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Frieze

With Painterly Precision, Artist Georgia Gardner Gray Reveals Female Fears

An exhibition at Croy Nielsen, Vienna, explores the female gaze on a world which seems murkier than ever



Georgia Gardner Gray's solo show at Croy Nielsen restores in me a certain faith in painting's contemporaneity. The seven figurative works in 'Buddha Bless This Show' are as complex as they are aesthetically pleasing: they play with picture planes, unusual canvas shapes and orientation; they entice with iridescent, saturated colour; they exhibit old-fashioned painterly skill. But, mostly, these paintings live through what they represent: the ennui and anxieties of a young woman at a time when navigating the world as one seems a murkier endeavour than ever.

In the gallery's smallest room, the large oval canvas of *Bad Night's Sleep* (all works 2019) depicts a nubile female figure lying down, eyes closed. Her clothes – rendered in shimmering blues, greens and whites – seem like divine robes; her expression could intimate exhaustion or, equally, fading ecstasy. (Here in Vienna, her flushed, vexed face seems vaguely Klimtian.) Near her head, however, is a pincushion of a voodoo doll, while the right side of the canvas is a splash of pitch black – an abyss or nightmare of sorts.

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Georgia Gardner Gray, *Bad Night's Sleep*, 2019, oil on canvas, 2.10 x 1.34 m. Courtesy: the artist and Croy Nielsen, Vienna; photograph: Joachim Schulz

The three paintings in the gallery's primary space (all on square canvases, oriented diagonally) depict more (self-)critical examinations of situations that might typically be deemed 'female': *Snowflake: Buddha Bless This Property* shows a bikini-clad woman in a chair. She's alone, holding her ears, near a swimming pool; another chair and two dogs appear at odd angles on the deep-red picture plane – the message seems to be that luxury cannot compensate for isolation. With an androgynous, dispassionate female nude in the grass, an escaping bare-bottomed figure and the inquisitive face of a woman mysteriously cut off at the neck, *The Age of Asexual Reproduction* could be a missed hook-up in a park or an allusion to the asexuality that Gardner Gray refers to in the exhibition text: 'In these paintings, humans sweat, unable to keep up with the pace of asexual reproduction. Blank in their toned, consensual poses; their faces are stony, unaroused, shame and resentment building around them.'

Date with the Narcissist, on the opposite wall, is a smaller painting whose varnished swathes of colour appear mostly abstract but, ultimately, aren't: a bent leg and tiny details, like the reflection of a woman's face in a spoon or a set of teeth in a knife, hint at the bad date alluded to in the title. Two

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further paintings convey strong but divergent messages: *Obvious Death* shows a broken skeleton and floating bones in red – the end game of it all? And, hanging in the gallery's office space, *Christmas Market* captures a crowd of cloaked holiday revellers – is their oblivious enjoyment a kind of denial of the angst emanating from rest of the paintings on view?



Georgia Gardner Gray, 'Buddha Bless this Show', 2019, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and Croy Nielsen, Vienna; photograph: Kunst-Dokumentation.com

Not listed as works (nor considered as such, according to the gallery) are three life-size 'guards' dressed in black security clothing and sporting flat male faces. Placed against walls at various points throughout the exhibition, these slightly misshapen mannequins stand sentry over the paintings, the viewers and a wigless female mannequin, placed on the floor on a deep-pile green rug. With what appears to be sweat on her tank top, she looks like she's stretching after a workout.

There's a lot to read into this non-work: 'Guards watch over our many blessings, burning penal calories to protect this blessed culture,' writes Gardner Gray. Beyond painting, the artist's practice has involved performance – she was affiliated with Berlin's now-defunct New Theater – and these ludicrous yet sinister figures transform the exhibition space into a set, perhaps commenting on modern gender roles. (Do women need protection?) At the same time, without a dedicated performance, the guard dolls are distracting. I kept thinking that just one Buddha would suffice, allowing us to better experience what blesses this show – the paintings themselves.

Georgia Gardner Gray, *Christmas Market (detail)*, 2019, oil and varnish on canvas, 1.35 x 2.10 m. Courtesy: the artist and Croy Nielsen, Vienna; photograph: Joachim Schulz