

Nature Morte

Portia Munson's paintings bear witness to an obsession that lies at the heart of representation: the painter's concentrated activity of looking. These meticulously painted, quiet and unsettling small canvases explore the mystery of everyday objects belonging to feminine domestic culture. A woman's blue underwear, rolled from the body, lies recently discarded against a stark white background; a child's teddy, one taped eye nearly hanging, is stuck in a muff of long bear hair; a baby's or doll's head, disquietingly low, emerges as if in birth from a shapeless knitted vessel; a white "ironing assistant" occupies its square like a domestic monolith, soiled with a rust-colored stain. Isolated by a gaze that seems to belong simultaneously to a mad housewife, a social scientist, and a minimalist artist, these objects float just beyond the reach of gravity, in an unidentified space and with a centrality and geometrical simplicity reminiscent of Warhol's Pop Art icons.

In fact, these oil paintings play with their status as reproductions; a nearly precise correspondence in size ties each painting to its subject. (As if to emphasize this relation, some of the same objects appear in Munson's "Pink Project," a mesmerizing collection of all things pink.) The genre of still life has traditionally focused on quotidian culture. Munson recovers the profound strangeness of the painter's impulse to redouble her surroundings; like a surrealist, she recontextualizes everyday life to suggest its hidden meanings. For this viewer, her paintings recall the psychoanalytic realm of the uncanny, a category of objects or experience which evokes fear and estrangement by its very familiarity—and they have a special relationship to feminine sexuality. Holes (often poked), gaps (sometimes filled), breaks and stains, seams near bursting, all bear witness to a sexuality that continually exceeding its borders, animating and staining inanimate objects, like an ill-behaved body that, with questionable taste, must

continually assert its unnerving corporeality. Occupying a sexual terrain that shifts subtly between human, animal, and inanimate, these paintings also confound the aesthetic boundaries between collection and representation, painting and *objet trouvé*.

The "Pink Project" extends this investigation of inanimate sexuality by exploring the paradoxical condition of femininity as both elevated and debased in contemporary commodity culture. Munson's found pink objects, assembled over the course of a decade, connote adornment and the cult of beauty, lowly tasks, and sexual aberrations. Some cruel, unconscious cultural joke must lie behind the tinting of dildos, baby pacifiers, tampon applicators, fly swatters, French ticklers, powder puffs and hair curlers, styrofoam meat trays, princess telephones and vibrators, with the shades of a color associated with both little girls and female genitalia.

Munson's rose-colored glasses once again reveal a world in which everyday objects are tinged with sexual meaning; her collection seems infinitely expandable. It's as if, some 80 years later, Duchamp's urinal had woken from its long sleep, and found itself in the Ladies' Room. And it's difficult to tell if we color these objects, or rather, if their fleshly associations assert a subtle control over our relation to our bodies and sexualities. Consider, for example, the packaging of a popular saccharine product; note that its sickeningly pink paper envelops a carcinogen destined specifically to address anxieties surrounding "excessive" feminine corporeality. Pink will have lost its innocence indefinitely.

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