

frieze

Jen Ray

WENTRUP, BERLIN, GERMANY



Photograph: Trevor Good. Image courtesy: Wentrup

A yellow army pick-up truck, surrounded by flickering candles and empty bottles of beer and champagne, dominates Jan Wentrup's front room. The occasion is the opening night of Jen Ray's second solo show in the gallery, 'Last Call', an evening that the artist has contrived to mark – as is her custom – with a bang.

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Mostly an illustrator, Ray is drawn to performance through a cluster of sources (including, amongst others, Grace Jones and Metallica). The North Carolina-born, Berlin-based artist possesses an edgier variant of the Southern talent for colourful fun. In front of the truck, two loudspeakers seep gradually intensifying noise into the room, as two projectors positioned on the truck itself beam kaleidoscopic triangles against shadowy facing walls. Meanwhile, three unobtainably beautiful women, still and unblinking, hold fierce positions. Two pack archaic weapons, a sword and a pike, and one holds an unlit cigarette in an elegantly extended hand.



The young crowd seems excited. The noise turns percussive. Three additional beautiful women now appear from the left. Moving with ritual slowness, they cut through a crowd irrigated a few moments previously by a pressed-upon gallery assistant. All wear sparkling costumes, two sport military caps. These hoist a black flag; the third, vacant and hatless, staring madly like some kind of cult member, bears a stack of flyers. The trio takes up three new positions on and around the truck. Now a tall black woman appears, again from the left, holding a tribal mask in front of her face. Ascending to the truck's platform, she takes off her mask, and starts singing, aggressive. Thirty seconds, forty. Then the noise fades, the women file out, the vacant girl leaving last, trailing flyers behind her.

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The smaller framed pictures extend these same themes, though they indicate a higher level of composition. Details now possess settings, including the truck, while the degree of precision and clarity is impressive. But the most impressive work on display is the largest. Depicting a personal mythology of savage girls in a savage land, the drawings and the performance indicate the same sources: primitivism, show business, acid surrealism, films like *Mad Max* (1979) and *Red Sonja* (1985). The image is a wasteland fantasia; discarded computer mountains lie in a heap at the base of purple cliffs, acrid smoke billows from jet-packed girl-astronauts, torn banners fly in the centre, urban punks overturn a car.

No men are present in any of these drawing, perhaps because they have been killed off and cannibalized. Ray clearly loves female forms, and her general aim in this show appears to consist in idealizing particular ones; women at once terrifying and electrifying; witches and sorcerers, jet-pack enchantresses. Apart from the men, who I agree are essentially surplus to requirements, there is a lot which is left out here: aging and death, ugliness and sickness. But Ray's work is undeniably beautiful and imaginative, its commitment to visual pleasure refreshing, and the artist clearly a fantastically talented draftsman.

Daniel Miller

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