

M+B

frieze

Josh Mannis

August 12, 2014
By Jonathan Griffin

A couple lie naked on a rug with their feet lolling in the air. She smokes; he holds his chin in his hands and gazes sideways at her, a quiet smile on his lips. They've probably just had sex. She is looking directly at us, or she would be – except her large, oval eyes have been entirely blacked out by the artist. They are unnerving empty holes.

The picture, *Upstairs, Downstairs* (all works 2014), is rendered in ink on paper, as were the other nine remarkable drawings in Josh Mannis's exhibition 'Sexus' (named after Henry Miller's 1949 novel in which, the press release explained, 'the permissions of sex, and those of artistic becoming are often one and the same'). It is not worth dwelling too long on titles, though. Mannis is a master of the red herring and though these are narrative scenarios, their particular allegorical significances are unreliable and fully understood only by the artist.

Almost every detail in *Upstairs, Downstairs* seems to be a deliberate distraction from the obvious focus of the picture – the girl's eyes. For starters, the matching pattern of the rug and the fabric on a director's chair (which stands, oddly, balanced on the couple's backs) looks vaguely like a grid of swastikas. Then there is the stippled, negative shading of highlights on the figures' arms and faces, their finely rendered and glossy hair, the ecstatic arabesques of the potted house plants that frame the composition, and the odd detail that the girl has both a nose and a lip ring – odd because, as with all these drawings, the scene has a distinctly non-contemporary atmosphere: out of time in the way that it is sometimes hard to tell if a *New Yorker* cover is from the 2010s or the 1930s.

The drawings in 'Sexus' are about attention and distraction, devotion and obsession. All depict couples or threesomes, frequently in flagrante delicto. *Upstairs, Downstairs*, as it happens, is the only instance in which there is not some third party intruding on the action. In *You Handyman*, a gentleman proffers his penis to two ladies mid-embrace. (They seem unperturbed.) In *A Toast!*, two uniformed soldiers look on in the background as a couple get frisky during a picnic. Even the protagonists of *Boyfriend and Girlfriend* – also on a rug, this time by the sea – are distracted by something on his iPhone. (Again, the anachronistic detail.)

Absorption occurs not, as we might expect, in the relations between these characters, who by and large wear impassive expressions on their large round faces. Instead, it is Mannis who seems absorbed. In places, his brushwork is extraordinarily fine, adorning contours with hatching and stippling as if he is the one getting off here; in other areas – often, weirdly, on characters' faces – his hand becomes heavy and the ink goes on coarse and dry.

His mischievous attitude to the expected hierarchy of compositional elements seems analogous to the contrarian dynamic of display and revelation that these pictures set up. Their monochromatic, graphic style – which we might call broadly illustrative – developed, in 19th- and 20th-century print media, from a desire to convey explicit meaning, rather than to obfuscate. Here, however, the most interesting part of the picture is often off to one side; eroticism resides in the marginal, kinky game of describing, showing, looking and withholding.

In *What About This Love?*, a man buys ice cream from a policeman down a dark alley while his lady-friend grasps his cock. The cop holds up his torch, apparently happy to help. What a complicated transaction! Despite the intimacy of these scenes, it usually feels as if the action is being performed for someone else. Which, in a fairly obvious sense, it is. The problem – and the delight – is never being able to tell who is having the most fun: the viewer or the artist.



Josh Mannis, *What About This Love?*, 2014
ink on paper, 25 × 22 1/2"