a new imperative: to avoid making her work too gorgeous. This can be difficult when your primary subjects are pretty girls.

The works on view in "Sticky Pictures" were a bold departure from Werner's usual practice. In a suite of paintings that either marginalized or completely elided the figure, the artist dared the viewer to contemplate empty spaces from which bodies have been deliberately evacuated, suggesting that the figure may be nothing more than an ontological problem to hang a dress on.

However, as the title of the show insisted, pictures are sticky. They adhere to the history of painting even as the painter tries to push them out of the frame. In one particularly fearless canvas, a parted theatrical curtain rendered in viscous layers of oil beckoned the viewer to enter a void. Its title, *Someone, something, no one*, 2017, describes the stages of disappearance enacted by the show. Elsewhere, Werner invited us behind the scenes to her studio, where spectral magazine muses compete with the occasional houseplant for our attention. While many

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of Werner's recent paintings are still lifes, they borrow from both Minimalism and abstraction to question art's traditional affects: What happens to figurative painting when you vacate the Someone and the Something? How might the most banal of objects—such as the bubble-gum pink surface of a plywood table in *Float (pink trace)*, 2016—work like a Mark Rothko to hold the viewer in a trance?

Once we give up our expectation that Someone might pass through the curtain and do Something, we can more deeply appreciate the perverse pleasures of Werner's deconstructed forms. In *Sorcerer*, 2016, a bra that is also inexplicably a pair of breasts lies discarded on a table next to a golden mirror reflecting nothing and a blooming cactus that looks perfect enough to be plastic. What is real here and what is a falsie? With Werner's typical sirens minimized in (or left completely out of) the frame, the viewer is given an opportunity to reckon with the sorcery of the artist's brush. These are not pictures of women, but pictures of pictures of women who are quietly upstaged by elegant fields of gray and blue.

Many of the strongest paintings in the show abjured the crutch of the body completely. *Untitled (gallery)*, 2017, was one exception, as the only painting of a body that was not conspicuously two-dimensional. Here a woman stands with her arms folded, allowing viewers to peruse the image gallery that spangles her skirt. Compare this with Peter Doig's 2004 painting *Metropolitain (House of Pictures)*, in which a man in a top hat—himself a quotation from Honoré Daumier's nineteenth-century painting *The Print Collector*—peruses a wall of pictures. Whereas both figures are dizzying postmodern *mise en abymes*, only she is both the picture and the gallery in which she hangs. *Woman* contains multitudes.

In another exception, *Hover (the distance between here and there)*, 2017, the most self-reflexive painting in the show, an exquisitely poised hand extends from an impossibly sinuous arm over a table scattered with images in order to snatch one from the jumble of everyday detritus. Although Werner proves that she can transform any *objet trouvé* into a captivating image, a chasm between what is and what might be nonetheless persists. In one fell swoop, Werner extends the long, limber arm of desire and bridges the gap.