

Why Do You Look That Way?

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56 Bogart Street #114, Brooklyn NY 11206

Opening Reception:
November 16, 2023, 6-9pm



Image: Katherine Bradford, *Green Vision*, 2023, acrylic on canvas, 8 x 10 inches

M.David & Co. is pleased to announce *Why Do You Look That Way?*, an exhibition featuring works by Katherine Bradford, Joey Brock, Kathryn Geismar, S. Klitgaard, Janice Nowinski, Michele Riche, Andrew Cornell Robinson, Carol Saft, Tuesday Smillie, and Cynthia Sparrenberger.

Proceeds from this exhibition will be donated to The Trevor Project.

Why Do You Look That Way?

by Caitlin Julia Rubin

Despite the large scale of Kathryn Geismar's *Olympia* (2023), its central subject takes up notably small space within the drawing's overall composition. This figure, clothed only in the band of a strapless bra and a pair of pointed heels, sits at the far edge of a bed that floats against a ground of soft grey. Geismar's drawing emphasizes the bed's recession and, propped on one arm, *Olympia*'s model leans even further away from the foreground. Though their torso angles to face the viewer directly, a second arm drapes across a curving hip to rest a palm high on the inner thigh. There is both revelation and concealment to this pose, a guardedness further underscored by the way that Geismar presents the figure: on display, but also just out of reach.

In the placement of her subject's hand and—of course—her title, Geismar's work directly references Édouard Manet's 1863 painting of the same name. The work caused an uproar when it debuted at the 1865 Paris Salon. Manet's stark, unadorned style of painting riled viewers, but it was the choice and treatment of his model, Victorine Meurent, that evoked such vitriol that outbursts became physical, with visitors attempting to puncture the canvas on which she was rendered. Paired with the details of both her dress and the surrounding scene, Meurent's disarmingly direct gaze and frank nudity led most viewers to conclude that she was a prostitute. Among the painting's many transgressions, it was Meurent's own that were perhaps most upsetting: a "working woman" who had assumed the role of the reclining female nude, trespassing on a very classical trope of feminine beauty. She was in a place she did not belong, and she was unapologetic.

Geismar’s Olympia is softer than Manet’s, and more focused. There is no stack of bedlinens, no attending servant, no harried cat at the foot of the bed. There is just her model, her own child; there is simply Sam. Sam has been central to much of Geismar’s work since she began to explore her gender identity as a teen and, recently, transitioned to embody a more feminine self. Here, Geismar places Sam within that long lineage of art historical influence and representation, linking her confident beauty to that of Manet’s Olympia and Titian’s Venus of Urbino before, and to the example of myriad painters prior.

In 1865, criticism of Manet’s Olympia homed in on Meurent’s body, which one paper described as “incomprehensible.”¹ Why do you look that way? was, as far as I know, not one of the lines hurled in Meurent’s direction, though certainly this was the gist of much of what was written. The phrase, delivered as such, is not really a question; it is an accusation, and a pointed way to say that, however one looks, one should not. Today, this is a phrase that often finds a target in the appearance of individuals who, like Sam, have invented or adopted modes of self-expression that upset some notion of normalcy. It seems to point out an observed flaw or problem: a failure to fit into what is expected, or to match what is broadly accepted.

Joey Brock explains: “It takes bravery to non-conform . . . What is perceived as beautiful by one can alternately be perceived as repulsive by others.”² His ethereal portrait Tre Putto (2023) is printed, in three images, on a tryptic of semi-transparent Mylar panels. Putti—symbolic, angelic winged infants—appear frequently in religious imagery. This association, as well as the religious connotations of the work’s three-paned construction, bears special significance for Brock, whose grandfather was a Primitive Baptist minister in his home state of Texas. As a queer youth, Brock often felt othered by the church. In contrast, his artistic practice provides space for the proud representation of individuals from the LGBTQ+ community he now calls his own.

The slight overlap of Tre Putto’s Mylar prints means that each photograph bleeds into the next, giving the impression of one image achieved through multiple exposures. To this surface, Brock has stitched veils of fabric and, atop the left panel, a piece of organza on which this photographic portrait has again been printed, but in reverse. Rather than stilling his subject through photographic capture, Brock communicates their multiplicity, and the strength of this fluid identity. The airy layers of Tre Putto add to the otherworldliness of Brock’s shape-shifting model while inserting a degree of illegibility, as it is difficult to see this figure clearly. Brock’s fabric additions drape his subject elegantly while also serving as a screen: they are a curtain through which his subject can peer, but not be fully looked at in return.

For members of transgender and queer communities, why do you look that way? is a question that can—in moments of performative self-presentation—bring welcome attention. But—delivered as you are trying to blend in or to pass, without second glance, in the identity you have chosen—it is a line that cuts deep. And, like the outbursts of disgust directed at Meurent, it comes with the very real threat of physical violence. Today, trans individuals are over four times more likely to be victims of violence than those who are cisgender.³ It makes sense that Brock shields his subject, and it is no wonder that Geismar, even in celebrating Sam’s beauty, protectively draws her towards the very back of the frame.

Why do you look that way? As was the case for criticism of Manet’s Olympia, the phrase stems from a lack of understanding. It points less to some shortcoming of the observed, and instead reveals something specific about the perspective of the observer. Taken at a different slant, the question turns into one for the viewer: why do you see the world as you do? As Tuesday Smillie has explored in her work (and most directly in her extended series focused on Ursula K. Le Guin’s 1969 novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*), we are often boxed in by the limitations of the world we have been born into, with its reliance on dichotomies, established roles, and tropes of gendered beauty. It takes dedication to see beyond the confines of the systems we have inherited. Or, as Smillie writes, “to build another world, we must first be brave enough to imagine how that world could be.”⁴

¹ Jason Farago, “The 19th Century’s Most Scandalous Painting Comes to New York,” *The New York Times*. September 9, 2023.

² Joey Brock, email to author, November 2023.

³ Andrew R. Flores, Ph.D., Ilan Meyer, Ph.D., Lynn L. Langton, Ph.D., and Jody L. Herman, Ph.D., “Gender Identity Disparities in Criminal Victimization: National Crime Victimization Survey, 2017–2018,” *American Journal of Public Health*, April 2021.

⁴ Tuesday Smillie, *How that world could be*, 2016. Print on paper, spray paint.

Since 2012, Smillie has created work based on the form and address of the protest banner, linking a history of activism to the language of painting. The cascading layers of *Sequin Light (Orange with Kjerstin Rossi)* (2021) iterate from a rectangle of orange fabric cut at the scale of a sign or flag, building a horizon of color in the combination of materials affixed to, and falling from, this central support. The work combines the rugged material of construction signage, fabricated in warning fluorescent hues, with the delicate qualities of darker and more decorative fabrics, floral blue lace and sheer navy chiffon. Smillie chooses her fabrics to evoke—and, as she highlights beauty in the traditionally utilitarian, to complicate and subvert—their historical use and assigned meaning. Her incorporation of lace and sequins is specifically tied to way that these materials have been deployed within queer and drag culture, as a means of self-decoration, celebration, and radical defiance.

Representation matters. What isn't shown (or what has been censored or redacted) constrains a point of view just as much as inherited histories, memories, and meanings mold the frame of individual perspective. Again and again, the stories of othered individuals have been omitted from the narrative gloss of history. Andrew Cornell Robinson responds to the ways that LGBTQ+ legacies have been erased throughout time and, in his 2009 *Bloodlines* project, creates a queer lineage in a revision of his own family tree. *Pansy Division* brings together work from this series and from his 2016 project, *Accidental Revolutionary—Fruit Bowl Manifesto*. The installation presents two figures of a reimagined and fiercely queer revolution: Charlotte Corday, a persona based on the counter-revolutionary assassin of Jean Paul Marat, and Frederick Frelighuysen, a character inspired by Robinson's real-life ancestor, an American revolutionary hero from Flatbush, Brooklyn. *Pansy Division* displays the reinvented Fred's rose-hued uniform, its powder blue sash decorated with medals drawn from the artist's own symbolic lexicon, and a photograph of Charlotte, played with flair by Robinson himself. His powdered face and vibrant makeup recall the dramatic performance of drag, and—like Frederick's costume, proffered as if ready for another wear—suggest that the radical queerness of history is always within reach, and ready to be tried on. Reclaiming control of the lens through which he sees his own history, Robinson not only envisions another world, but embodies it.

It is powerful to step into a self-made frame, and to see oneself within this: to be both subject and viewer. This is a freedom that is difficult to achieve. Cynthia Sparrenberger's dreamlike works relay the confusion of isolating a single moment from the specter of other visions. As her tactile and densely layered paintings and sculptures suggest, the way we see the world is a composite of the many senses and experiences that have shaped us.

It is hard to fully shed the filters through which we are accustomed to looking. Michele Riche builds her paintings through an arduous process of addition and subtraction, alternately applying paint and sanding it away. From this process, lone figures emerge in subtle tonal gradations—soft forms that nearly sink into their muted grounds. Riche's extensive reworking of her paintings reflects her processing of the trauma from which they stem, as their compositions are based on photographs taken of her as a child, when she was posed and presented through the eye of another. Achieved through a deft balance of light and shadow, Riche's finished artworks evoke the feeling of remembered scenes and speak to the ways that this history continues to color the way she views her identity today. It is one of the truths that Riche has come to terms with through this work, bravely reckoning with and acknowledging the impact that the gaze of others has had on her own ways of looking and seeing herself.

Part of the problem with Manet's *Olympia* was, of course, that she controlled her own gaze: she looked back. Meurent's directness unsettled viewers, who were unable to look without feeling watched themselves. With this in mind, why do you look that way? might also be interpreted as a challenge to the autonomous gaze of a (hoped for) subject of observation—a rebut to the challenge and power that rests in the eye of another.

But what would it mean to look generously: to look with, rather than at? Before he picks up his camera, Brock sits down for a conversation with the person he is about to photograph. As he explains, "I ask, what is the one thing that has impacted you most in your life? What did you learn? How did you grow?"⁵ For Brock, it is important to understand the perspective of his subjects in advance of forming his own. Similarly, Geismar's *Olympia* is based on an image that Sam posted online: a photograph taken by her friend, the photographer Madeline Hampton. Geismar is always careful to follow Sam's lead, depicting her only in ways she has already elected to show. Yet even as Geismar faithfully represents her child's evolving self-presentations, the work she

⁵ Brock, November 2023.

makes is distinct from Sam’s own view of who she is. As Sam explains, the work feels separate from herself; to her, it is more about the perspective and experience of her mother.

Geismar’s own reflections on this body of work echo Sam’s. She writes: “In exploring the identity of the other, I was surprised to unearth my own identity obfuscations. I bumped up against long-formed ideas about who I was and what I could become.”⁶ Working from this realization, she began a new series that conflates her image with that of Sam’s. Drawn individually on the translucent sheets of Duralar and laid atop one another, their portraits merge. Often, their point of overlap is an eye. Geismar usually chooses to portray herself based on ways that Sam has already posed, adopting a stance or mode of dress that brings the two of them into even closer dialogue. *Amalgamation* (2022) is one of Geismar’s most amorphous double portraits, in that it is difficult to discern where Geismar stops and Sam begins. It is hard to say if Geismar is seeing Sam through herself, or seeing herself through Sam. As Geismar has discovered in her practice, stepping into the gaze of another to understand how they look—both how they present themselves, and how they see the world—can ultimately expand one’s own sense of self.

Building another world requires the boldness to look beyond what sits in front of us, and the bravery to envision something different. Sometimes, this is something different than ourselves. Smillie describes *Sequin Light* as a “quarantine piece,” made during the early days of the coronavirus pandemic. For many, forced isolation made our immediate worlds smaller, but it also compelled us to recognize the good fortune of close companionship, and to seek connection and dialogue beyond the borders of our pandemic pods. For Smillie, constructing *Sequin Light* was a means of meditating on the possibilities that can exist within even the darkest moments, and of asking how, amidst the ongoing and mounting crises of the world, we might see and hold for one another the glimmer of a more hopeful future. At the time, Smillie was preparing to start a family with her partner, Kjerstin, and contemplating what it would look like to expand their world with the life of another. In *Sequin Light*, she crafts beauty from the stuff of warning, transforming bright hazard flares into a bunting that speaks—tentatively, and tenderly—to the sweet and fragile gift of joy.

The world can feel stuck in its broken ways and, against this fixed nature, the slog of progress hard-fought. We have inherited legacies we wish were not our own, and ways of seeing that seem only to prompt the replaying of these traumas in our own time. It can be very hard to change the way that we look. But isn’t a more empathetic world what we all wish for: for ourselves, for our children, and for the families and communities we find and make our own? Following the lead of these artists, then, let us look differently. Maybe, if we are bold enough to do so, we can recognize the light in each other and—in turn—expand the potential both of who we are and what the world we live in could be.

⁶ Kathryn Geismar, *m(other)* (Boston: St. Botolph Club, 2023), 2.