

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Mark Godfrey, "Friends with Benefits," *Artforum*, November 21, 2008

ARTFORUM



Left: Frances Stark, *The New Vision*, 2008, collage on paper, 29 x 24". Right: View of Frances Stark, "*The New Vision*," 2008, Portikus, Frankfurt. Photo: Katrin Schilling.

Los Angeles-based artist Frances Stark is widely known for combining text, image, and literary sources in her collages, which often include thoughtful though tenuous self-referential links to her roles as artist, mother, woman, and professor. "*The New Vision*," an exhibition of new work, opens on November 22 at Portikus in Frankfurt.

THIS EXHIBITION WAS quite a surprise. Although I had been planning to do it for at least a year, before I was able to start on my original plans an opportunity arose for another show, which took up a tremendous amount of energy. That large-scale exhibition, at the Secession ["*A Torment of Follies*," April 26-June 22, 2008], was organized around an excerpt from a novel that I was "putting to music," so to speak. There I used text in a rhythmic way and choreographed graphic figures around the room almost as if they were performing the text. This show is nearly the opposite of that one.

I had a conversation with a curator from the Hammer Museum, which has an extensive print collection, about the form of "the folly" and more specifically about Goya's follies, or *Caprichos* [caprices]. I began to look at these more, and one image in particular really hit me, a print titled *They Already Have a Seat* [1799]. It depicts two women with chairs on their heads and skirts pulled up to their faces. This particularly ridiculous image struck me.

There were a few other *Caprichos* that inspired some of the pieces in this new body of work. I did a version of the most famous, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* [1797], with the flurry of bats and monsters behind the figure, as an exhibition poster

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for a gigantic summer group show I was in, “Pretty Ugly” at Gavin Brown and Maccarone. Instead of Goya’s slumping, somewhat gentle figure, mine is more exasperated. Each of these Caprichos has a text that Goya has written, a little snippet or a comment that isn’t part of the title but is somehow associated with that particular print. I liked how this text exists in a no-man’s-land. About the image of the women and chairs, Goya writes, “If conceited girls want to show they have a seat, the best thing is for them to put it on their head.” That really egged me on.

I really felt, when I started to make this show, that it would end up being an exhibition of paintings—despite the fact that I really don’t make paintings per se. I hate that I keep having to offer this caveat, but honestly, one could actually call this a figurative painting show—but not entirely, of course.

In a way, the work has more of a “trashy collage” aesthetic. But the images are also more solid and singular and depict bodies in subtly ridiculous, exhausted, or slightly compromising positions, and there is a lot of play with black-and-white versus color. One of my favorites is a foreshortened figure seen from above with a kind of giant head weighing down the image, and her feet kind of just floating at the top of the canvas. In her hands is a sheet of paper, which reads: “Why should you not be able to assemble yourself and write?” This text comes from a letter I received from a very smart and sympathetic friend, who, in asking me for a contribution to a publication, lamented the fact that I have been writing less and less to focus on making “work.” It asks a lot of difficult questions about appropriating text in artworks versus producing original texts for publication. An abridged version of this letter appears in the exhibition in one of the few nonfigurative works, on a painted music stand, next to another letter received from an artist friend who strikes a completely different tone. The juxtaposition becomes a kind of score for the possibility of what I can or will perform.

— As told to Lauren O’Neill-Butler