

Chloe Wise: Thank You For The Nice Fire

April 7, 2021
Susan Harris



A quote by Jean Baudrillard heads up the press release for an exhibition of new works by Canadian-born, New York-based, and Instagram-popular artist Chloe Wise, who is having her first solo show in New York. “This is the only country which gives you the opportunity to be so brutally naïve; things, faces, skies, and deserts are expected to be simply what they are. This is the land of the ‘just as it is.’” Situating Wise’s hyper-realistic work in the camp of American directness, literalness, and naiveté as described by Baudrillard is apt. I am reminded of the brilliant Barbara Novak’s discussion about the enduring *American vision in American Painting of the Nineteenth Century: Realism, Idealism, and the American Experience* in which she identified the unique and direct relationship between object and idea as characterizing American realism from colonial times on. “For the need to grasp reality, to ascertain the physical *thereness* of things seems to be an essential component of the American experience,” Novak wrote. Within this framework, Novak’s illuminating analysis of John Singleton Copley’s portraits as laboriously distilled syntheses over repeated encounters remains seared in my memory.

ALMINE RECH

Wise engages the venerable tradition of American portraiture in *Thank You For The Nice Fire*, her show at Almine Rech and while, like Copley, she paints people of her time, she eschews the essential character of real individuals in favor of the milieu they inhabit. Since her breakout moment in 2014 when she was catapulted into an arena where art meets fashion meets popular culture with *Bagel No. 5*, a urethane bagel purse oozing with fake cream cheese over which fashion writers worked themselves into a frenzy, Wise has become an art fair darling and has demonstrated herself as a witty observer of, and participant in, her millennial generation and culture. Irreverence for the distinction between high art and popular culture is hardly new, but Wise's particular version is of the moment. Describing herself as ADHD and easily bored, she moves between painting, sculpture, and video/sound installation to document the people, the food, the jargon, and accoutrements of the selfie age. She uses her friends in staging group portrait paintings and videos that explore constructions of self and community in deadpan, self-aware, and self-reflexive musings on consumption, desire, and the gendered gaze.

Enter COVID-19—a time without parties or socializing with friends, a time when the pace of life slowed down to a hard pause, and a time when truth became variable and uncertain. The artist's gaze seems to have shifted inside and inward in portraits that now focus on individuals, not groups of friends. In a recent interview Wise says, “I made my show about indifference ... because indifference is the tool that you use to overcome unease. Unease left untreated would be anxiety, or unhappiness, or pain, or suffering ... So, indifference became this theme that I feel was my only option.” Is this emotional cover-up Wise's genuine response to COVID-isolation or is it disingenuous deflection? Her portraits of “indifferent” faces line the walls throughout the gallery interspersed with old master-styled, painted still lifes of melting butter or suggestive vegetables on sumptuous fabrics. Some portraits feature closely cropped, vacant smiles; others zero in on theatrical expressions. *I'm so-and-so and I exist!* (2021) is a portrait of a young woman gazing outside through venetian blinds through which no one can see in—the striations of light and shadow falling across her face accentuating her isolation.

The main gallery is punctuated by sculptures of hanging Caesar salad leaves posing as light fixtures with dressing and croutons oozing onto the floor along with two sculptures of towering masses of melted butter atop glass-block pedestals. Funny and sickening in an abject sort of way, the pieces extend Wise's obsession with food as a metaphor for transience and decay in her cheeky investigations of the body, gender, and identity. In the hallway between the two galleries is *Prime Time* (2021), a subtle installation of a house's exterior with the flashing light of a TV that is always on as well as a soundtrack of disjointed sounds and tweet-like phrases such as “Person Woman Man Camera TV” and “Suburban Lifestyle Dream...Enjoy!” Lacking real visual presence it is, nonetheless, heard at all times throughout the gallery. As such, it's beguiling and captivating even as it establishes an impenetrable kind of voyeurism where the viewer is hearing and peering into someone's house but is resolutely kept out—not unlike watching someone else's life on Instagram. *Prime Time* is the sleeper hit of the show. It captures the disorientation, loneliness and exclusion shared by so many during COVID—and the feelings of marginalization experienced by many in non-COVID times as well. Does this installation signal an authentic shift in Wise's world-view? When all is said and done, Wise's current show begins and ends with *Prime Time*.