

Flash Art

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Helen Marten

THE AGE OF LOVE

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Kaspar Müller / Promising Young Woman
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Xinyi Cheng, *The Horse Wearing a Red Ear Bonnet and Eye Blinders*, 2020. Oil on canvas. 160 × 145 cm. Photography by Aurélien Mole. Courtesy of the artist and Balice Hertling, Paris.

2 Hamishi Farah “Antagoni” Château Shatto, Los Angeles by Franklin Melendez

Hamishi Farah's first solo exhibition at Château Shatto, “Antagoni,” cleverly hijacks the banal mores of portraiture to delightfully nihilistic ends. Six of the works on view depict closely cropped figures whose faces are paradoxically both obscured and made all the more visible by various types of coverings or markings. These include *Joey* (all works 2020), a mugshot-esque snap of a white, blue-eyed adolescent with marker scribbled over his face. This is rendered in Mr. Farah's signature fluttery brushwork – a type of mock, post-impressionistic looseness that insists on the surface of the painting rather than indulging in illusionistic depth; it also cuts through any preciousness, giving the compositions a slightly informal air. That much is evident in *Argyria Blue* (*The Ghost of Paul Karason*), a seemingly absurdist splice of Santa Claus and Violet Beauregarde. A quick web search, however, identifies the namesake phantom as the real-life Oregon native who suffered from a rare type of silver poisoning that tinted his dermis into Smurfian splendor and launched him into minor Internet fame. He is flanked by *After Vidaperfect*, *Gogograham* and *Marykang*, an uncharacteristically solemn, almost devotional depiction of a veiled icon based on a backstage snap at fashion label Gogo Graham's AW20 runway show. Between these two enigmas protrudes a close-up of a hornet whose

distorted, fisheye lens effect gives the inhuman eyes a slightly quizzical expression as they gaze upon this disparate cast of characters.

Juxtaposed against the paintings is a grouping of more cohesive black-and-white charcoal drawings: self-portraits commissioned from Rachel Dolezal, the controversial figure who achieved her “trans-racial” passing through a series of calculated surface signifiers. These are on display in her allegorical compositions – radical acts of self-fashioning narrativized into concise, pictorial psychodramas such as *Drowning* (all works 2020), which captures her struggle against an unseen undertow just beyond the reach of attendant dolphins; or the more serene *Nkechi*, an idyllic rendering of her facial features titled after the popular Igbo language name meaning “gift of god.” It is worth noting that initially these commissioned works were intended to be shown as “readymades” over which Farah would claim authorship (think *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) pitted against the flimsy fantasy of a “post-racial America”). The pieces were ordered through Dolezal's Instagram art platform but would be signed by Farah, a gesture that invariably led to a dispute between the two parties, with accusations of overreach, unlawful appropriation, and the willful coopting of Dolezal's artistic identity.

If we let that sink in for a minute, the punchline basically writes itself, but it is worth unpacking the chiasmic beauty of the perceived violence of Farah's localized defacement as it comes up against Dolezal's more pervasive and much more corrosive violence in her performance of black face. And the joke doesn't stop there (although at that point it might stop being funny): more than a personal indictment against a single perpetrator, the juxtaposition between these two sets of images and their modes of production highlights the nefarious ways in which the medium of painting – and more specifically portraiture – is dependent on the circulation of so many extractable signs of “authenticity.” In fact, these form the shining core of a currency that can be funneled, not unlike offshore assets, into various nefarious usages. These range from Dolezal's “problematic” conjuring of her inner biracial self, rendered most poignantly in a self-portrait holding a totemic black and white cookie (and topped off with a generic tribal head wrap) all the way to the whims of a gluttonous art market that indiscriminately devours certain modes of painting that, in the process, become stand-ins not just for monetary value but real lived experiences. The belief in this false equivalence bestows these pictures with almost talismanic properties, able to absolve its owner of any potential social sins. In light of this, a soaring auction premium seems like a small price to pay. What Farah makes aptly clear, however, is that, rather than diametrically opposed positions, these are all part and parcel of the same neoliberal endgame – something which, once glimpsed, like say the image of Nancy Pelosi kneeling in Ghanaian kente cloth, cannot be unseen.



- ← Rachel Dolezal, *Black & White Cookie*, 2020. Acrylic on canvas. 38.74 × 30.48 cm. Photography by Ed Mumford. Courtesy of the artist and Château Shatto, Los Angeles.
- Hamishi Farah, *Now Then*, 2020. Detail. Acrylic and volcanic rock on linen. 76.2 × 94 cm. Photography by Ed Mumford. Courtesy of the artist and Château Shatto, Los Angeles.

