

Girls! Girls! Girls! / Dana Holst



Dana Holst's first solo exhibition with Christopher Cutts Gallery, entitled ***Girls! Girls! Girls!*** presents a series of new paintings and drawings that continue her exploration and obsession with female portraiture and narrative. In this new body of work Holst builds on themes of female identity development and the psychological impact of being a woman within the broader framework of social structure and all its trappings. The exhibition is dark and brooding in tone and highlights the complexity of childhood, teen, and adulthood years by examining milestones of experience, fate, and cryptic hidden discrimination through social hierarchy and undertones of male dominance.

Holst's exhibition begins with an installation entitled *Girls! Girls! Girls!*, which features black and white drawings in wax encaustic, pinned salon style to the walls with innocent pretty pink pins, bringing to mind the postered bedroom of a melancholy teenager. In this blackened room, *Oh Melania*, hung purposely in darkened isolation, greets viewers with a sustained, crystallized gaze. Faceless, with only her eyes, she peers across the room into the lives of the other *Girls!* of the exhibit, from a perceived hierarchical position of judgment, but also from a place of being systematically judged. Despite her powerful and sultry gaze, there lurks a place of feeling hunted and trapped. She serves as an extension and poignant example of current day media and its pathologizing of the female body – as object of constant gaze and desire.

Across the room from *Oh Melania*, are heavily impastoed, wax laden drawings featuring young girls and women caught in moments of self-awareness and revelation. Emotional situations of social expectation that routinely ask women to surrender their identity or take risks in exchange for male admiration are depicted. Rich and haunting, with many drawings hidden under washes of grey, Holst posits why men want to control women - and what about women evokes male threat or fear?

In *Riptide for Oscar*, a large drawing of a teenaged girl floating listlessly on her back, Holst memorializes feelings of freedom and grief, release and compassion -- an elegy of lost love and experience. Deeply personal, this piece depicts a modern day Ophelia, a girl floating away from the viewer in a strong current, swept away by forces beyond herself and her control. *Riptide for Oscar*, is surrounded and nestled by the many other *Girls!* of the installation. These *Girls!* are drawings that chronicle situations of complicity, control, judgment, insecurity, celebration, melancholy, grief, release, objectification, exploitation, victimization and whimsy. In the dark drawing *I Never Promised You a*

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Rose Garden, Holst depicts a young girl peering into an ornamentally clad mirror, pondering not only her physicality, but also the space between the sunshine and rain of her life. Presenting a here and now that fades in and out of clarity, this drawing alludes to a future that is uncertain and fragile.

In other drawings of this installation, such as *Someone's Little Honey* a young teenage girl explores the power of her sexuality, posing provocatively against a wooden wall, flexing her muscle and her vulnerability in a tenuous balance between belonging to someone else's desires and finding her own identity. Tanned to a crisp, she sizzles in her flowered bikini and almost seems to become forever stuck to the adjacent wall. And, this begins to read like the grill of a barbeque.

Scratch Your Eyes Out, is a drawing that plays with feline instincts, offering a perceived vulnerability. A young girl lays with what appears to be luxurious, submissive relaxation and contrasts it with sharp, nasty fingernails. Seeming to invite touch, the figure appears docile and considerate, but the viewer is left wondering whether she will be provoked or stoked, even if by glance.

Another drawing that explores the power of sexuality and the interplay between masculine and feminine, is the tauntingly titled *So What*. In this piece, a young girl leans back into space with her long wavy hair flowing around her, confident in the extreme. With a knowing gaze, she seems to conquer all around her. Striking a masculine, defiant pose, she beckons an array of responses, from being labeled a bitch, to the appearance of strength, to the desire to put her in her place - wherever that might be.

From the black installation room, the viewer is transported to a larger white room consisting of richly glazed oil paintings and three large museum-scale drawings. In this exhibition, Holst presents three new paintings, *Handstand*, *The Watchers* and *Transference*, which have been created over the last two years. Labor intensive and beautifully crafted, Holst utilizes old master techniques, beginning with a rich red ground and overlaying with many layers of lush coloured glazes in jewel tones and a love of repetitive pattern, seen in endless blades of grass and delightful wallpaper. Holst seems to use an array of vivid colour and depth as a trap for the viewer, beckoning one closer, only to reveal dark social secrets and buried emotion.

Ultimately, each of the three paintings are about being exposed. Vulnerable to fate and human instinct, they are cautionary in nature. In the largest of the three works, *The Watchers*, Holst details an interrupted solitary walk through a luscious landscape. A girl of about thirteen is in a meadow balancing on a log, the grass below her feet is fecund, growing and swirling around her. She seems to pause, her face frozen in that moment of vibrated sensation of danger. The light of the moon provides more insight – that the girl is really not alone. Questioning her awareness or the intentions of the Watchers lurking deep in the desolate woods, this piece brings fragility to reality – what is potentially an act of innocence or a display of dexterity – leaves the viewer wondering what happens next.

With equal parts whimsy and trepidation Holst's other two paintings, *Handstand* and *Transference* depict moments of cavorting that hint at darker secrets. In *Handstand*,

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Holst shows a young girl in a plaid skirt and golden underpants performing upside down for the viewer in a vulnerable and exposing position. The environment of the sky, and the grass of the fields seem to surround and envelope her body, with her clothing both revealing and concealing her very being and her identity. This earth seems to want to swallow her whole. *Transference* is situated inside a house, with a teenage girl leaning precariously backward, beginning to perform a back-flip trick. Leaning into the colorful pretty wallpaper of birds and flowers the young girl seems to want to float through the wallpaper into another world, an internal world, like Alice going through the looking glass. With birds symbolizing death and being rife with omen, Holst plays with superstition and pretty colors to generate a mood of foreboding, eliciting a transfer of past experience and hope from the viewer onto the girl in limbo.

Finally, Holst has created three large museum scaled drawings for the show. The first is the elegant and somber, *After You Get What You Want*, which visits the chameleonic highs and lows of being an object of desire and then bored abandonment. It visits the sadness of a love affair over, of discontent and subsequent exhaustion from a process where one is never fully satisfied. Larger than life, the young woman looks soulfully at the viewer, lost in a reverie, completely exposed, for all to witness.

Night Time is the Right Time examines the relationship between masculine and feminine, as the two are entwined and struggle between the darkness of night and lush foliage for control. Questions of seduction, victimization, aggression, and turmoil arise. Appearing almost as Adam and Eve-like figures in a dark and disturbing garden, Holst conjures up the ghost of feminine assertion as caught in a masculine tide of control over expression of thought, perception and desire.

Girls! Girls! Girls! ends with a celebration, of sorts. *Fairyland*, a large mural sized piece, a whirlwind of mark-making virtuosity chronicles a celebration of strength and development. In a world mysteriously inhabited by *Girls! Girls! Girls!*, Holst shows magic wands being waved in independence and freedom. Running amok and contrary to any set pattern in *Fairyland*, Holst's *Girls!* live in a moment without the presence of constant, ambivalent comment and erosion of worth. They are free to be themselves.

Robert Sleight