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Review: *Look at Me Now!* / Monique Meloche Gallery



Hassan Hajjaj. "Miriam," 2010, Metallic lambda print on 3mm white dibond, 53 x 36 ¾ inches
Image courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.

RECOMMENDED

Revising the art historical canon to account for a variety of erasures is a commendable curatorial endeavor, but one is perpetually challenged to find new methods to add value to such well-worn conversations. This summer group exhibition takes on tropes related to race, gender and caste by offering fresh alternatives to the history of Western portraiture. Individually, the works of Rashayla Marie Brown, Hassan Hajjaj, Rashid Johnson, Ebony G. Patterson, Amy Sherald, William Villalongo and Nina Chanel Abney are colorful, multifaceted and visually complex; together, they feel oddly muted and restrained. Pronouncements of individual agitation rise up, but the gathering of disparate voices does not make for lively conversation.

Whether they insert themselves directly into these narratives, or use others as stand-ins, these artists speak to issues of beauty, rebellion and the destabilization of power through portraiture's presumed claim to represent identity. Hassan Hajjaj's "Miriam" (2010) challenges Western ideas of the subservient Arab woman. A woman in a colorful polka dot djellaba and matching veil sits on a motor bike, her feet clad in bone-colored leather

slippers resting on the handle bars. Her eyes are hidden by fashionable sunglasses, yet her posture is relaxed, implying a confidence that belies assumptions about the confines of a woman's life in Marrakesh. Ebony G. Patterson's work draws heavily from the aesthetics of her Jamaican heritage.

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In "...two birds-beyond the bladez" (2014), she creates an elaborately adorned and brightly patterned phantasmagoria using elements of camp and dancehall flamboyance to present a dreamy meditation on death and beauty.

A summer exhibition must do double duty as smart enough for the initiated art consumer but approachable for out-of-town visitors and those stumbling in to catch a break from the heat. This can make these exhibitions of little consequence for a gallery's bottom line, but offers an opportunity: out-of-towners and initiated art consumers might be more forgiving of risky curatorial gestures. "Look at Me Now!" represents a missed opportunity by not offering an incisive counter to an Eurocentric, male-dominated gaze, but its engagement with social histories through re-interpretations of portraiture is an admirable start. (Lee Ann Norman)

Through August 23 at Monique Meloche, 2154 West Division.



Ebony G. Patterson. "...two birds-beyond the bladez," 2014, Mixed media on paper, 90 x 89 inches overall
Image courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.