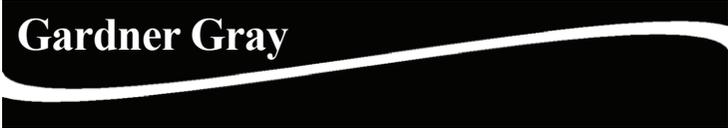


Georgia Gardner Gray



DOWNER

at Skalitzer Str. 68, 10997 Berlin

There were security guards posted up in Georgia Gardner Gray's last exhibition at Croy Nielsen, Vienna. Their presence seem to strike some balance between mocking the fact that Gagosian actually has security guards, inducing the anxiety of being evaluated by a doorman at a club, and reminding us of the systems of control that lurk around our everyday lives – whether they're wearing paramilitary swag or largely invisible. Convincing at first glance, Gardner Gray's security team were actually life-sized puppets with skewed out of proportion bodies and inkjet printed faces pasted onto stuffed heads. They reminded me of the dummy security cameras people used to buy before the real things became so cheap.

Equally meaningful was whom the guards were guarding. The show was populated by hair-trigger sensitivities – its press release half lamenting, half just plainly stating, that we are becoming increasingly inward facing, self-congratulated, and nihilistic. In the midst of the installation of paintings and the loafing security team was a bald girl, stretching, post-workout on a patch of grass. She was posed – not actively seeking attention, but definitely not discouraging it. It was an 'I'm feelin' myself' moment. So in a way, I think the guards were there to keep the public and Georgia's subjects from getting too close to one another.

The fake guards also short-circuited the experience of visiting a gallery – a ritual that is usually given the privileged psychological space of a thought exercise rather than a confrontation with concrete social failures. We know that security jobs are low-wage, unskilled and with little upward mobility. And while it's fun to remark how Robert Ryman or Wade Guyton were once museum guards, we know that most of them don't really care about this industry that all of our lives orbit.

Authority figures have been cast in Georgia's work before. A project from last year starred the mysterious and much loathed figure of the public transit 'controller.' A system in which train fares are purchased on an honor system necessitates a cadre of undercover workers, both to check riders' tickets and simultaneously reinforce the prerogative to buy a ticket in the first place. Enter the controller. The controllers are a particularly insidious group, as everything about them is designed to deceive. Some wear

Armani polo shirts and sweatpants; I've even seen one with dreadlocks and a longboard. The specter of their existence keeps civil society functioning and its citizens obedient. They separate the naughty and nice, and they do it in public. Much like the bouncers at Berlin's famous nightclubs, their psyches and predilections are speculated on – which train lines they patrol and at which times of day – but little concrete information is known about how they profile. Just like people claiming to know what time to line up at Berghain, or what to wear, people also claim they can spot controllers from two cars away or that they will be surfing the U6 on weekday afternoons.

Power, despite all of its corrupting effects and abuses, can be alluring. I don't think it would be inaccurate to suggest that there is also an element of fetishistic attraction to these bearers of power, however small their arena. Repulsion and attraction are often just a degree apart. And, anyway, what is transgression without something to set it in relief? Georgia's practice relishes in these oppositions – order versus disorder, abundance versus decay, beauty versus the abject, control versus anarchy. The battle between these often takes place microcosmically – in the space of one train car, one restaurant, or indeed even one mind – but implication is broad.

Agency and self-awareness are pursued by the figures that inhabit Georgia's sculptures, paintings and plays, but they are difficult to attain. Not only is there this looming presence of control – in the public decency sense of the word – there is also the growth of consumerism as self-definition. The solipsistic, over-influenced shoring up of the self through buying junk is omnipresent. As is the trail of junk that gets tossed as soon as it's no longer useful to us. Figures pictured wandering around Georgia's paintings frequently carry shopping bags or stroll past storefronts. More bags and cheap two wheeled grocery carts have dotted her installations – these filled with mundane but bizarre things like hair dye or white chocolate. The battle between freedom and consumerism is another of Gardner Gray's front lines.

She also looks to the spaces we spend money in – junk boutiques, grocery stores and coffee shops – as fulfilling a new role as mediated public space. These are places where people can kind of just hang around – work at their laptops for hours on end, or sleep, harass and clip their fingernails, so long

as they are paying for something. They are also some of the few remaining locations where strangers might interact with one another. Like on train cars, these territories are where polite society can meet its opposite, where humanity can bristle up against itself.

Who is bristling against who is an important question. This is where the oppositional binaries get cloudy. Georgia's works are permeated with nouveau clichés – think of what Hot Topic did to punk, or the corporatization of other subcultures. Caricatures seem to be everywhere. In one painting an aging punk wraps his arm around a dog. His bleached hair is beginning to grow out and the dark roots are visible. His hairline is receding. It's kind of embarrassing. The people who are supposed to do the bristling have become totally familiar. Punks, hippies, grunge kids – all of these counter culture personages have been packaged and marketed to us for so long that we can smell their complacency. The same can be said of certain markers of wealth or refinement – and, fittingly, fake designer bags turn up Georgia's installations as well. Life seems to have become a costume party. We don't really interact in public so much as masquerade. We screen phone calls in favor of texting and rarely go anywhere unless we're meeting someone we know. How we look must now communicate exactly what we want others to think of us. In two paintings, two pairs of couples are dressed so similarly that they're starting to become indistinguishable.

A lot of the parody in Gardner Gray's work is found in the ways our narcissism can pacify us. She once rewrote and restaged Molière's *Les Précieuses ridicules* – a play about coachmen impersonating high society types – as taking place entirely inside the imagination of a young girl being fawned over by her toys. In the end, the impostors are unmasked and the little girl convinces herself she knew it all along. Another play starred a shopkeeper so manically self-involved that he didn't notice his partner cheating on him in the back room with a homeless man. She eventually leaves him for a flamboyant pimp who the shopkeeper breathlessly hurled sales pitches at earlier that afternoon. The disorder finds a way in – it gets pushed to the margins before eventually roaring back.

There is a bit of rot tingeing each thread of Gardner Gray's practice: from

the heads of cabbage left lying around one exhibition, which literally did rot; to the concept of moral decay, which is lampooned in her plays and performances; to the realization that ideals or utopic ways of living were always corrupt. The implication is that everything begins to stink if you let it hang around too long. This rot touches her paintings, with their bruised palette and dappled fields of paint like mold setting in on bread. It's not just styles of dress that her work prods and satirizes, but also styles of painting. Many of her canvases look as if Toulouse Lautrec, Berthe Morisot and Édouard Manet had time traveled forward 150 years, landed in a bar and decided to make a painting together. The idea that painting should be a vehicle through which to see the truth of contemporary life is repurposed to show that contemporary life is a stylized mess. If anyone is valorized, it's only the truly unhinged.

We don't make it into the work so often, but I think that we might be Georgia's real subjects. We, the people who denounce power, but are secretly attracted to it. We, the liberals who invented cancel culture and watched it spread like a virus; the people who fly way too much but refuse plastic straws; who dress like punks for one party and yuppies for another; fetishists of bohemianism, but dandies in real life. The focus is aimed towards the ironies, bits of manipulation or betrayal, and the convenient lies we tell ourselves. Rather than an easy, broad-strokes societal take down, we're shown 'twinning' couples, dogs lapping at the crotches of people passed out on couches, pallid girls sleeping next to their voodoo dolls, and groups who are just wholly incompatible astrologically. These vignettes accumulate into a picture of our world in all its lunacy and unkindness, but they don't skimp on the absurdities that give life its uncanny reality.

Patrick Armstrong