

Petite Mort



I asked if you'd like to submit to me. Your trust was all I needed. I wanted to provide for you. I wanted you to provide for me. You fed me, and I can only hope I returned the generosity with love.

The following is an exhibition text by Ruslana Lichtzier:

Upon entrance, one notices: birds penetrate the space.

Traces: sound of chirping (synthetic)

A small watercolor of a lying man, his head, a bird. The feral beast invades into the human body.

Opposed to common knowledge, the ancient siren was not a mermaid. The mythological creature is half female and half bird, who, with her luring songs, drove sailing men towards their demise. This grotesque creature, a hybrid of parts that should have never been united, is a transgression; a force of death. And yet, as attested by Cicero, she also held secret knowledge. In his 45 BC philosophical treatise, *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*, while referring to the sirens' song, he writes: "Apparently it was not the sweetness of their voices or the novelty or diversity of their songs, but their profession of knowledge that used to attract the passing voyagers; it was the passion for learning that kept people rooted to the Sirens' rocky shores." And yet, like with Eve, who was the first to know by devouring from the tree of knowledge, by transgressing God, sirens' knowledge was concealed, repressed, and demonized. Both figures are read today as symbols of deadly femininity, their knowledge is of the abject and horror.

If one chooses to recover this history, as we are attempting here, one will swiftly recognize that this knowledge is not a contemplative object; it cannot be provided with a book. Rather, it is a force that perforates open bodies, the likes of which one encounters through desire, sex, and death. It is revealed with touch, with seduction, while being seduced, while falling in love (recall the fall of Eve and Adam). One cannot possess it. One must let it go. One must forget.

Consider again the watercolor. There, the Siren is re-casted as a man, the hybrid is reversed. With floppy phallus and limp limbs, this new open body is surrendered to my female gaze and I feminizing it. The act is of submission.

About one month into quarantine, Iris Bernblum began approaching individuals, via Instagram, writing, "If you'd like me to paint you, submit a photograph to me, nude, in your present circumstance, your name will not be revealed when it is made public." It was at the point when people began losing their minds due to the ongoing, monotonous isolation. A contract was drawn between the participants and

Bernblum. A concealed agreement based on mutual respect, a secret. Both parties were required to be submitted to the work. Open to their own fragility, to their shifting boundaries. Multiple photographs began pouring in, providing the source materials for paintings of mostly selfies. The monochromatic watercolors present naked figures in isolation, in domestic environments that are marked with a few sparse gestures. The bodies are treated with great care, some heads morph into a shadowed bestiality, otherwise the gazes are turned away. The result is, “submission,” a group of forty intimate virtual encounters. Here, the overt exhibitionism that the practice of naked selfies entails, has a different tone. The paintings crave the touch of others’ gaze. It is as if they—the anonymous subjects—must be painted for their own survival; as if without the viewer’s gaze, they would evaporate into the thin walls around them. The paintings scream, and cry, and laugh (in madness). The paintings howl.

Two large screen prints on exposed canvases present monochromatic, grey-scaled, mirrored images. On each, a pair of bald eagles. Locked talons, suspended in the mid-swirl of a courtship dance, the birds are falling. The two prints are doubles in reverse; the dominance of sexes is in question. Caught in a “death spiral” (the name given to the mating ritual, and the title of the work), the eagles approach a climax of desire, which, at its limit, brushes against death. One ought to read *death* here both as metaphoric and as actual. Desire and its sibling, love, entail a momentary, if not recurring, death; a burning of one’s own identity. In love, I am burning with desire—my constitution and my boundaries are in flames. While falling (in love), you are lost, annihilated by foreign forces within yourself. An actual death. The bald eagle, a nationalistic symbol (which, by constitution, is a symbol of patriarchy and oppression), descends towards its own annihilation. There’s something delicious about it.

Contemplating upon this work today, in August 2020, one should not divorce this discourse within the work from the recent advances in the dismantlement of nationalist symbols in the United States. Indeed, up to now, the targeted monuments were evident, and yet, it seems as if the work whispers a greater promise, murmuring: “what will happen when the bald eagles spiral into their death? What society can be built when groups of people choose to identify themselves not through national frames? What state will be constituted when exclusion, be it on the base of national, racial, classist, or gendered lines, is not the governing law?”

—Ruslana Lichtzier

Aspect / Ratio, 864 N ASHLAND CHICAGO, IL
60622