

In Her Third Solo Show at Curator's Office, Dawn Black Is Expanding Her Fantastical Universe

In her third solo show at Curator's Office, Dawn Black relishes in pointed juxtapositions and cultural crossroads with fantastical watercolors.

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"conceal projects: aesthetic" by Dawn Black, 2014

The dark cloud that looms over the glam figure at the center of “brut force” (2016), a watercolor and ink portrait by **Dawn Black**, could be overlooked as no more than that—an ominous gathering storm. Look closer, though, and figurative elements emerge within the maelstrom, the way they

always do in clouds. They materialize as treacherous, hooded figures bearing low-slung assault rifles. Dawn has painted a clash-of-civilizations narrative, pitting an androgynous subject, who toasts the viewer with champagne, against the lurking menace of ISIS.

Black's third solo show at Curator's Office, "fount of florid reluctance," relishes in pointed juxtapositions and cultural crossroads. Her allegorical portraits draw from many different wells, from ancient fairy tales to couture fashion. These drawings are morality tales without morals, stories laced with dread and dangers but lacking the necessary coherence and structure to serve as a warning.

The show's titular work, for example, depicts a scene from a dream (or maybe a nightmare). A 10-foot-long drawing in gouache, watercolor, and ink, "fount of florid reluctance" (2016) assembles sinister vaudevillains in hook-nosed masks and Asian knights in floral burqas. The women in Black's illustration, wearing precariously stilted heels and dresses with daring slits, wouldn't be out of place in an **Alexander McQueen** retrospective. The Baton Rouge-based artist taps the same nerve centers: sex and death but also fantasy, mystery, and a passion for the antique Oriental. The masks and tails worn by these feminine fighters' tormentors hail from closer to home, perhaps New Orleans.

Black lets these characters stand on their own, declining to give them any sort of setting or backdrop, which makes them all the more dreamlike. The floating formlessness of her drawings is important in terms of what it means to her mark-making. While she works in watercolors and ink, she isn't one for stains and atmospheres. Black works on thick, toothless paper, which may give her more control, allowing for the kind of precision seen in "fount of florid reluctance"—in particular a jarring and gorgeous overlap of one woman's oral dress and the bejeweled hilt of her sword. There are moments when Black lets her watercolors do their thing, but only moments. A series of black drawings on paper that show the shadowy silhouettes of women holding snakes, titled "first rebels descending" (2016), indulge in the possibilities of fluid pigment, but only a little.

While they are non-sequiturs in a show about unmoored allegories, Black's "conceal projects: aesthetics" (2014) portraits are always welcome. For this series, the artist draws portraits based on real but unlikely pageant winners: Ms. Pregnant Bikini, Ms. Klingon Empire, Miss Vaginaplastica. (Pity the poor woman wearing the "Miss Faded Youth" sash: She is in fact third alternate Miss Faded Youth, meaning she possesses just slightly too much joie de vivre to achieve her dream.) These fun, irreverent works celebrate the diversity of the concept of beauty and the marvels of pageantry.

Her larger and more dramatic drawings are looser—sometimes too loose. In "wonder wheel" (2015), a portrait of a blindfolded woman caught up in an oversized inflatable hamster wheel, the figure's arm is grossly large relative to her body. Justice, perhaps, but out of scale? Black may be bending proportion in order to land a metaphorical punch—the mistake is too egregious to account for otherwise—but the punch doesn't connect.

Black is best at character building, which is why her singular portraits are so delightful. In the past, when those had more of a fantasy feel to them, they seemed to each stand for their own self-contained world. Black's latest show finds her universe-building. The results are occasionally

gripping. “muse and mistress” (2015) appears to depict a Little Red Riding Hood-type character accompanied by Ignorance and Want, the emaciated children who lived underneath the robe of Dickens’s Ghost of Christmas Past; Ignorance appears here in a gimp suit. Elsewhere, though, it’s harder to trace the dimensions of Black’s narrative arc. Viewers may struggle to grasp some of her drawings, like a dream that threatens to slip away.

*Through July 30. Saturdays noon to 6 p.m. and by appointment. 703 Edgewood St. NE.
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