

## *The Faceless Portraits of Deborah Druick*

Aurélie Bernard Wortsman

Stylized lush hair, perfectly manicured red fingernails and expensive looking richly patterned turtlenecks adorn the world of Deborah Druick. Reminiscent of 1950s and 60s housewives, Druick's faceless female characters both embody and toy with the notions of perfection and beauty traditionally associated with femininity. In control and fully self-aware, her figures seem to tease the viewer's expectations, repressing any form of expression, except for their exaggerated Medusa-like hair, which takes on a life of its own. Stiff and composed, these characters appear ready to be captured for a selfie, yet also offer a nod to classic portraiture and the topos of the female muse. Instead of defying our expectations or confronting us, Druick's females remain elusive and mysterious, leaving us begging for more.

These featureless figures echo the allure of Chicago Imagist Christina Ramberg's disassembled females in her 60s and 70s paintings and recall the women in Julie Curtiss' more recent neo-surrealist works. Like the works of Ramberg and Curtiss, Druick's oeuvre challenges traditional notions of beauty, sexuality, self-presentation, and cultural norms.

Druick fetishizes hair, with shiny black or brown locks obstructing the outlines of her figures' faces. Contrary to a free-flowing natural mane imbued with erotic undertones, the characters' hair is highly controlled and artificial. This hair appears to be permeated with hairspray and styling gels to form complex curved shapes which evoke the over-the-top pompadours of Marie Antoinette. These tresses at times serve as a literal support for incongruous objects, as, for instance, a table propping up stacked juggling balls in *The Performer* (2022). Mirroring paper cut-outs, Druick's depiction of hair evokes the traditionally female decorative art of decoupage.

Shapes are further explored through the patterns in the clothing and accessories worn by Druick's protagonists. These designs often have interlocking forms, in contrasting vivid blues, oranges and pinks, reminiscent of 60s textile motifs. Much like a paper doll, the figure is enveloped by these striking motifs which appear cut and pasted on. Druick often adds ornate borders to her works, filling them with decorative elements that mimic the figure's clothes. This flat rendering of materials evokes the intimate domestic scenes in Edouard Vuillard and Pierre Bonnard's paintings, yet instead of having her characters meld into the background, the figure is centered and framed by the borders, which highlights its artificiality.

Flowers and nature play a key role in Druick's visual lexicon. On a surface level, these motifs set in a seemingly domesticated environment further stress the traditional female topos. Yet through an exploration of form, Druick infuses her works with a sense of unease. The curved feminine contours of the tulips, present in two of the paintings, stand in opposition to the sharp phallic-like outlines of the leaves in *Solitude* (2021).

Druick does occasionally set her characters in more developed pastoral settings, alongside dogs. Rather than mere accessories, the dogs depicted in *Dog Run* (2021) have eyes and open mouths, with their tongues hanging out. The dogs and the faceless figure, with her hand seemingly gesturing to someone or something, appear to be in motion. They seem to be walking towards the edge of the composition, contextualized by the line of the horizon in the back with a green field, mountainous trees, and a gray sky. This pastoral scene stands in contrast to most of Druick's work, in which an exploration of flatness and form emphasizes an overall sense of artificial perfection. These static renderings, seemingly devoid of emotion, exude an eerie sense of disquiet. Perhaps most disturbing is the composition in *Solitude*, in

which the oval face of the protagonist lies sideways on a small wooden table, resembling an executioner's block for a beheading. In *Shadowed* (2021), a checkered black and white background, evocative of closed Japanese sliding doors, and rhombus-shaped mirrors which capture no reflections further emphasize the static, blocked-off essence of this macrocosm.

Druick's deceptively simple and descriptive titles, much like the rest of her work, appear at first glance easy to read, yet are anything but. *Parlor Games*, the name of the exhibition, refers to a domestic "feminine" setting; yet Druick plays with and deconstructs this apparent levity. Faced with the cartoonish flat rendering of a seemingly straight-forward reality, the viewer remains engaged in a "game" with Druick's faceless figures, searching for fragments of truth.

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