

M + B

ARTFORUM

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Legally Blonde

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By *David Everitt Howe*
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When it seems like every group exhibition in the art world is “inspired by” obscure proverbs or dry philosophical texts, it’s truly refreshing when a show comes along and takes its cue (and title) from the delicious dross of *Legally Blonde*—that 2001 film following Reese Witherspoon’s flaxen-haired “bimbo” character getting into Harvard and proving to her peers that she’s no dummy. At Downs & Ross, that ditzy blonde stereotype is playfully pried apart, exposing the ways in which female sexuality and identity are dictated by advertising, the media, and—by extension—men.

It feels appropriate, then, that “Legally Blonde” opens with some man hate. On a canvas featuring a copy of a work by Konrad Lueg—a certain cool male Conceptualist painter—Marie Karlberg has planted impressions of her butt cheeks in gouache all over the German artist’s Op art, primary-color patterning. Elsewhere we see patriarchal power in the form of Vikky Alexander’s *Portrait of Hugh Hefner*, 1984, which, despite the title, doesn’t show Hefner at all but rather photos of the Playmates he groomed (and exploited) to prominence—including Marilyn Monroe and Dorothy Stratten—all taken from various magazine spreads. Paris Hilton makes a deconstructed appearance in Kayode Ojo’s *Undressed (Hilton)*, 2022—a sculpture that is all unkempt wig, tassels, and costume jewelry hanging from a music stand. Hilton also might be the inspiration for one of the undead figures in Catherine Mulligan’s hilarious oil-on-board paintings *Angel 1* and *Devil 1*, both 2021, which seem to evoke the notorious heiress and her friend, Nicole Richie, during their *Simple Life* days. With their distended bellies and corpse-like faces streaked with drool, Mulligan’s models forgo any desire to be pretty with a monstrous vengeance. Yet nothing brings it all home quite like Darja Bajagic’s *Ex Axes – Voodoo Bumblebee*, 2021, comprising the titular object and a “sexy” picture of a woman, wearing nothing but a thong, emblazoned across the tool’s head. She presses an almost identical hatchet into her butt cheeks, an action that creates a murderous *mise en abyme* full of dark femininity and power.



Catherine Mulligan, *Angel 1*, 2021, oil on board with gold leaf artist frame, 60 × 36".