

## ARTFORUM



Marnie Weber, *Gathering Daisies on a Misty Day*, 2019, mixed media, 12 1/2 × 91/2".

## Marnie Weber and Justin John Greene

SIMON LEE | NEW YORK

The pairing of Marnie Weber's haunted collages with Justin John Greene's macabre paintings plunged this viewer into a dark corner of the American psyche. For their two-person exhibition at Simon Lee, the Los Angeles-based artists presented an assortment of tableaux from the collective memory—reflecting on such themes as the Midwestern pastoral, girlhood innocence, boyhood violence, and urban anomie—and transported us to the scarier side of nostalgia.

For the past few years, Weber has developed a body of work—via music, films, performances and installations—with her Spirit Girls: a cast of characters inspired by Spiritualism, a religious movement with roots in nineteenth-century America, which posits that communications between the living and the dead are possible. Her feminine phantoms appear in collages made from photographs and acrylic paint, which situate the artist's (Middle) American Horror Story throughout sundry cornfields and farmhouses. In *The Barn Dance* (all works 2019), women in Empire-era dresses hold court with a bunny-masked figure amid a kaleidoscopic background of splotchy reds, greens, yellows, and oranges. In *The Corn Ritual* and *Gathering Apples on a Sunny Day*, groups of masked young girls, clad in 1960s shift dresses, arrange themselves as if posing for a school photograph. Though their expressions are hidden by ghoulish masks, their gazes are confrontational, perhaps goading us to remark upon their grotesque visages.

Greene's paintings are set in the urban wilds of LA, where motley crews of ghouls and goblins roam the streets. In the 1980s, thinkers such as Dave Hickey and Fredric Jameson observed that the relationship between fact and fiction in that city is tenuous at best, pointing to the Westin Bonaventure Hotel and Disneyland as exemplars of this postmodern condition. Amalgamating various styles from across art history within a single composition, Greene suggests that painting today, its production yoked to the grim labor conditions of the gig economy, blurs the boundaries between apparitions and apparent reality—the images of which are buoyed by a sinister energy.

*Spirits and Libations* depicts the unfolding of a Faustian bargain: A devilish-looking agent of destruction (perhaps a Hollywood agent, since this is LA) passes a scrawled note to his drinking companion, a sleazy venture capitalist, who appears to have been rendered by a social realist. The investor's girlfriend, a Picassoesque femme fatale, leans on his shoulder and nurses an oily-looking cocktail. Surrounding them are the weasel goons from *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988), painted in a ghastly shade of green. In an update to the Christian Annunciation scene, a bathrobed woman in *Insomnia*, eyes wide with fear, is visited at her kitchen table by a suited specter. He holds his chin in one hand and with the other dangles a teabag like a mesmerist's pendulum. Half cast in shadows while shackled to an unidentified source outside the frame, he smirks at the woman's horror.

Greene's paintings also parody the dismal inequities of our harrowing present. Take the class anxiety illustrated in *The Righteous*, wherein a group of hipsters, one toting a champagne bottle, prowl the streets; they are observed by a scowling man turned gargoyle dressed in sweats and sneakers, who wields a cane as he feeds a stray cat. Or consider the range of American male iconography in a still life of action figures—from the patriarch Earl Sinclair of the '90s sitcom *Dinosaurs* to the Incredible Hulk—stacked in a tight arrangement. The work's title, *Toxic*, encapsulates the kind of ugly and adolescent masculinity of our country's right wing, and the waste it has laid to our politics.

In their neo-Gothic renderings, Weber and Greene plunder this country's imagination for all its garish and gruesome visual riches. Their variety of US kitsch melds the supernatural with the superficial—two elements that seem very American indeed.

— Tausif Noor