

María Berrío, Caroline Walker, Flora Yukhnovich, Victoria Miro Gallery II, London, U.K.

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Caroline Walker

← *Wishlist*, 2019.

Photo : © Caroline Walker, courtesy of the artist, Victoria Miro, London/Venice & GRIMM, Amsterdam/New York

María Berrío

† *Oda a la Esperanza (Ode to Hope)*, 2019.

Photo : © María Berrío, courtesy of the artist & Victoria Miro, London/Venice

María Berrío, Caroline Walker, Flora Yukhnovich

This is the year of women artists, women exhibitions, women curators, women writers, women cultural activists, and whatever else a woman can do in the art world, you name it. This year, it seems, we are entering a brave new world, one art show at a time. Or so I am told in bi-weekly gallery mailouts. “So-and-so” (white male art dealer) has only shown women artists! Ever! “ABC” (Western art collector) will only be showing women artists this year, in his private collection! In 2019, “XYZ” (venture capitalist funded art buyer) will only buy art by women of colour! Buy more women! Own more women! As if this concept (its associated politics, ideologies, and practices) is something society ever needed to be convinced of. I wonder what the radical change will be, when it finally trickles down, some five hundred fiscal years from now. Meanwhile, I’m curious about what all of these women—Women! Give us more decontextualized women!—and their work have in common, and how it benefits them, or doesn’t.

Victoria Miro’s summer exhibition of work by María Berrío, Caroline Walker, and Flora Yukhnovich is an interesting case in point. The show brings together works by young women artists, each of whom uses painting to vastly different, deft, subtle, and often surprising ends. Berrío’s delicate collages crafted from layers of painted Japanese paper show young women—alone, in pairs, and in groups—frozen in a state of repose and contemplation; or, conversely, in a state of captivity and alienation. Yukhnovich’s vast, Rococo-inspired canvases invest the spectre of history painting with humour and agility: as if a Fragonard or Boucher had dissolved into ambiguously fleshy, soft, corpulent masses, lit up with pink and cerise, loose dashes of purple and mauve, flecks of crimson and cyan—a pleasurable visual tumult. My favourite works, however, are Walker’s quiet portraits of women at work, which are like contemporary Edward Hoppers: scenes

of women captured unawares, going about their lives, and often seen through a screen or window, surrounded by the trappings of modern commercial life: boxes of luxury goods, an empty office building, bolts of fabric and spools of thread. These are studies in painting and portraiture as spaces of solitude and intimacy.

For the life of me, I can see nothing that these three artists share, save their gender—the unfortunately specious and flattening conceit upon which the exhibition’s curation relies. The show is organized in association with @thegreatwomenartists, an Instagram account “founded” by “Instagram activist” Katy Hessel, whose daily posts draw attention to women artists, ostensibly as an educative tool for her social media audience. The problem is that exposure isn’t an ideological position in itself; revealing problematic power relations needs to come with analysis, especially when purporting to employ capitalist digital platforms—or commercial gallery spaces—as tools of resistance. Visibility, power, and money are substances, not values: they are not capable of acting reflexively or critiquing themselves, only changing hands. As such, this show is as ambiguous and hobbled as its politics, which I don’t buy; but then again, I don’t think they’re meant for me.

Emily LaBarge

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