

## Donna Huddleston

SIMON LEE

"There's something about drawing the female form that holds a certain psychological power for me and that feels a necessary element of my work," Donna Huddleston has said. Her first exhibition with Simon Lee was replete with striking and enigmatic women carefully rendered



Donna Huddleston,  
*The Stand In*, 2021,  
color pencil on paper,  
39 1/4 x 28 1/4".

in Caran d'Ache colored pencil, graphite, pencil, and metal point on paper. Placed against elaborately patterned backgrounds, in stylized otherworldly tableaux, and within tightly constructed interior spaces, these figures appear as characters plucked from a larger narrative whose whole remains at a mysterious remove.

The show was titled "In Person," but its exact subject remained ambiguous and multilayered. One could read it as a kind of theatrical marquee: the artist—in person! Indeed, Huddleston's own likeness appeared in two works, the large and colorful *The Stand In* and the spare metal-point triptych *As You Like It*, both 2021. In the former, she is shown in profile, garbed in a clingy plum-colored dress, standing between two wood-grain plinths on which she delicately rests her elbows. One hand is raised to grasp a dangling piece of white fabric; the other is poised

gracefully in front of her throat, like a bird mid-flutter. On her horizontal forearm stands a tiny figure with the same coiffure and costume, though in cantaloupe orange, who drops a white handkerchief into the stippled green ether of the drawing's background. The woman, or Huddleston, or her likeness, gazes with longing anticipation at this diminutive, alternate version of herself—a mirage, a vision, a manifestation of a desire, perhaps, to leave the self and become the other.

In *As You Like It*, we see the artist's three-quarter profile in stark outline as an Egyptian-style bust that rotates counterclockwise across three images. The work is named for the Shakespearean comedy in which an exiled nobleman, the melancholy Jaques, utters the famous lines, "All the world's a stage / and all the men and women merely players." Artistry is a performance: of skill, of imagination, of storytelling, of self. Femininity, too, is a dramatization, and Huddleston surrounds her surreal self-portraits with images of other women both recognizable and not. In the large and extraordinary *Time Passed*, 2022, we glimpse Chantal Akerman drawn in grays and blacks but for her crumpled yellow shirt. In *Hag*, 2021, the Evil Queen of Disney's *Snow White* (1937) appears in her wicked, witchy form, eyes bulging, eyebrow cocked, her cloak a psychedelic haze of radial patterns.

Huddleston's process involves a prolonged initial phase of research, after which she begins executing her meticulously detailed works—the multipaneled *Time Passed* took a year to make. The artist collects source images from a wide range of films, literature, theater, and the visual arts, hanging them in her studio as "a bid to absorb them both subliminally and directly." When fragments of images start to assemble in her mind, she knows she is ready to draw and begins immediately, without planning or preliminary sketches. The composition is determined in the making, one detail giving imaginative rise to the next, as if revealing a deep psychic composite. The artist's background in theater and film is often mentioned by critics, but staging means image-making in any case: How to create space and depth? Where to place the figure? From where does the light shine? When to break the fourth wall, as so many of Huddleston's women do, fixing the viewer with a direct gaze? The artist's drawings reward attentive looking with their

symbolic features—crows, carnations, textiles, slatted blinds, strings, piano keys, rhythmic and mirroring shapes, shadows and reflections—and technical precision. In person, up close, the seductive works reveal their construction: Colors that appear solid are stippled, crosshatched, contoured, feathered, dotted. The texture of the paper is visible; the images are as transparent as they are vivid. In this, Huddleston's works remind us, too, that to look, as to make, is to both absorb and be absorbed.

—*Emily LaBarge*