

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Maurin Deitrich, "Jill Mulleady," *Cura Magazine*, Summer 2017

# CURA.

## JILL MULLEADY

BY MAURIN DIETRICH

"We are the granddaughters of the witches you forgot to burn centuries ago".  
Unknown

Jill Mulleady uses repetition, within the language of painting. This approach blurs any conclusion around the assertion of an origin or original. "Act so that there is no use in a centre," Gertrude Stein suggests in a whisper. What an absurd idea to be able to remain entirely focused in one center, when no one is any longer interested, not even the subject itself. Mulleady's paintings are inhabited by figures who exist by looking at each other, and mock on their personal performances with a hint of a knowing smile. These slippery characters seem to be repeating nameless rituals, until the point they freeze on a gesture. Something vanishes in the process. But the trace remains and still keeps repeating endless rituals. She paints doubles, triplets, producing figurative spaces where *Doppelgängers* meet each other. They gaze at themselves in reflections, mirrors, irreverent shadows, or painted copies.

Prince S is in a bar at night staring with mysterious bloodshot eyes, smoking a joint. His/her or their naked torso leaning forward at an unnatural angle, gazing with the corner of his eye at his own mirrored image who escaped into a starry night. In the following painting, *Prince S 2*, the same blueish figure descends a green stone spiral stairway while carrying on the shoulders an unconscious victim, their fugitive reflection. In both paintings we find ourselves inside rooms with paintings in the background. Paintings within paintings, where we encounter faceless and genderflux figures entangled, forming a decadent sometimes violent sex party. We are voyeurs, they

are witnesses. Here, an action can never be pornographic in itself; it is its representation that makes it. Pornography is therefore always graphic. This was understood by Pierre Klossowski when he suggested to interpret eroticism as a specific form of representation.

In Mulleady's paintings, figures linger, move and leave through a dreamlike reality. They seem to be driven by a desire with fatal consequences. The structure within the formality of repetitions and reflections recalls the anatomy of the digital novel *Patchwork Girl*. A hypertext fiction by Shelley Jackson, written in 1995, which revolves around the connections between monstrosity, subjectivity and repetition. Parts of a female body are stitched together through text and image. "In hypertext," she says, "everything is there at once and equally weighted. It is a body whose brain is dispersed throughout the cells, fraught with potential, fragile with indecision, or rather strong in foregoing decisions, the way a vine will bend but a tree can fall down." It is inspired by Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*, in which the male character Victor engages in the creation of a female companion for his monster but then destroys his creature before completing it. In Jackson's variation it is Shelley who creates her own female monster. The woman and the monster later become lovers, travel through the United States, and live wild and lawless adventures. Shelley's hypertext fiction works, as Mulleady's paintings, through the duplication and reflection of different parts of the body and figures that, all together, generate a new image. Not anchored on a specific origin, but rooted on possibilities and choices. They have the freedom to become something different. "If you want to see the whole," we

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read at one point, “you will have to piece me together yourself.” Here, the form of hypertext demonstrates to what extent the technique of collage—but above all the process of appropriation, assembly, connection and disguise of borders—characterizes the method by which we conceive sex and identity. In Mulleady’s paintings contemporary cyber porn snapshots can then become the model of a mythological extreme rape scene. What you see now alters what you will perceive next.

A scene set in a bar, titled *Kleptocracy*, recalls Otto Dix’s *Metropolis* triptych and seems to be a gathering of female figures of different decades and realities in a bar. Among voyeurs, glaring portraits, genderless characters, riots and underworld *Doppelgängers*, Mulleady’s bar represents a social place where one may run into Joan of Arc or Anita Berber, the *femme fatale* and incarnation of the feminine bohemian of the 1920s. And is it Melania Trump that appears to be chained to the bar?

In May this year, Mulleady opened her solo exhibition at Kunsthalle in Bern, presenting a series of recent paintings created specifically for the institution. The works themselves welcome the viewer by infatuated and bewitched beings. They slightly turn to the visitor only to turn vainly away just a moment later. The figures look at the observer from the corner of their eyes with an appearance that seems to want everything and nothing, inviting the observer to be all they want and don’t want to be.

Together with these fictional characters, we face the banality and fatigue of domestic scenes set against the glaring sun of Los Angeles. Chaotic desks and cluttered dishwashers depict the familiar myths and facts of everyday life, a fictive housewife fearing fear. In the painting *No Hope No Fear*, twilight illuminates a messy desk strewn with books, a pink light bulb, a knife, a green empty cup, and the remains of a meal appear before our eyes; on the front, a notebook left open, a hasty list of things: Nietzsche, eagle, Beckett, no style.

On the foreground sits the historical novel *Heliogabalus* by Antonin Artaud. We are again voyeurs, but this time of intimate representations where the everyday life of managing a household and caring for a child overlaps with the drive to produce one’s own work. How to make art work? In *Heliogabalus*, Artaud attempts to poetically mythologize his own persona and aesthetic project. Leaving Artaud out on the desk, Mulleady thematizes the power of historiography in two ways. The image of this book marks the possibility of an exit as *Heliogabalus* is also a narrative of life becoming fiction or all that life could—potentially—be. It follows a protagonist who, by virtue of imperial authority, assumes the power to shape a kingdom according to his own imagination, transforming everyday life into an orgiastic theater of cruelty. Any concept of reason is violated as rationally organized language is transgressed by the boundless freedom of the body. Sexuality, crime and illness become means of spreading anarchy in Rome, liberating society from law. In Mulleady’s paintings, domestic still lifes are counterposed with fictional and bewitched figures, and although this meeting may appear confusing at first glance, these very female figures have passed through the cruel normality of domestic life in order to claim a new role for themselves as makers of even crueller, painterly fictions.

The captain lied, 2017 (previous page) Prince S, 2017 (p. 176)  
The Green Room, I, 2017 (p. 178) A Thousand Natural Shocks, 2017 (p. 179)  
All images Courtesy: the artist

