

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

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Alex Becerra

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Alex Becerra, *Fresa*, 2014 oil on canvas, 1.8 x 1.6 m

Alex Becerra is a young painter who seems to value freedom over pretty much everything else, even at the expense of such musty old notions as moral responsibility or restraint. Left to its own devices, his mind goes, most often, to the naked human form: to pictures of fulsome ladies in compromising positions, up-skirt shots caught in mirrors, women with legs akimbo, examining themselves. In this exhibition, Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)* (1907) is evoked more than once. Becerra makes unapologetically reckless pictures that are, at their best, thrilling to look at and, at their worst, vexing to think about. In this exhibition, there is never a dull moment.

Becerra paints fast and loose, leaving background areas of his canvas raw (and dirty) while other parts of the picture are so thickly and urgently caked with paint that he squeezes it straight from the tube. Colours are unmixed, or get mixed directly on the

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canvas. An untitled installation in the back room of the gallery illustrates his working methods: pizza boxes, repurposed as grimy portfolios, explode with marker-pen drawings on mismatched sheets of paper spread out across the floor. A free 'massage guide' newspaper, featuring a buxom babe on its front page, gives an indication of Becerra's high-low source materials.

In a speech at the opening of 'Entartete Kunst' (Degenerate Art, 1937) in Munich, the artist-curator Adolf Ziegler voiced his outrage at the way artists in his exhibition insulted 'the German mother' as 'a sort of whorish female archetype, or give her a facial expression of utter imbecility'. Ziegler was responding, though he didn't acknowledge it, to the non-judgmental realism of artists whose models, in many cases, also moonlighted as prostitutes.

Is such realism feasible in figure painting today? Or, for that matter, such outrage? Becerra's exhibition's title, 'Las Putas Problematicas', roughly translates as 'The Problematic Bitches' or 'Whores' – which looks, in print, flatly misogynistic but which spoken in Chicano slang comes off merely as cheeky, even affectionate, and not necessarily gender-specific. ('Wassup, bitches?') Becerra, who is Mexican-American, refuses to take a moralistic position on the vernacular that shapes his aesthetic sensibility. Partly what is at stake here, as it was for Picasso in 1907, is the privilege of cultural representation: what deserves to be pictured in oil paint on large canvases?

There is a sense, in many paintings, that Becerra is mocking his own coarseness. The self-portrait Chach (Half Gone) reportedly refers to Becerra's nickname; it shows him in a hick cowboy hat and Hawaiian shirt slumped drunkenly over a barrel, a green hosepipe in one hand. The best paintings in the exhibition, such as a diptych titled Living in the Suburbs can be so Depressing (all works 2014), are touchingly humane. A large naked woman squats near two agave plants, lost in thought, and in two puddles, her face and her genitals are reflected back at the viewer. As with the nastier Strictly for CADDY Lovers, which features a nude woman standing on a mirror, the undignified self-exposure in these pictures is far from erotic.

The grotesque in art is usually understood as arising from the contravention of borders between the body's insides and outside and, by extension, themes such as sexuality, gender roles or race. But who gets to contravene whose boundaries? Rex Goliath depicts a black male Olympia, reclining on a shag rug in nothing but a tiger-print coat and a leopard-print pimp hat, grinning maniacally. As a fantasy or a racial caricature, it is an objectionable image; but it is also so ridiculous and horrible that it is funny. I will not pretend to be offended on anyone else's behalf, but I marvel at the self-granted freedom that allows Becerra to paint a picture that no white artist would dare put his name to. He clearly feels no pressure to self-censor, which is a rare thing today, not just amongst artists.

Jonathan Griffin

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