

HAW/CONTEMPORARY

Peregrine Honig risks making a hash of selfie and trans cultures, wins

Liz Cook, Pitch Magazine, November 4, 2014

At the risk of sounding aloof, I'll cop to a distaste for selfies. I like my landscapes unmarred by ironic mugging, and my aversion extends to the word itself. Its diminutive ending begs to be read in a sexy baby voice. But grumping about generational self-indulgence has become its own cliché, so when I entered Haw Contemporary for Unicorn, Peregrine Honig's new, selfie-themed solo exhibition, I tried

to operate by the culture's presumed mechanisms.

Which means: Stand in front of a painting (you can look at it later). Extend your wobbly tripod arm. Widen your eyes like an anime heroine and duckface it till you make it.

That's the superficial way to interact with the works on display. But Honig is, as usual, firing on a few different intellectual cylinders. The Kansas City artist may have traded her usual fine-boned watercolors and drawings for large-scale oil paintings, but much of the fraught sexuality and uneasy innocence of her best art remain.

Those themes commingle in material standout "#lamby," a striking, salmon-colored print of a taxidermic lamb in a specially blown glass egg. (The titles of all the works in this show are all lowercase, and all start with hash tags; for the sake of typographical clarity, I'll refer to each without the normally required quotation marks.)

Bubbles in the glass evoke a snow globe, as if

the lamb were suspended in an amniotic gel. The animal's nubby, Berber-carpet fur suggests innocence closely sheared, simultaneously elevated and protected from the outside world on its ovular pedestal.

Honig's selfie-primed paintings, some nearly 6 feet tall, offer further riffs on common visual cues of purity and spirituality. Floral wreaths await posing patrons, beatific halos for casual snaps; #faberge sets a dainty, doily-like pattern atop a pastel wreath, with color splotches given floral form in offset, overgrown outlines as long, weeping lines of paint drip from the blooms. A soft spray of silver adds to the saintly aura, but the painting's visual imbalance and playful palette launch it into a winking, Rococo realm.

One painting, #discosaintselfie, first appeared in The Stench of Rotting Flowers at La Esquina, but its new context brings some of the work's less maudlin themes to light. The mirrorball-tiled center allows



us to gaze at our splintered reflection before we turn our backs for a photo, but a milky film across the glass prevents us from gaining much pleasure in the recognition. The palette here is more assertive than in #faberge, but a few fine details sneak across the canvas; a faint, barely perceptible ribbon bow in the bottom third suggests a whispered, marginal femininity.

The title painting, #unicorn, adds a figure to the frame, a nude adolescent with both engorged, blood-red nipples and a penis nestled in her lap. The murkiness of the palette this time gives a charged, threatening edge to the scene. The "unicorn" meets our gaze innocently, but a milder being — a rabbit — lies dead at her feet.

By placing a figure outside the male-female gender binary in front of a wreath, Honig attempts a difficult synthesis of the show's two themes: selfie culture and transgender identity. It's a dangerous marriage when the stakes are so uneven. But the painting's proximity to the enormous

#transgenderflag, an industrial nylon flag, helps connections emerge.



Transgender people have, in the past, sought a banner separate from the ubiquitous rainbow gay-pride flag. I expected, in #transgenderflag, a riff on the most familiar design (horizontal stripes of blue, pink and white). Instead, Honig rejects signifiers of the gender binary entirely in favor of a bridal spectrum of whites, ivories and champagnes. Under the gallery lights, the striped flag shimmers translucent, as delicate and unassertive as tracing paper. Unicorn colors? Maybe. But there's also a discordant fragility here, an ethereal beauty that sweeps ghostlike through much of Honig's work. As I stared up at the flag, I couldn't help but think of deep-sea creatures, the colors of their spectral bodies made irrelevant in the lightless depths.

That's the quicksand tug at the heart of Unicorn — the simultaneous celebration and erasure of difference in selfie culture. After the exhibition's opening, a host of near-identical selfies bloomed on my social-media feed from gallerygoers. The faces changed, but the poses and the props stayed the same. After the fourth or fifth image, I no longer paused to note the differences. It struck me as a democratic twist on the elitist art of commissioned portraiture: In snapping a selfie, we encompass the biting paradox of fading into a collective even as we attempt to make ourselves singularly known.

The flag embodies its own contradiction, confining its rallying cry for a gender minority to a whisper. Unicorns, the exhibition's focus suggests, should be recognized, affirmed. But some transgender individuals are perhaps tired of feeling like unicorns, would perhaps prefer to fold easily into the social backdrop like the subtle white shifts of Honig's flag.

Unicorn doesn't attempt to resolve these contradictions, but instead leaves room for us to question how we define authenticity and construct ourselves. I left Haw conflicted, as I ought to have — after



all, what makes us unique, what makes us unicorns, isn't always what makes us true. Do we embrace our bodies as we find them or mold them to match our minds? Is the unicorn a symbol of authenticity, or does it represent a betrayal of the body? Where, along a spectrum from Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer to Renée Zellweger, are we supposed to align ourselves?

OK, that last one's a little glib. But then, so is selfie culture. Maybe a little levity — a little easy validation, an identity we can shape and control — can help lighten the load.