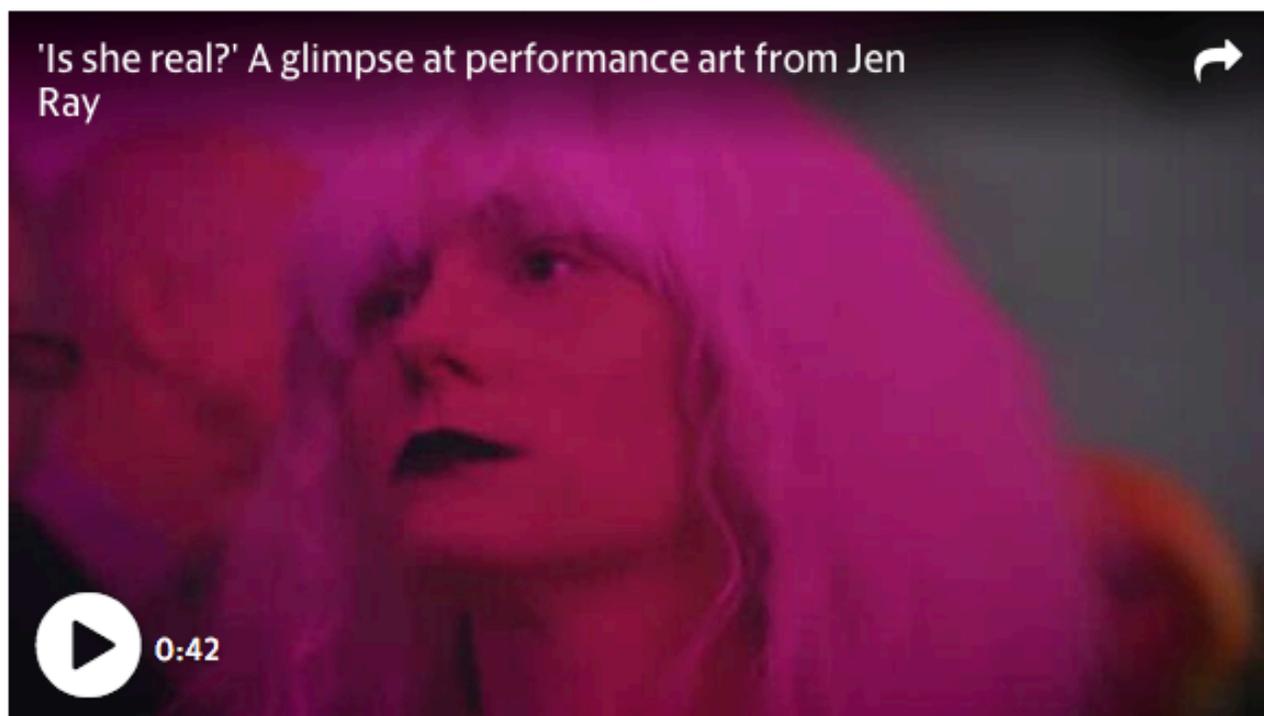


‘Surrounded by Wolves’ depicts a world of bold, flawed women



"Surrounded by Wolves" is an exhibition now at Davidson College of work by N.C. native Jen Ray. Here's a glimpse of a live performance coordinated with the exhibition. Video by Basic Cable.

Jen Ray's paintings, performances and installations combine bravura technique, brutality and heart. They are filled with women who cannot be controlled.

In "Surrounded by Wolves," at Davidson College Art Galleries through March 3, Ray uses the story of circus performer Patricia Jameson Cuneo as her inspiration.

Some works are almost documentary in nature, representing aspects of Pat's life, while others are trippy, Aubrey Beardsley-esque depictions of dystopias occupied solely by women.

Schreiber, Barbara. "Surrounded by Wolves depicts a world of bold, flawed women," *The Charlotte Observer*. February 14, 2018.

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Ray, who now lives in New York after a long stint in Berlin, was born in Raleigh. She was a child when she met Pat, who she describes as a mysterious family friend who had retired to the mountains of Western North Carolina with her partner, Myra. In adulthood, Ray became curious about Pat's past.

Pat was a tough, scary woman. Ray eventually learned about her traumatic childhood in England, helping her father burglarize stores and living through World War II; her escape to the circus, where she started out as a sideshow performer and went on to work with big cats; and her marriage into wealth and the later dissolution of that marriage.

Ray likens her work to wrecked stage sets. Whether in performance or painting, she attempts to direct the movements of masses of women who have no interest in being directed.

Her large paintings, which in this exhibition are up to 51 by 120 inches, are filled with innumerable tiny details, yielding chaotic scenes that are at war with Ray's meticulous execution. "Untitled (Double Warriors)" is dominated by two languorous giant women, one smoking a cigarette. They are surrounded by numerous small women whose clothing, props and postures signal various cultures, occupations, and intentions. Books and paperwork are scattered everywhere.

This work teems with displays of military-style power and pomp, including weapons and costumes/uniforms. It is also post-apocalyptic, with its obsolete technology (including a tethered phone and boxy TV with a fake wood veneer), fire, blood, tattered clothing and bandages.

"Untitled (Trap)" depicts women warriors in a beautiful hellscape. As in "Untitled (Double Warriors)," it is filled with symbols of masculinity and domination, including spears, wads of cash and meat. Two signs—"no dumping" and "I don't like Mondays"—are hilariously ineffectual declarations in the midst of chaos.

Axes from Ray's "Sculpture WEAPON (axe series)," which she created in collaboration with Meissen Porcelain, are composed entirely of delicate porcelain flowers. They are succinct and exquisite expressions of female power and lethality.

Ray brings characters from her paintings to life in performances that she conceives and directs, but does not perform in herself. In these insistent, propulsive works, overwhelming women, backed by battalion-like choruses, perform and ultimately claim ownership of misogynistic songs. On view in the gallery are videos of two performances, featuring The Guess Who's "American Woman" and Black Flag's "Annihilate This Week."

The title work, an installation, takes up an entire wall. It tells, in episodic fashion, Pat's story of escape and success; it also explores theatrical deception and the sad reality behind Pat's glamorous existence. Filled with works on paper, photographs, and objects, it is a beautiful jumble that includes stilettos, eroticized leopards, confetti, pennants, text snippets (including obits, descriptions of animal circus acts, a gory description of a leopard tearing out a chunk of Pat's leg, excerpts from her self-published bio and interviews), makeup, disembodied animal jaws, glamour shots and cigarette butts.

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In the installation's audio portion, Pat talks about her career in novelistic detail. As a member of a Glasgow circus, she and another performer, in shifts, portrayed a mysterious South Seas woman who would be brought out of a trance by a "professor" for a few moments a day. The installation includes remnants of the exhibition's opening-night performance, a hallucinatory take on this aspect of Pat's career.

"Surrounded by Wolves (Marching Pats)" is an array of six identical, tuxedoed and stilettoed Pats. A first glance, Pat appears to be in her glory, but closer examination reveals her grim expression; the balloons and confetti engulfing her are suffocating instead of celebratory.

Whether depicting Pat's world or using it as inspiration for fantastical, dystopian meanderings, Jen Ray explores thrilling, insular environments filled with unsettling ritual.

'JEN RAY: SURROUNDED BY WOLVES'

When: Through March 3.

Where: Van Every/Smith Galleries, Davidson College;
davidsoncollegeartgalleries.org; 704-894- 2519.



Installation view of "Surrounded by Wolves" by Jen Ray at Davidson. David Ramsey

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