

## Katja Seib

SADIE COLES HQ | DAVIES STREET

A series of stylishly sinister oppositions set the scene for this exhibition by German painter Katja Seib, in which real and imagined portraits merged with a mannered symbolism. The self-conscious, carefully rendered large-scale works downstairs contrasted with more informal, and generally much smaller, paintings upstairs. Within the context of this pristine blue-chip gallery space, Seib's works' deceptive ambiguity existed as a glitteringly corporate criticality that posed paradoxical questions around painting's relation to time. The exhibition's title, "dear diary," hinted at the revelation of intimate narratives, and the show's characters enacted absurd theatrical scenarios that manifested shifting cultural attitudes toward sexuality and subjectivity.

*Eve's curse* and *Hell here* (all works cited, 2018) performed this role well. The former depicts a woman lying on a bed in front of a picture showing a green snake winding around a tree, while the latter presents an apple bearing a small drawing of a contemplative girl's face and the word NARC; it hung from the ceiling in front of a corner flanked by two small canvases, one containing the word HELL, the other HERE. Eve's loss of innocence and her resulting self-consciousness shifted to a complex mix of transnational politics and feminism with the painting *You made your bed, now sleep in it*, in which another indolent woman lies in bed in her underwear; the garment is patterned with stars reminiscent of those on the US flag, perhaps reflecting the fact that Seib now lives in Los Angeles. *Girl with teapot* also featured a patterned textile, but a real one this time, found in Los Angeles's fabric district, according to the press release. Using the cloth as her ground, Seib has painted a figure caught in the glow of her cell phone. The design fades in and out, in some places standing in for a tablecloth, in others for wallpaper, to evoke a relaxed domesticity updated for the momentum of the technological revolution.

That sped-up pace continued upstairs, with works that were each made in a single day. These portrayed surreal *dramatis personae*. In their formal inconsistency, these works could have been read—if you put your faith in the philosopher Jacques Rancière's writing on time and politics—as a critique of the daily mechanical temporal regime of "one thing after another." Although Seib made these paintings of semi-imagined events one after the other, her complex pace of execution skewed automated time. The works' painted surfaces facilitated both slow and fast readings, actions that served to push Rancière's preference for a "vertical" partition of time rather than its standard horizontal progression of repetition.

Either way, the small pictures were fresher and more recalcitrant than their large-scale cousins, and they extended themes of temporality from medieval panel painting and Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2)*, 1912, to those currently being proposed by contemporary

painters as diverse as Jana Euler, Allison Katz, Laura Owens, and even Julian Schnabel, who utilize the grid or the serialized format of calendars and clocks to represent multiple subjective time frames. Seib would also seem to be the latest recruit to an international coterie of artists—including Sarah Buckner, Behrag Karimi, and Florian Krewer—who share a maverick informality in their approach to imagemaking. This network links Düsseldorf (via Peter Doig, who taught at the Kunstakademie) and London (through Alastair Mackinven, who lectures at the Slade School of Fine Art), and the US West Coast.

Seib's final work, a polyptych of five panels titled *Hello there*, threw an antisocial suspect device into this mix. Containing the oft-misinterpreted quote from Sartre's *No Exit*, "Hell is other people," it detourns the Mexican art publication *Terremoto's* October 2017 "Art Los Angeles Reader" with pink text painted directly onto its front page; the work can be read as a critique of the sometimes inbred habits of the international critical networks the artist is now part of. Seib seems to suggest on multiple levels that if we're not careful, we'll stay fixed in the same unchanging community, making it a living hell. No matter—the dual nature of her dreamlike psychological figuration has an upside: It invites readings that go beyond the vanities of the painted medium into a wider symbolic political framework.

— Andrew Hunt