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What's on Los Angeles

Pick of the Week

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By Jody Zellen

Zoe Walsh

I came to watch the morning rise

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June 26- July 25, 2020



Zoe Walsh

The source for Zoe Walsh's evocative mixed media paintings are photographs from the 1970s that come from the Falcon Studios (producers of gay pornography located in San Francisco). While the original photographs depicted men engaging in sexual activities around swimming pools, Walsh's manipulations transform them into colorful montages that obscure both gender and place. The finished works are layered composites where fragmented silhouettes, palm trees and pool-side architecture are screened separately onto the canvas using a cyan, magenta and yellow color palette which creates hues that glow orange, pink and blue. The pieces call to mind both David Hockney's swimming pools and Monica Majoli's recent *Blueboys* -- soft toned, muted watercolor and woodcut transfers based on images of naked men from *Blueboy* magazine from the mid 1970s. Like Hockney and Majoli, in these paintings Walsh celebrates queer desire, while simultaneously creating a space for trans subjectivity.

The pieces in *I came to watch the morning rise* not only use appropriated photographs from gay porn, but also take their titles from writings by gay authors Samuel Delany and Marilyn Hacker. The titles guide the interpretations of the works that at first glance appear to be colorful abstractions. In *Boys who are not boys*, (all works 2020), two translucent orange-yellow silhouettes fill the majority of the composition. They float on top of shimmering light magenta and cyan colored water at a pool's edge. Large transparent-blue rectangles are also silkscreened onto the work dividing it into colored quadrants. Through labored analog and digital processes and purposeful mediation, Walsh transforms the figures so that the original male bodies become more ambiguous allowing for trans identification and proposing trans subjectivity. The collapsing of public and private spaces as well as prescriptive body signifiers is core to Walsh's endeavors.

Walsh's process is to silkscreen multiple image fragments onto the canvases, combining different glazes of gel and color to build up layers with varying degrees of opacity and saturation that emphasize the quality and texture of the painted surface. There is a lush translucency and glint to the images that reinforce the reflective qualities of pool water, making the works simultaneously abstract and representational. Though a narrative can be inferred that imagines the interactions between two or more men at a pool-side gathering, the pieces are not ecstatic or highly sexual, but seductive juxtapositions of color and forms. Walsh explores,

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"the pool as a threshold space of heightened surveillance, exclusion, unfixed boundaries between public and private, and potentially, pleasure."

The arrangement of figures and architecture in *I should have followed Carol*, references both interior and exterior spaces. While the primary subject is a figure sitting by the edge of a pool, Walsh depicts other scenarios containing these silhouetted figures— casually posed together and alone, as well as engaging in intimate acts. In the distance are faded trees and the walls of a cabana or home that protects the privacy of the poolside environment. In Walsh's work, the viewer feels like a voyeur who has inadvertently happened upon a moment of lush and vivid intimacy. The way Walsh repeats elements both within and across the canvases creates a sense of familiarity. The works explore the place where sensuality, sexuality and architecture collide. Though graphically striking, the pieces are surprisingly subtle. Walsh transforms intimate moments from the past, originally captured on film, into a vivid present, infusing these moments with the presence of light and a sense of ambiguity, as well as an acceptance of queer and trans life.