

ARTFORUM

LOS ANGELES

“All of This and Nothing”

HAMMER MUSEUM

Jointly curated by Anne Ellegood and Douglas Fogle, the most recent installment of the Hammer Invitational (that museum’s biannual contemporary group show, which typically has a local focus) featured an impressive lineup of seven young and midcareer Los Angeles-based artists together with an equal number of their American and international peers. “All of This and Nothing” championed introverted artistic practices that are chronically unmoored by the metaphysical force of self-doubt and the ineffable, even as they are grounded in an economy of means, formal simplicity, fragmentation, slowness, abstraction, and (as has been duly addressed at New York’s New Museum) the unmonumental.

Taken as a whole, the exhibition essentially attempted to describe a current conception of “the poetic” as an ascendant critical term characterizing a strain of contemporary art production that is fixated, almost neurotically, on its own self-reflective and often hermetic process, prone to isolate intuitive gestures as meditative prompts. Beyond somewhat stale claims (in the prosaic curatorial essays) for “the magical potential of our everyday lives” and “giv[ing] voice to silence,” “All of This and Nothing” seemed astutely to ask, What does the poetic look like today? Surveying the galleries, one might first have noted that much of the work demonstrated a lyrical affinity for the expressively musical (Jorge Macchi, Fernando Ortega, and Charles Gaines), and then, perhaps, how other works were often installed as though a spare theatrical stage sets, evocative in its mute emptiness and seemingly haphazard dilapidation (Ian Kiaer, Gedi Sibony, and Mateo Tannatt). Here, the poetic was most vividly located in the idiosyncrasies of an artist’s introspective depiction of his or her private studio space (Paul Sietsema, Frances Stark, Eileen Quinlan, and Evan Holloway), as well as in a transcendent sensitivity to, and refined experimentation with, a range of painterly materials (Sergej Jensen, Karla Black, and Dianna Molzan).

Above all, for Ellegood and Fogle, the contemporary poetic seems to boil down to (or at least tend toward) a neutralized palette of cardboard brown, canvas cream, both paper and gesso white, ink black, beige, tan, khaki, Mylar silver, and a range of grays, from drywall and concrete to graphite. It is curious that an assessment of this exhibition should ultimately hinge on a discussion of desaturation, corralled as the array of works and varied materials were into what was a rather consistently off-white affair. But, savoring degrees of subtlety, slightness, intimacy, and handmade imperfection, perhaps we could interpret the pale spectrum of off-white to convey shades of self-effacement oscillating



between transparent and opaque. The show’s overcast pallor, then, also operated to chromatically reinforce romantic associations with brooding solitude and the literal and figurative blankness of an unmarked page, canvas, or wall as it circumscribes the empty, zero-degree interiority of the white cube. For whatever reason, when color did occur, it tended to sputter and explode spectacularly in standout works by the exhibition’s women artists, from Molzan’s exquisitely constructed and patterned paintings to Quinlan’s vibrantly kaleidoscopic studio photographs and Black’s sea-foam, salmon, sunshine, and lavender LUSH bath bombs pulverized across a lunar field of plaster powder in *Once Cut*, 2010. Poetry wants color, too.

Even as “All of This and Nothing” rallied admirably around a notion of the poetic as an organizing principle for understanding some of our culture’s most thoughtful and thrilling artists, it also introduced the accompanying caveat that contemporary art is by no means immune to the production of bad poetry either (take Ortega, for example)—disposed as it is to assuming the form of facile conceptual gestures, familiar tricks simulating authentic thought, and trite sentimentality. Poetry, like romanticism, hates to be worn out with heavy, cloying hands.

—Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer