

Paula Kamps | Cold Customs

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<<Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, come in, come in! Marvel at our acrobats and tightrope walkers, play with jugglers and ventriloquists, hold your breath before sword-eaters and don't let our clowns make you cry! An array of fabulous acts awaits you here. All this and more. Welcome to the "Circus of Life"!>>

The voice of the ringmaster seems to emerge from afar in my memory, just like the scenarios and figures, depicted by Paula Kamps (b. 1990, Germany), slowly loom up from a brilliant cloudy wash. They are concealed yet able to vividly recall in our minds this special moment many of us experienced as children years ago.

Under the colorful pigments of these apparently joyful paintings, Paula Kamps hides complex stories often inspired by her personal experience. In her painterly visions the impossibility to share memory, the notion of displacement, contemporary difficulties in one's identity formation and self-conception collide. Over the last year, Kamps uses imagery taken from various cultural dresses and costumes as seen in theater, circus or at carnival events. A costume understood as an active and performative agent embodying ideas and concepts becomes a key in the lecture of many of her works, while the theatrical gestures of painting one's face, wearing a mask or manipulating a puppet, all become a fertile ground for interpretation.

In this new body of work, Kamps continues the use of ink, pigments diluted in rabbit skin glue and acrylic paint applied by airbrush, a touch free painting technique, which allows her to add light strokes and washes. Halfway between watercolor and drawing, this unique painting process lets Kamps emphasize the intensity of colors. In most of her works, scenes sensitively emerge from vibrant stains just like some hazy thoughts and blurred images pop up in our minds sometimes.

"All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players [...]”¹ - Shakespeare's words spring to mind when looking at Kamps' works. Just right at the center of the room, before your very eyes, her *Circus of Life* emerges. On the left-hand side "Sorry Spectacle" depicts young and confused performers on stage. An inspiration taken from the artist's personal photograph showing her as a first-grade ballet dancer. Immersed in the magical-like powder, the scene reveals different protagonists, all belonging to another time, another epoch. An old man in a yellow raincoat seems to be a lost captain or a fisherman coming straight from one of the Brothers Grimm's fairy tales. A lady with a menacing gaze wearing a gothic dress with a high collar most likely got away from the Victorian era, while a girl with a striped cowboy shirt is definitely not afraid to look directly at you, the viewer. Indeed, each character looks somewhere else, nobody seems to be interested in the spectacle.

¹Shakespeare, William; Dolan, Frances E. [Editor]. *As You Like It*, Penguin Classics, 2000.

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The attention is directed towards the “Center Ring” presenting a female performer who surprisingly lifts two gentlemen. Here is where imagination and magic meet with reality. Kamps often juxtaposes these elements in search of her own truth. The painting was inspired by the real story about Katie Sandwina, an Austrian-American strongwoman working with Barnum & Bailey Circus in the United States at the turn of the 20th century. Known as Lady Hercules, Sandwina embodied both man’s strength and female beauty. She saw no difference between lifting her husband overhead with one hand and being a loving mother, while keeping her sense of femininity and wearing beautiful performing garments highlighting her hourglass figure. “These eyes have beheld the Superwoman. Her head is the head of Juno. Her form is fit for a mother of kings and heroes. She is twenty-five years old, weighs 210 pounds and moves as lightly as a greyhound. [...] She is as majestic as the Sphinx, as pretty as a valentine, as sentimental as a German schoolgirl, and as wholesome as a great big slice of bread and butter.”² Despite her “masculine” profession, the American press always emphasized Sandwina’s maternal and feminine nature; indeed during the Victorian era the women’s greatest value was to be found through childcare and homemaking. The public needed to confirm her sexuality to make this Titaness look less threatening. Sandwina became a myth. She crushed preconceptions. For Kamps, her story constitutes a fascinating tale about the construction of identity and its complexity, being at the same time a starting point for this exhibition.

Whether Kamps’ childhood ballet dancing garb, a Victorian traditional dress or Sandwina’s circus corset outfit - all costumes combine spaces of traditional or folkloric pageantry. They act as signifiers of affiliation and indicate gender, social or cultural belonging as we perceive it through broader meaning systems, historically constructed. How is our identity being formed today? How do we understand ourselves as individuals? Kamps skillfully captures these questions in scenes evoking memories of the past as if coming from a film still or some old photograph. A nostalgic reverie and sense of longing permeates her visual fantasies, which recall to mind a line from "Suite: Judy Blue Eyes" (1969) by Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young: "Don't let the past remind us of what we are not now." Who we are and where do we belong? The questions Kamps poses could maybe find the answer in the feelings her works actually provoke - a nostalgic circus - a precious reservoir of memories and experiences often helping us to align our past identities to the present and future ones.

In the work “Censorship Projected” we observe a simple gesture of painting a mustache on a girl's face by some unknown person. Apparently innocent, but evocative marking gesture becomes a strong image and leaves room for interpretation. Unlike in the “Iron Game” a woman paints her face with red lipstick. Is she just having fun? Or, is the gesture rather desperately evoking a sort of imprisonment? An imprisonment in stage character or in her life? The line seems thin.

Kamps is intrigued by people’s performative attitudes in their everyday lives. Indeed, her painterly visions reveal multi-layered narrations about staging ourselves in the contemporary world. How we act on the screens of our phones, who we dream to become and which “costume” we choose to wear. Are we authentic or are we performing? Following Jean Cocteau’s “Letters to Americans”, a book she was reading while working on this series, Kamps looks at life like she would look at stage.

Agnieszka Faferek

² Kate Carew: “Barnum & Bailey’s ‘Strong Woman’ Tells Kate Carew - This Young Goddess of the Tan Bark, Who Tosses Her Husband About as She Would a Feather, Explains How She Came By Her Strength” New York American, 16 April 1911, 2-M. In Jan Todd: Center Ring: Katie Sandwina and the Construction of Celebrity. Iron Game History. Volume 10, Number 1, November 2007.