

M+B

TWO COATS OF PAINT

Catalogue Essay: Aubrey Levinthal at Nancy Margolis

Contributed by Samantha Mitchell
May 6, 2019

Mirrors are a frequent theme in Aubrey Levinthal's work, both literal and implied. Her self-reflexive paintings often feature figures that resemble herself and her family – a brunette woman, a bearded man, and a young child – and self-portraits in the studio with brush at hand are an homage to a classical tradition that is very much alive in her technique. The work creates a narrative thread that explores a specific kind of contemporary domestic life that mirrors her own. These reflections present a complex, brooding image of young motherhood, at times a bright floral haze, at others a dimly lit miasma.

Nursing (Boot) is at once an aggressive and tender depiction of motherhood, a feminist reimagining of Madonna and child. The body of the infant, almost indistinguishable, melts into its mother's body, while the mother confronts the viewer with a direct, withering gaze and the sole of her boot. In *Breakfast at 13th St.*, a scene at a nuclear family breakfast table, a mother and father appear completely consumed in deep, dark, thought while a baby stares intently out from the background. Seemingly unnoticed, a bouquet of flowers morphs into a surrealistic globular lozenge, bubbling out of a vase, suggesting the existence of an alternate reality within the grim intensity of this one. Echoes of influences like Nicole Eisenman and Berthe Morisot reverberate through Levinthal's uncanny mealtime scenes, where figures congregate with brooding expressions, rendered in thin, feathery strokes and washes.

Where Levinthal's paintings are often celebrations of sumptuous offerings – food, flowers, ornately patterned wallpaper and textile – this current body of work casts these joyful trappings in a distinctly ominous and foreboding light, operating instead as *memento mori*. The bouquets are dark and wilting, flowers bent at the stem. Tables are littered with Chinese takeout containers and various fruit rinds, and the refrigerator is only occupied by condiments and milk.



Nursing Boot, 2018. Oil on panel.

M+B



Double Mirrors, 2018. Oil on panel.

A scene from a flesh-toned office where a fashionable young therapist charges her Apple device while in session is a bright pink foil to the other largely greyed-out paintings, and features the same confrontational boots, now submissive in their spot on the analyst's couch. In *Double Mirrors*, a woman stands in a bathroom with baroque wallpaper while the faucet runs, considering reflections of her shoulder and half of her face cut up between two mirrors above the sink. These moments of decorative indulgence are counterpoints for the figures within, who are at once intense and absent, slipping between presence and invisibility.

With this work, Levinthal offers the viewer a world within her own that is simultaneously real and surreal. Familiar visual themes that appear throughout the work – face, flower, earbud, boot – are a refrain, arresting in the same way that one might recognize their own body within a dream. Like the mirror, the paintings both reflect and dissociate, opening an illusory space where narrative becomes fractured and plays out in a suspended reality.