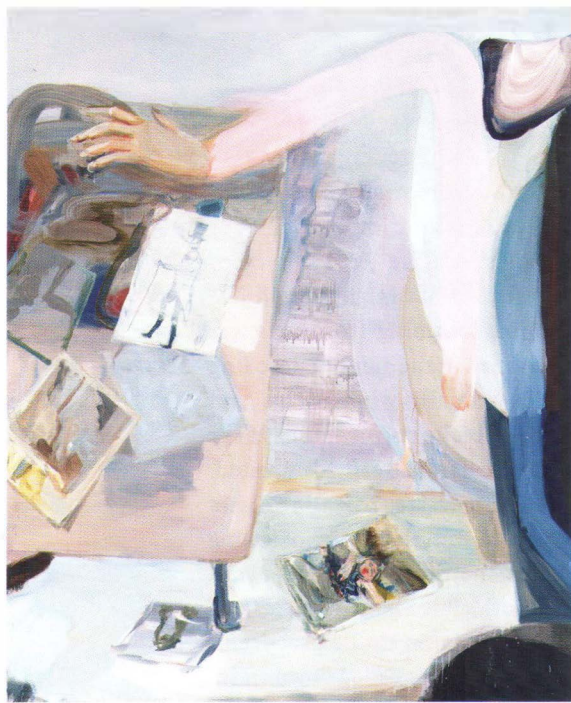
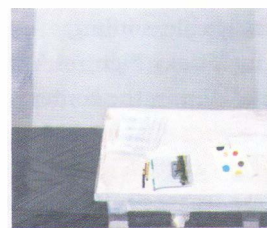


VISUAL ART

Janet Werner

by Erica Mendritzki



hurts because #metoo, because #yesallwomen.

Janet Werner has made a career of making paintings of pictures of gorgeous, shiny-haired girls. Loosely based on images from fashion magazines and illustrated books, these portraits have had less to do with individual identity than with the idea of pretty per se. The imaginary models who filled Werner's canvases were long-limbed and starry-eyed and menaced by their own good looks. Even when Werner's work got weird, I had the funny feeling that pretty was winning: the women she painted with squished heads or elongated necks or animal faces felt like victims. Pretty had done them in. The ladies, that is—not the paintings. The paintings were consistently good and funny and worth looking at. But what I'm trying to say is that despite these admirable qualities, Werner's work used to depress me a little. It hurt.

In her newest body of work, something has shifted. There are still lots of girls and they're still good-looking. But now, there is room to move.

In "Sticky Pictures," Werner backs up from the fashion spread to take in a wider view. Images torn from the pages of *Vogue* and *Elle* are shown within the context of her studio,

piled on dirty tables and fixed to the wall with green painter's tape. A smiling face is folded in half; a glossy page is scrunched by the rolling wheel of a table. These images are filthy, torn, well used.

The best paintings of studios (I'm thinking of Matisse's *The Red Studio* or Rembrandt's *The Artist in his Studio*) are revelatory and instructive glimpses of the internal workings of an artistic practice. They show not only where paintings get made, but also how the work operates: they present, in microcosm, the essential formal and intellectual concerns underlying a body of work. "Sticky Pictures" functions in this way.

With her photographic source material laid bare on the studio table, Werner draws attention to these images as images. Rather than making pictures of girls, Werner is now making paintings about looking at pictures of girls. We begin to consider not only how her own work is constructed, but also how fashion operates, how girls and women make themselves up and how pretty is manufactured and spread throughout our culture.

As Werner's title implies, pretty pictures stick to us. We can't get rid of their pernicious insistence that we should be thinner, blonder, shinier, more compliant. We can't

Beyoncé was right: *pretty* hurts. It hurts girls and women, mostly. It hurts to pluck our eyebrows and walk in heels and not eat what we want. It hurts to get surgery, to get waxed, to starve. It hurts to still not be pretty enough. It hurts that I care about being pretty so much, even though I am a grown woman and I know better. It hurts because, well, it actually does matter what I look like, and it is affecting my job prospects and social interactions and access to power. It

even show how hard it is to strive towards this unattainable goal: we've got to wake up like this, effortlessly chic, smiling.

But in "Sticky Pictures," work is visible. Within the context of a studio, a photographic image is a useful object with a job to do. We see these images taking part in the complex chain of connections and tasks that lead to a painting getting made. By revealing the ways in which she constructs beauty in her workplace—her studio—Werner connects her artistic labour to the work of beauty making in general. But the thing that made me so excited about "Sticky Pictures" is that she doesn't stop there.

In this exhibition, Werner's paintings do something I have rarely seen: they take seriously the problem that prettiness poses for women while also shrugging off its demands. And, ladies, this is how freedom appears.

A friend once told me that every body of work needs a piece that functions like an escape hatch, somewhere for the ideas that bog you down to slip out. "Sticky Pictures" is full of openings. Pink, black and violet-grey voids punctuate the selection of work. A dark hole beckons in the bottom of *Hover*. In *This*, four black corners frame a pinkish expanse of ... not much. *Black Book* is maybe a picture of a Moleskine notebook with coloured page markers sticking up, but it is also a rectangular void, a slow and deliberate No.

These are the kinds of paintings you need when you've got yourself in a tight spot. They are places to slip away, or, alternatively, gestures of refusal. One of my favourite paintings is the large and theatrical *Someone, Something, No One*. Loosely painted black and sea-green curtains are pulled to either side of a broad

flat grey. The paint is opaque and unyielding and close to the surface. It is a tense painting. It has shades of disappointment, of the one that got away, of *shh, keep quiet* (*Someone did Something*, and *No One* got caught). But equally—and thrillingly—it suggests that we just can't see what's coming next.

This is a body of work by an artist at the height of her powers: conscious of how her pictures operate, aware of what makes them stick, but also ready and willing to look for something new. There were flourishes of pure painterly delight throughout the show: the loopy pink mass in the background of *Vo Mars*, for example, or the brushy dappled greys of *Harper Valley*. *Untitled (Gallery)* is very nearly a depressing painting, depicting a pissed-off blonde with crossed arms wearing a skirt made of pictures. Who wants to carry that weight around? Beside her elbow, though, there is a swirling mess of blue and brown brushwork, positively buzzing with energy. It feels a little bit like magic.

"Sticky Pictures" shows us the kind of spell we need right now. We need beauty that is wilder and stronger than the gnawing, negging power of pretty. We need practised refusals of unreasonable demands. We need to examine and explain how pretty hurts us, and why. And we need somewhere better to go from here. "Sticky Pictures" shows us the way. ■

"Sticky Pictures" was exhibited at Parisian Laundry, Montreal, from September 8 to October 7, 2017.

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