

BLOUIN modern painters

ART / ARCHITECTURE / DESIGN / PERFORMANCE / FILM

JANUARY 2016

ON THE ROAD WITH ADRIÁN VILLAR ROJAS

REVIEWS

NEW YORK

Jen Ray

Albertz Benda // October 8–November 7

VISITORS TO RAY'S exhibition are greeted by an unpopulated stage accessorized with microphones, an electric guitar, and a single amp. Adorning the back walls are a metallic gold spiderweb and the backlit words "I Don't Like Mondays" running along the ground. The web suggests entrapment, but also conjures an alluring sense of darkness, fear, and beauty. The phrase is a reference to Brenda Spencer, who in 1979 at age 16 shocked society by carrying out a school shooting, and enigmatically uttered the expression when asked for the motive behind her murderous outburst. The troubled schoolgirl is just one of many provocative images of female violence and rebellion that permeate Ray's work and shape her creative vision.

Featuring a group of women performing a raucous rendition of the song "American Woman," the setting provided a backdrop for the opening of Ray's show and her multivalent reflections on female identity. Social commentary always takes center stage in Ray's consciousness. She chose the catchy Canadian song to herald her show not only because it evoked womanhood but also because it captured many of the negative stereotypes often associated with America—in her words: "money, ghettos, and seduction."

The exhibition features nine new watercolor-and-ink paintings on handmade



paper alongside a handful of older pieces dating to 2012, as well as three mixed-media installations and a set of porcelain axes. One large untitled painting from 2015, hanging to the right of the opening installation, depicts a goddesslike woman, bare-chested, her face heavily made up and her hair cloaked. She's holding a lit cigarette, and flames rise from between her svelte legs, which are clad in tights. She is the centerpiece of a landscape inhabited by legions of miniature women—some uniformed and marching, others bearing weapons or flags. One has a bandaged arm, another listens to a boom box, and a third is proudly pregnant. Ray depicts women exclusively, and her figures exude strength. None is in need of rescue, and all seem to co-exist rather peacefully, despite vastly different agendas.

Exploring the interplay between femininity and violence, Ray has also

created several glazed porcelain axes elegantly bedecked with floral embellishment. She delights in the ambiguity of the presentation, telling me at the show's opening, "It reminds me of cutting the flesh—women bleed a lot metaphorically and physically, and for me it covers a lot of territory." Ray's nonjudgmental fascination with women should resonate with an audience that appreciates the complexity of the characters that inhabit the artist's works. She grants her figures an unapologetic license to rebel, and it's impossible for the viewer to turn away from what results. And then there is the skill with which Ray executes the paintings—her mastery of the medium of watercolor is impressive, as is the level of detail she captures. Though she explores similar themes in her installations, it is her two-dimensional work that dazzles. —Bridget Moriarity

ABOVE RIGHT:
Jen Ray
Untitled, 2015.
Watercolor
and ink on
paper,
51 x 120 in.

Moriarity, Bridget. "Reviews: Jen Ray," *Modern Painters*, January, 2016.

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