

(Something Flippant), Pure Pleasure

By Jonathan Watkins, Director at IKON, Birmingham, UK

"At LACMA, I stood looking at a Picasso painting called Man and Woman where the male figure is pointing a knife at the woman's vagina, when a male security guard (laughing) said, 'Picasso was a pig!' That encounter stuck with me and as I started to make my Pure Pleasure paintings. I turned my attention to an unexplored perspective in the history of painting, that of a woman painting her female lover, woman on woman, with a desiring female gaze. I realised that when we see a female figure in a painting we are only used to seeing the desiring male gaze or self-portraits." Kate Groobey, 2018

Kate Groobey's *Pure Pleasure* is a deceptively easy-going body of work. Comprising video and dressed mannequins as well as painterly paintings, it is as ingenuously joyful as it is philosophical, at once hedonistic and knowing. The artist's feminist observations on the canon of art history - incidentally informing museum acquisitions and displays since museums were invented - are not unfamiliar, but her artistic response is extraordinarily original, subtle and refreshing.

Born in Leeds (1979), having studied fine art in Oxford and London, Groobey now lives between Yorkshire and the south of France. The latter, with its landscape and lifestyle sharply contrasting with the milieu of her upbringing, inspired her to embark on a series entitled *The Good Life* (2017), paintings and videos that depict friends and acquaintances aspiring to a wholesome balance between physical and mental wellbeing. There is joie de vivre in their reading, swimming and playing outdoors, but with typical wit Groobey conveys her humane understanding of the difference between ambition and actual achievement.

The Good Life evolved into *Pure Pleasure*. In a recent interview Groobey explained that she painted a series of nudes and portraits of her partner while they were travelling through California, and this inspired the title: "[It] was something flippant she said, 'I am pure pleasure', but that phrase seemed to me to sum up my feelings about the landscape, about paint, about her and about the time of year; it was the start of summer."

Classical antiquity, the Renaissance, Rembrandt, Gauguin, the German Expressionists - Picasso! - and countless other (mainly male) artistic precedents immediately spring to mind for Groobey's nudes in landscapes. She acknowledges the tradition as much as she revels in the act of painting itself - often standing on her canvases in a performative process - and this corresponds to the videos in which we see her dancing as different painted characters against landscape backdrops. With

happy homemade soundtracks, it is as if she has stepped through a picture plane to impress upon us the feeling of pure (female) pleasure. Furthermore, the artist's English sense of humour makes her work stronger, more ambiguous; she knows that we know that she knows that the good life, happiness and pleasure are not so simple, but then, as impulses, they are compelling. She embraces the complexity, the politics - the sexual politics - with a life enhancing spirit.