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EDITORIAL

Catherine Mulligan

Rebecca Storm
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The transience of life, the certainty of death, and the futility of pleasure were themes explored through *vanitas*, the OG still life genre that through the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries, grappled with what life meant in the wake of, or anticipation of, death—how it looked for life to be still. Or maybe *vanitas* was a portal through which to marvel at the great contradiction, that despite its beauty and sensuousness, we are more often overpowered by life's bitter taste—and yet... there is *still* life?

For her ongoing exhibition at Queer Thoughts in New York, Catherine Mulligan offers up new interpretations of what constitutes a still life through her collection of work in *Vanitas*. Foregoing the classic “surface strewn with ephemeral objects” as the show’s name might imply, Mulligan harnesses portraiture and landscape to explore ciphers of a postcapitalist dystopia—organized religion, climate anxiety, data mining, post-irony, fast fashion, faces that smile unknowingly, or perhaps in blissful ignorance. Each weathered and stained with its respective patina, these works feel like vestiges of our current reality, a snapshot of a general-consensus-definition of life, as we wait for death to find us.



Are the women in your paintings happy? They are smiling but...

They are beyond happiness or pain. When they smile they are trying to seduce you into entering the underworld!

What's the scariest thing about owning a body?

Everything about owning a body is scary. Not feeling in control of your body is scary, but actually I think deterioration of the mind is my biggest fear.

Define hell.

Prison. Lacking agency. Maybe solitary confinement for eternity.

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What happens when we die?

I think realistically nothing happens, but there is probably a period where your consciousness lingers in the ether. I'm sure it is the most fascinating feeling and it is probably so frustrating to be unable to ever communicate it to anyone.

Given the choice, would you upload your soul to a computer to live on after death?

Oh my god I wish. Although I'm not actually sure what that means. How would it live? Could others access it? I think everyone has a soul but I also think being reduced to my soul is a bit terrifying to me in itself, like maybe I do not actually have a very pure and good soul if you take everything else away.

Do your paintings have a moral lesson, like the Dutch vanitas?

No. My work is actually just a space for me to access certain feelings or visual/visceral/psychic spaces, and I don't really assume any moral authority on the basis of being a painter.

Sometimes I feel guilty for making ugly work actually, like I am introducing some hateful element into the world. In my view the world is already pretty ugly and hateful, but when I see others' responses to my work I wonder if that feeling is not universal. I don't know, my work is post-moral.

Is there therapeutic value to making scary work?

My gut response is yes, but who knows? I think there's a value for anyone to really dig through the ugly corners of their psyche; in my case I end up with a visual. I wouldn't say it's therapeutic but it is creatively fruitful.