

HYPERALLERGIC

GALLERIES

Embracing Femininity in Florid and Fierce Portraits

In her show at Albertz Benda, Sydney-based artist Del Kathryn Barton presents her unflinching nude figures with stoic faces and brazenly bared breasts.



Del Kathryn Barton, "Weird Seed" (2017), acrylic on French linen, 71 x 63 inches (all images courtesy Albertz Benda and the artist)

Sydney-based artist Del Kathryn Barton isn't afraid to embrace all aspects generally associated with femininity, from frail to fatal. Her paintings often depict women with large, dark eyes, pale flesh, and spindly limbs rendered in a dizzying amount of dots and set against a rainbow of pulsating color that makes the viewer feel hypnotized. The figures, despite their pallid coloring and twiggy

Carrigan, Margaret. "Embracing Femininity in Florid and Fierce Portraits," HYPERALLERGIC. 07.06.2017

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compositions, don't appear frail or sickly. Although their arms and legs are often bent at startling angles, they boast stoic faces and brazenly bared breasts.

The artist's latest show, *r u a bunny?*, currently at Albertz Benda, features 12 brand new paintings, along with four photomontage works, and her short but darkly powerful film, "Red," featuring fellow Aussie Cate Blanchett. While the exhibition represents her first solo show in New York, Barton is well known Down Under for her ecstatic, frequently sexually explicit work. In the past 10 years, she has won Australia's prestigious Archibald Prize for Portraiture twice and made sensational headlines in 2008 when her work in Brisbane's Gallery of Modern Art's group exhibition *Optimism* invoked a public outcry because of her playfully raunchy drawings of, among other things, an erect penis with giant pineapples for balls.

Phallic fruit aside, Barton routinely incorporates themes or imagery drawn from the natural world — such as flowers, feathers, and animals — into her fierce female portraits. The conflation of women with nature (and, vice versa, men with culture) is an arbitrary but deeply encoded psychological gender binary the Western world has long promulgated. But rather than resist it, Barton leans into it.



Installation view of *r u a bunny?* at Albertz Benda, New York

Consider her latest Dada-esque photomontages that splice together the bodies of women in short, frilly dresses with heads made of images of giant flowers and moths. It's easy to dismiss these compositions — they seem too on the nose, too simple, too *unironic*. Yet the near lack of imagination behind them, coupled with their abstract, pleasingly passive titles like "soft cake in the wind" and "to speak of anger, i will take care," underscore how ridiculous it is that our society is not only anesthetized to but continually produces these rote representations of womanhood.

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Nevertheless, the artist almost gleefully explores the floridness often identified with femininity. The namesake piece of the current exhibition, “are you a bunny – a real live girl,” features a woman with exceptionally erect nipples whose head is enshrined with leaves; she gazes almost adoringly at a rabbit perched on her upwardly bent arm. The woman’s hands gesture as if she were performing the age-old trick of pulling a rabbit out of a hat. Yet her hands don’t touch the animal; the bunny is balanced on her arm of its own volition. There is no coercive magic or physical mastery. This is a relationship born of mutual understanding and appreciation between one creature and another, suggesting that perhaps to be a “real live girl” is to delight in one’s animality and connection to nature.



Del Kathryn Barton, “are you a bunny – a real live girl” (2017), acrylic on French linen, 78 3/4 x 71 inches

Barton’s bright, candy-colored palette and sketchy line work recall dreamy teenybopper doodles. Her unflinching nude figures riff off the male-dominated 20th-century legacy of symbolic portraitists, like Egon Schiele and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, which puts her conversation with a host of contemporary female painters currently exploring similar psychological themes through polychromatic portraiture, such as Mira Dancy, Natalie Frank, and Mickalene Thomas.

Like her precedents and peers, Barton doesn’t use a panoply of color to hide the darker aspects of femininity, which is especially evident in her first ever live-action film, “Red.”

Taking the female Australian redback spider — which cannibalizes its mate during copulation — as its inspiration, it plumbs the depths of life, death, sex, and love in an impressively short 15 minutes. Filmed noir-style and set to epic music that sounds like a Hans Zimmer score, the film flits between intense scenes of aggression and tenderness. Blanchett writhes on the floor as she cuts away her fishnet costume; attacks her suitor before ecstatically succumbing to his touch (and then promptly wrestles him to death); screams at the top of her lungs, first alone, and then later with her progeny who has emerged from dark waters and experienced her own fishnet-shearing fit. Spiders were often used by Louise Bourgeois

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as a symbol for her mother (most notably in her series of large-scale bronze sculptures entitled “Maman”), since she saw them as clever, patient, smart creatures that were able to defend themselves and demanded a certain amount of fear. Similarly, Barton turns the small but terrifying arachnid into a consuming force larger than life. If her paintings rely, sometimes perhaps too heavily, on stereotypical signifiers of femininity, “Red” reveals the less easily defined qualities of female pleasure, pain, and potential.



Del Kathryn Barton, “RED” (2016), film duration: 15min, format: 1080p, HD Edition 2 of 5

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