

ArtReview

Donna Huddleston *The Exhausted Student**Drawing Room, London 28 November – 1 March*

Often depicting groups of young women, Donna Huddleston's drawings distil fluctuating and formative states, such as the transition from adolescence into adulthood, into the stillness of a tableau vivant. For her first solo show in the UK, the Irish-Australian artist has turned to her own biography, weaving narratives from her time as a student of theatre design together with fragments and images by Anton Chekhov, Raphael, Diego Velázquez and Tennessee Williams. The result is a body of work that is carefully staged even as it reflects on what it means to stage life in art.

The focal point of the exhibition is the titular drawing (all works 2019), which is over 2m wide. Made up of eight sheets of paper, it is arranged on a freestanding wall that is placed in front of a series of fabric acoustic wall panels of the type used in theatres. The composition is borrowed from Raphael's similarly sized *The Deposition* (1507), but in Huddleston's reworking, Christ is replaced by a young woman who has collapsed into

the arms of those around her, a dripping paintbrush in her splayed hand calling to mind bleeding stigmata. Mary Magdalene is played by a woman with a face covered in freckles or scalelike marks, her pale-yellow hair encasing her head like an immovable wooden wig. In contrast to the Magdalene's desperate, clutching distress at Christ's dead body, this woman looks over the student with a distanced, clinical expression: she holds her listless hand as if checking her own pulse.

The figures are built up through layers of coloured pencil, and their clothes give the impression of having gone through the wash too many times, the original vibrancy of colour bleached out. Expressions are conveyed through theatrical signifiers: a hand raised to the mouth, the whites of eyeballs visible as they roll backwards. Huddleston builds personality through detail: a dated beret, a pencil behind the ear, bloodshot eyes, nail varnish colour, wrinkles. In *The Call* a woman holds a rotary telephone to her ear with a dramatically crooked bend of the

elbow, her brow furrowed in anguish. Her laboured performance acts out the significance of the call but divulges nothing else. Focusing on gesture and ritual, the artist rinses her scenes of any deeper signification, presenting them back to us as pure affectation.

More references to theatre and art history arise throughout the carefully coded works in this exhibition. The frontal gaze and structured dress in *The Call* are reminiscent of Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656), while the scaly, lizardlike print of her outfit nods to Williams's 1961 play *The Night of the Iguana*, quotes from which the artist incorporates into her enigmatic exhibition text. Although the scenes they depict are static, these drawings never quite settle. Instead they evoke a feverish, dreamlike state in which the separation between theatre and life might collapse for a 'suffering' student exhausted by their own ambition. Slipping between self-parody and sincerity, *The Exhausted Student* is a wry study of creative labour, sacrifice and ambition.

Kathryn Lloyd



The Exhausted Student, 2019, coloured pencil on paper, eight parts, 145 × 226 cm (overall).
Photo: Angus Mill. Courtesy the artist