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CELESTE DUPUY-SPENCER

And a Wheel on the Track

MARCH 26 – MAY 7, 2016

MIER GALLERY is pleased to announce the first solo exhibition at the gallery by Los Angeles-based painter Celeste Dupuy-Spencer. The exhibition will open Saturday, April 2, 2016 at 7313 Santa Monica Blvd. in West Hollywood, and will be on view through May 14, 2016. An opening reception will be held on Saturday, April 2, 2016 from 6:00pm – 8:00pm.

And a Wheel on the Track

Text by Em Rooney

During our pithy relationship in 2012 Celeste made a portrait of me. I think it was based on a picture that she took (or maybe just a memory) of me, pre-coital, laying back on her bed with my shirt half unbuttoned. She took a lot of liberties and infused the painting with drama, and a certain grotesqueness, pit stains, blood, and tattoos where none existed. In the end it wasn't a flattering simulacrum of me; rather the painting became shorthand for a longer, more symbolic, phrase about that moment in time between us. The grotesqueness in her work operates as a way to mediate our visual understanding of things and our cerebral/emotional ones. It considers how our perceptions morph and are not static. What results, in many cases, is dark comedy. The humor in the paintings comes from the character's faith, and from their tragic lives, like a Flannery O'Connor novel. Exaggerated features make prominent the noses, wrinkles, and jowls of flawed people, their flaws personified. Laughter, in these paintings, is perverse. Words are desperate and venomous, and where teeth are visible they're recoiled into gums like turtles staving off contact with an oil spill. Or they're fully exposed, with eroded gums, like useless phalluses. In the new paintings, flesh rendering has become a device to represent the disproportioned. Brandi is burnt on top, but has a fake tan on the bottom. The guy listening to music, most certainly a self portrait, is translucent, his blue and green veins expose his mortality. Different characters are grey, yellow, or pink respectively as it relates to their proximity to death, metaphysically.

Over the years I have come to know Celeste (and her paintings) with all the complexities a person or a thing can have. The paintings (like the person) are filled with anger, longing, resentment, humor, shame, and a total lack of fear around self expression. They are judgmental, proud, and self reflexive (especially around humiliation). And, they brood over lived experience. They travel to Celeste's childhood places, her recent, wrought time living in New Orleans, and her reconnection with painting and all the avaricious baggage it carries. Like a true satirist Celeste looks at her cultural heritage and surroundings with a magnifying glass. A row of macabre figures wait in line to get coffee at an NA meeting, and though Celeste renders them grimly, other paintings (like *Me and Brandi*, *Goodbye Brandi*), suggest that she's earned her right to gallows humor.

Half Jewish, half Cajun Celeste paints to honor the proletariat, in the communist tradition of her family, but also to identify with them as an afflicted Southerner. Like the Verists in Germany after WWI the paintings reflect a certain horror and ennui of our time, inescapable poverty, and unforgivable wealth. They examine this divide, and others; between the north and the south, between Republicans and liberals, and between the artist's class (if such a thing exists) and artists themselves. This new body of work takes stock of how liberalism has changed in her lifetime. In *Sports bar/Used to be a Gay Bar*, sports fans and ghostly gays intermingle, the latter with a problematic invisibility. *The Matriarchs of the Hudson Valley (1980s-90s)*, portraitizes women from Celeste's Rhinebeck childhood, chain smoking, booze drinking, "baby boomers for multiculturalism," who serve as contradistinction to the urban aesthetes of *Closing Party (Hit the North)* exhausted from moving as they sit around a picnic table strategizing repairs in their new fixer-upper, and the best place to compost.

The paintings pay little mind to a "style" of painting, though Celeste's intimacy and comfort with paint, as well as the painted subject, is obvious. The paintings for this show remind me of Elaine De Kooning's portraits of JFK — they're painted with a love so big and absurd, the act of painting becomes an irony in and of itself. (Like Elaine De Kooning, Celeste too, has a love of sports that figures prominently in the work.) The paintings recognize that popular culture and politics are inseparable in

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America's 2016. With an earnestness that mirrors Celeste's love of country music (which is, eventually, infectious to those around her) the work is infused with song, just like life, or at least any life worth living. What Celeste is reading, watching, and hanging on to (pictures, notes, favorite mugs, ashtrays and other small possessions) all get painted into the work. And these collected things are part biography, part feminist creed. Her serpentine doctrine, though, keeps the work dialectical. The philandering drunk, George Jones, maybe the most famous country music singer ever, is pictured belovedly in one of the drawings (and Celeste genuinely loves him). In the original drawing for *Fall With Me For a Million Days (My Sweet Waterfall)* "a guy," again, most definitely a self portrait, scans his computer's music library (in the throes of an attack of memories) and slouches — his love and nostalgia is so overwhelming it erupts into a painful back deformity. Jones too, operates like a kind of symbol for deformity, the kind that grows within you when your anger turns into a sort of infatuation; the deepest, most unrealistic love of humanity. It is this unrealistic love of humanity, and perhaps an unrealistic love of self that unifies the characters in these paintings. From the cheering fans at a Trump rally to the 7Eleven guy in *How Long U Got?* These figures express blind hope in the face of absolute, maddening hopelessness.