

MOUSSE

REVIEWS

Reena Spaulings “HER and NO” at Museum Ludwig, Cologne

by Nicholas Hatfull

The name “Reena Spaulings” feels husky, with a hint of a dire edge. Notably, perfectly generic in a world of improbably literary-sounding characters, it likely lodged in readers’ consciousness on first exposure, like ambient and spiky plane-tree pollen in one’s throat. The name somehow conveys plausibility and a tell, even before one is versed in the nexus of influence and implication it spins. Established in 2004, the identity trifurcates: a novel by Bernadette Corporation, a Lower East Side and Los Angeles gallery with an enviable roster of associates, and a smartly represented artist (which is actually a collective). The book, spurred in part by John Kelsey’s translation of Michèle Bernstein’s roman à clef, *All the King’s Horses*, drew on a Hollywood-size pool of writers to evoke a city one can’t see, an “everyday group hallucination” where “double phoney has a greater reality than stones, rivers.” The artist Reena Spaulings is, like the gallery, preeminently associated with Emily Sundblad and Kelsey, but personnel clues don’t preclude the “distancing effects” and “possibilities of dis-identification that flourish as soon as we begin to operate under the sign of fiction.” Such effects and possibilities were not far on the occasion of Reena Spaulings’s first institutional collaboration with a museum. Curated by Anna Czerlitzki at the Museum Ludwig, it seems to be a painting retrospective, toggling through idioms of hazy pointillism, hegemonic portraiture, and late-epic bluster.

Discrete series, perhaps the stickiest, will be revisited and appended with further, bespoke examples. *Post Card (Köln am Rhein)* is a series of speckled, touristic views of the Dom cathedral, prompted by a card sent from Cologne by Michael Krebber. Pointillism, through no fault of its own, is a museum crowd-pleaser (as anyone who’s ever tried to look at the works of Georges Seurat during a half-term school break will confirm). These works may have as much to do with enchroma tests and the narcotic reverie evoked in Paul Thek’s cityscapes, with something of their hovering pretty/bleak

tone. But Reena Spaulings's amiable riffing on place and palatability is a gift for tour guides. As part of an incomplete trading-card set of classic modes, this suggests a hankering to see how these works fare with such a degree of embedding. It remains to be seen, as of the time of this writing, whether or not Reena Spaulings will deploy the barks of Rex Plus motion-detector alarms that accompanied the pictures' outing at Galerie Buchholz in 2010.

"Am I cleaning a large room or a small room?" asks the iRobot Scooba 450 in the text that originally heralded the *Later Seascapes*. It turns out it's as apt a scumbler as a scrubber, when put in the ring with emulsions of simpering taste (the group's satirist nostrils were alert to the whiff of sad poetry to be snuck from mildly unexpected names in Farrow and Ball's "Estate Emulsions" range: Smoked Trout, Mouse's Back, Blazer, Eating Room Red). But not only was it able to knock out "two Schnabel-sized areas on a single battery charge," it also completed the canvas as an interior-finish-soused Ouija board, summoning the flares of J.M.W. Turner's dimming sight, as the text claims. Beyond the digital steering and rounded right-angle buffing, viewers' eyebrows will raise when it dawns that, with a pinch of good nature, these do have flashes of Turner. Butt has proven able to cash check mouth wrote, so to speak, noticeably in passages that could be magnified samples of Turner's distinctive flecks of black and white. If there is a tang of snark in the mockery of both the revered obfuscations of "late style" and the soft belly of over-formulated "zombie abstraction," that tang is leavened by diverting gestures (whose charge registered in notices of their exhibitions at Galerie Neu and Campoli Presti). Whether these are any more or less laced with meaning than the used tablecloths from the gallery dinner, stretched up as "enigmas" on other occasions, is probably up to the viewer. But if one is game, Scooba spirit-wrote a sea monster. These works may be crossover hits. In 1997, CEO "D'Antek" (Walczak?) wrote on behalf of Bernadette Corporation: "As a successful corporation, you will be a cyborg, and you will need to justify yourself with warmth."

It's not unusual for Reena Spaulings to execute a series the week prior to the vernissage, and at the Ludwig, the masterpiece best known as *Bonjour, Monsieur Courbet* will be made fresh on three large freestanding aluminum panels. Heroicizing the body language between the bohemian plein-air painter and his collector, the industrialist Alfred Bruyas, during an encounter on the outskirts of Montpellier, the original work was seen as deviant in its subject. Rendering Courbet's professional itinerary in grand style was found insufficiently demure.

That artist, though far from deferential in his jaunty pose, was disclosing his position in a reticulated system, telling it like it was. Transposing the meeting to our own time sits compatibly with another featured series, the fourteen-piece *Advisors*. Dashed off in pitch-perfect nonchalance, these works are especially ticklish in their proposition of collective painting. Knowing that one or all of Jutta Koether, Emily Sundblad, and John Kelsey may have been involved, it's hard to silence one's twitching yen to discern authorship; the show's title, abrading the project series' tag, is *HER and NO*, steadfast in its refusal of such trivia. Ostensibly a contemporary splinter genre of the patron's commissioned portrait, these works could have appeared in *The Galleries*, Kelsey's text

of lucid-dreamt premises strewn with art that resembles evaporating versions of other art. They are a little Merlin, a little Emily, a little Krebber, a little German-speaking female gallerist, a little Kelsey.

At the Ludwig, home to a motherlode of pops at the canon (now well-beloved fridge magnets), this survey makes an absorbing impression. It looks like Reena Spaulings is thwarting expectations and crowbarring room to shimmy by, to diligently fulfill retrospective norms. It's a new tangle in a ludic thicket of rarefaction.

at Museum Ludwig, Cologne
until 27 August 2017