

Color Coated

In an old episode of *Twilight Zone* department store mannequins are allowed a certain period of time alive. They find themselves drawn to the mannequins as mannequins in the store, recognizing some sort of kinship without knowing why, so that an encounter with one leaves them feeling deeply unsettled. During that window of time they forget that they once were mannequins; they remain oblivious of their imminent return. Thus the moment of return to their natural state (plastic) comes as a terrible shock.

Mannequin-like figures often make an appearance in Lara Odell's art. Her human subjects do not look at you, as they do in Alice Neel paintings, for instance. They are mannequins, statues or toys. We question their capacity to express at all, even as we sense that they display an indifference to our presence. Or not indifference, but fear—fear of humans and human nature. A profound connection exists with the Emily Dickinson who wrote in 1884: “In all the circumference of Expression, those guileless words of Adam and Eve never were surpassed, ‘I was afraid and hid Myself.’”

Ulrich Loock, in an essay on the Belgian artist Luc Tuymans (b. 1958), notes that “Painting people in their suffering is impossible; the inevitable voyeurism of a gaze that cannot be returned would be unbearable.” Tuymans incorporates people in scenes of what are really abandoned worlds by painting “inactive figures”—people as “available objects,” people as toys. In this practice Tuymans follows his mentor Edward Hopper (1882-1967). Both Hopper and Tuymans are important to Odell. Unlike them, however, she paints using digital color. In our time of computer (mediated) art, everyone is “painting by numbers.” Colors as codes.

Colored plastic anticipated the significance of commercial color in a can, and digital color especially, in twentieth-century art. In “Plastic” (1957) Roland Barthes noted that of yellow, red and green, plastic “keeps only the aggressive quality, and uses them as mere names, being able to display only the concepts of colours.” Similarly, I think, department store mannequins display not only the concept of a color (flesh tone), but the concept of a person. Plastic is a “shaped” substance, Barthes adds, and offers “*resistance*, a state which merely means an absence of yielding.”

The poured concrete walls of swimming pools also offer an architecture of resistance. Unlike a plastic container, though, pool walls have their color applied—that famous “sea water” color which glows in Odell's series of nine pool prints, *One Feet Deep* (2002). There aren't very many pools in Buffalo, NY; the pool season is just too short. So private pools are not built (dug out), and public

pools sit empty much of the year. Empty of water, that is—when winter comes, what pools there are fill with snow. We see in *One Feet Deep* the white winter sky in the bottom of a public swimming pool. The scene feels inverted and enclosed, with the sky cropped out, and our position at the edge looking into the pool. It's an abandoned world—though lingering are, perhaps, the ghosts of prepubescent bodies at play. The pool concedes itself to nature, open to what falls from the sky, its relatively pure gift of blanketing snow. It is that special property of snow to lie still on the ground, and retain a consistent whiteness, so that depth perception becomes destabilized—the numbers on the signs lose relevance, the ladders decorate the surface rather than lead down.

Lara Odell comes from southern California (b. 1971), where pools are abundant and not seasonal. (Compare her prints with Brit David Hockney's LA pool paintings in the 60s and 70s.) She has lived in the northeastern U.S. for a decade now, but has never felt native to winter, to the general absence of heat. If the absence of color connotes something cold, and its presence something hot, then Odell mourns its absence in this part of the country. These personal details are relevant to her work, which has consistently focused on the meaning and function of color, on how the medium she uses in her art affects her experience of color.

We have a way of referring to “a blanket of snow,” which does offer a hint of warmth in whiteness. How do you feel about whiteness? In *Chromophobia* David Batchelor has discussed the ancient opposition between whiteness and color, which is “made out to be the property of some ‘foreign’ body—usually the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer or the pathological”; as well, “colour is relegated to the realm of the superficial, the supplementary, the inessential or the cosmetic.” “Colour is,” Batchelor concludes, “dangerous, or it is trivial, or it is both.”

Whiteness has thus been understood as stable and primary, situated underneath color. The advent of color photography well after black & white only confirmed this theory (color seemed applied). The white paper is indeed the base, yet in her method Odell effects an unveiling of color, as if color were primary. She scanned a color photograph, and on top of that image she added a black & white layer; she then erased so that the red and green of the pool and the changeroom building (and some brown in the snow) were restored to their original color. As well, under that snow lies more color; whiteness has thus been applied. What if whiteness were in fact cosmetic, a painted surface? Complicating this response is the use here of an inkjet printer, which drops only colored ink. For the canvas there is white paint; for inkjet prints there is white paper. These prints thus call attention to the properties of paper—the artificiality of white paper, its bleached

appearance. In the end these prints do not celebrate color, but point out the tension between color and whiteness, each seductive to us.

Lara Odell's recent videos continue her interest in documentary narrative, and in "the double." *Good Answer* documents one family's response to the experience of participating in a television game show, *The Family Feud*, combining footage of a 1979 episode with interviews done in 2001. This funny work demonstrates how smoothly an appearance on national television fits into the normal lives of southern Californians, and exposes the behind-the-scenes coaching that contestants receive—"be enthusiastic." *Applaud everything*. In the end, comparisons between this show and "games" in real life seem inevitable—debates in Congress, for instance; both are orchestrated on the same principles, with dissent not part of the script. Truly a conflation of art and life.

Antibodies is a video collaboration (with Monica Duncan) in which "Noon and her friend" are scientist/artist types who gather color samples and are equally at (un)ease with human and machine forms. Odell's videos involve people in largely unscripted performance roles; the video camera never transparently records, nor do people on camera behave "naturally." Her videos are ultimately a perfect response to the theory that we are rarely if ever not on camera. How then can I hide myself? In *Antibodies*, as in *Grandma Baba and Little Boris* (2000, with Anya Lewin) and *Incident at Wal-mart, or Where's My Daughter* (1999, starring Charles Bernstein), the performers are obviously adults; but in each case the adults behave in ways indistinguishable from children. Acting like an adult or a professional remains a well practiced pretense that we need to believe fools everybody, including ourselves.

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