



Thirst for Silence

An exhibition with works by

Will Sheldon

CLEARING Los Angeles

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Curated by John Utterson

Working across painting and drawing, Will Sheldon ekes out a territory of forms that is at once mired in tradition and innately bound to inner reflection. There's a coolness to the practice that remains suspended, unfettered by calculation, but infused with a genuine historical curiosity and pictorial acumen. Sheldon perpetually dusts off extant matter and produces work that implicates constellations of inspiration. His particular universe deals with subcultural ephemera and fantastical exploration, as the artist zeroes in on the frictions between high and low cultural objects.

Like Balthus's interpretations of Poussin and Masaccio, Sheldon traces a legacy of mark-makers and establishes his own domain of production. Religious iconography is not explicit in *Thirst for Silence*, though Sheldon notably injects some of the formal conventions of Italian secular painting into his present day ruminations. As such, he becomes an archeologist of the strange, also leaning on historical figures to the tune of Etsuko Miura and Pierre Klossowski, while maintaining a contemporary disposition. Where content is concerned, Sheldon spins the ball joint dolls of Hans Bellmer's subversive universe into complex webs of pastoral, urban, and domestic situations. Perhaps this is part and parcel of the artist's understanding of content as nebulous. Sheldon sees ideas and images as unfixed, ready to be captured and reconfigured through specified modes. As such, his ability to pull from these figures and spin their evocations into new compositional territories substantiates his position as inventor of new images.

Sheldon's frequent iterations of doll-like figures marks the substitution of a human model for the inanimate object. The doll becomes an abstraction of the human in this case, a postscript on the already fraught relationship between artist and subject. The traditional "sitter" has been irrevocably consigned to the phantasmic, rendered as an echo of the author's visual experience. As Klossowski writes, "whatever the painting - in whatever attitude the 'model' as the central character surrounded by others, imaginary or not, is - everything is attributable to the artist only." This maxim basically confirms the notion of authority in that the creator of images, or arbiter of objects, impresses his or her own perspective upon any given subject. Hans Bellmer proffers a similar sentiment, writing "an object that is identical with itself is without reality." In this instance, illusion and eroticism complicate the experience of a form. As such, the arbiter of an image has carte blanche to form his or her expression of the material at hand.

Synthesizing reality and fantasy, Sheldon examines the contours of artifice, vanity, and obsession using symbolic devices that affirm his pursuits. A welcome motif in this case is the mirror, which serves as a companion to reality just as it becomes symbolically charged in children's tales. Numerous compositions feature doll-women clutching hand-held looking glasses as they either turn away from or directly confront their visage. Refracted appearances are placed at the fore in this context, concurrent with inflections of an Artaud-infused theatricality. Assuming notions of surrealism and the erotic imaginary, boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable are likewise toggled without moral judgment.

What remains consistent is Sheldon's ability to assemble forms. His arbitration of the line is determined with finesse, as he embarks on the clarification of an image. Strapped with a remarkable ability to render, both drawing and painting become wracked with his decisive contours. The exhibition foregrounds large scale works on paper alongside smaller ones, as well as a selection of paintings that draw from art history and Sheldon's irreverent curiosities.