

REVIEWS NEW YORK

Michelle Uckotter

King's Leap

By Barry Schwabsky

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The six paintings in Michelle Uckotter's show "Trap Paintings Vol. 3" were all oil pastel on panel, and the artist's use of a dry medium was crucial to their look and feel. It's patent that her paint doesn't start out as fluid—it's not smooth, and it doesn't flow. Rather, it's been pushed and dragged against a resistant surface, one without the give of stretched canvas. The texture is rough, and the palette is subdued, almost drab (lots of grays) and yet a bit overheated. Because I'm a sucker for painterly fluency and dash—gimme Van Dyck!—it took me a few minutes to notice that Uckotter, playing against my inclination, is more than just an earnest and hardworking pictorial storyteller. What might at first seem a somewhat faded and fusty realism is just the sly and darkly witty camouflage in which she's cloaked a stranger and more beguiling project. Can painting be melodramatic and deadpan, blatant and inscrutable, illustrational and reflexive all at once? That's the bet Uckotter makes, and wins.

The protagonists of these works likewise supported contradictory responses. Isolated in eerie settings, caught up in storylines impossible for the viewer to suss out, they could have been victims or villains, ingenues or succubi, "final girls" or solitary schemers. Or maybe they were none of the above, just ordinary people glimpsed at odd moments. Most often, their faces were hidden or turned away from the viewer—perhaps absorbed in something from which the onlooker is excluded. For example, consider the nearly naked figure in *Satan* (all works 2023) riding backward on a white rocking horse that's much too small for her in a vast, dimly lit attic. This lumber room, filled with all the odds and ends you might expect to find, is tinged with a lurid crimson light pouring in through one small window. In a way, she's expressive enough even without a face: The very hunch of her back bespeaks an alluring melancholy. You almost might not notice that someone else seems to be crouching behind the big old air conditioner in the lower-right corner—not spying on the girl so glumly disporting herself but looking off in another direction. This figure is not there to see something but to avoid being seen. Uckotter is trans, and the show's titular "trap" is derogatory slang for a trans woman, referring to the straight male fear of accidentally getting "trapped" in a romantic entanglement with a passing trans person. The seductive figure in these lurid but alluring settings ingeniously toyed with this form of cheap heterosexual hysteria in clever, subtle ways, both playing into and undermining cultural phobias.

Seeing and not being seen is the subject of *Girl in studio*, where the standing figure, clad in ill-fitting froufrou, shields her face with one hand but reveals the blue pupilless eye of an alien staring out at the hypnotized viewer between her fingers. There's nothing coy about this gaze; it's at once commanding and threatening. The one piece here that was not a painting rendered the threat literal: *Terrible place, glory hole* is a takeoff on Marcel Duchamp's peep show *Étant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau / 2° le gaz d'éclairage* (Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas), 1946–66, in which—I'll try not to give a spoiler—the viewer's voyeuristic desire is not rewarded with the splayed availability of Duchamp's deformed nude seen through the work's eyehole at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

The setting of *Girl in studio* is, as the title announces, a painter's workspace, but the easel in it holds a canvas (not a panel like the ones Uckotter uses) that is turned away from us, as are so many of her protagonists' faces. And there's nothing to indicate that the person we see in the picture is the artist; in fact, I'm inclined to read her as an intruder—a stand-in for the viewer, not for Uckotter. Am I fascinated by some strange image of myself here? Maybe. Or let's say I'm fascinated by this reflection of my own fascination with the uncanniness of there being any self at all.