

Nude Figuration: A Review of ‘State of Undress’ at Victor Armendariz and Cheryl Pope at Monique Meloche

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Installation view, Cheryl Pope, "BASKING NEVER HURT NO ONE," 2019. Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery/Photo: RCH Photography.

For reasons possibly attributable to prudery or gender politics, exhibitions that focus on nude figuration have been scarce this millennium. This summer, however, two such shows are running simultaneously. Don't expect to see the sacred profundity given to the human body by masters of the past and don't expect to see figurative paintings as sensitive to form as non-objective painting needs to be. Instead, it's the treatment of provocative subject matter that makes these shows so entertaining.

Sexual desire, mostly of men for men, prevails in "State of Undress" at Gallery Victor Armendariz. That desire is crude and rough in the expressive monochrome drawings of an artist and musician named Garek. Though self-taught, Garek has nailed the excitement and anarchy of rampant lust. Also appearing to be self-taught, though possibly intending that his photo-based figures appear awkward, Rick Sindt presents the mutual loneliness of sex without romance. By contrast, the many skills of academic painting have been applied by Bruno Surdo to present metaphorical fantasies with elegance and wit. The penetration of St. Sebastian's writhing body with multiple arrows has never appeared more sensual. Similarly, the expertise of commercial photography has been applied by

Doug Birkenheuer to present body parts as if they were rare and expensive items in an upscale retail catalog.

Somewhere between those extremes of technical sophistication are the paintings of Zack Zdrle who dutifully renders handsome young men with their shirts off. Their poses are modest, but there's no apparent explanation for their display other than to ogle their smooth young bodies and compliant expressions. Richard Gibbons is similarly demure in his presentations of bare young male torsos. They almost resemble Russian icons. But again, why have they been put on display? Is the male gaze any less voyeuristic when it is directed at other men?



Installation view, Cheryl Pope, "BASKING NEVER HURT NO ONE," 2019. Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago/Photo: RCH Photography.

More politically charged issues prevail in two shows at Monique Meloche Gallery. In "Show Me Yours," three emerging artists – Brittney Leeanne Williams, Jake Troyli and Bianca Nemelc – play with gender and racial identity in a semiotic, academic and, one hopes, positive way. The visible human body is encyclopedic in its range of possible meanings. In the gallery's other exhibition, Cheryl Pope does something quite different. Her work embodies physical attraction between a black man and a white woman. Their bodies are intertwined, though more like ballet than sex, and apparently their character and personalities don't matter since we can't see any faces. Although the show raises issues of power regarding race and gender, I question whether it actually "challenges the widespread racism that has historically defined Chicago," as the exhibition text claims. But Pope's work does radiate with the joy of being young, free and healthy, with sinuous contour lines and strong patterns. Made of unspun wool needle-punched into a cashmere support, they offer a surface that is so much more intimate and inviting than pigment on canvas.

Thanks to classical Greece, Euro-American civilization has cultivated the observation of the unclothed human body. The artists in these two galleries continue that legacy, but apparently have less interest in rising above politics, humor, fantasy or sexual stimulation. (Chris Miller)

"Cheryl Pope: BASKING NEVER HURT NO ONE," Monique Meloche Gallery, 451 North Paulina, through August 17. "State of Undress," through July 6 at Gallery Victor Armendariz, 300 West Superior.