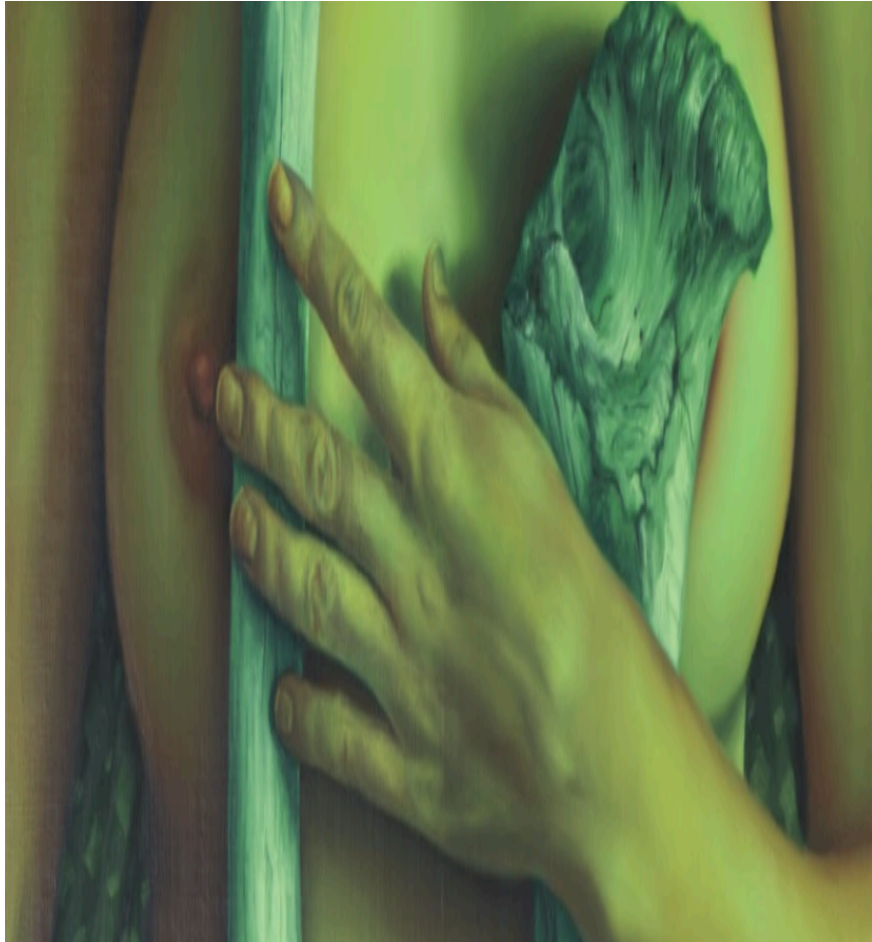




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INTENTIONALLY,

IMPERCEPTIBLY,

FATALLY ESCHEW

BY MARINA MAY

JULY 8, 2021

AS A DANCER, THERE'S A PARTICULAR LEVEL OF HYPER-AWARENESS THAT'S ACCUMULATED OVER YEARS OF VIEWING YOUR BODY IN RELATION TO ANOTHER'S BODY IN RELATION TO A SPACE.

You are conditioned to hyperfocus on a certain area - the arch of your foot, the back of your knee, the crook of your elbow, for an extended period of time, multiple times a day, year after year. You become an emotive barometer, constantly attuned to the temperature of the room, and the way in which your body occupies it. Processing how you are viewed, what you are presenting, what you are concealing, and how to communicate your presence non-verbally.

This acute bodily sentience saturates West's practice, even in non-figurative work as her subjects range from female forms to bits of linoleum. Their apparent

ality is what makes their juxtaposition so effective as the coldness of a trompe l'oeil linoleum square converses with the exsanguinous flesh of a truncated female torso. West teaches you how to see by asking you what it is that you're looking at. The architectural works prime the figurative.

For example, West's meticulously crafted series of *Blind* paintings. Quite literally "drawn" and painted, West creates realistic representations of household blinds from gradated horizontal bands of color. The *Blinds* require viewer activation to function. In their latest installation *Looker* at Monaco in St. Louis, Missouri, West chose to pair two *Blind* paintings together, framing them back to back, as they protrude off of the wall, impeding the path of the viewer. West's placement mandates a viewing "in the round." These blinds invoke voyeurism. The viewer activates the physical space with their presence, the *Blinds* then filter, control, alter, and edit the perception of what's on the other side - what is chosen to be seen, assumed, blocked, concealed, censored or projected. (The irony of the title *Blind* should be noted, as the function of the work is to instruct the viewer through the process of *seeing*.)

With this, West introduces tension between presentation and perception, anticipating the figurative work. In *Looker*, West

presents *The Shadow Gathering*, which functions as the access point to her latest body of work created for PM/AM Gallery in London. In *The Shadow Gathering*, West depicts a nude female form, cropped at the collar bone and just above the navel. A slight bend in the waist, the figure's hands reach towards one another to conceal the breasts. She squirms. The discomfort indicated by the awkward body positioning is highlighted by the gaseous, eerily synthetic green shadows cast by her scrambling hands. As the title indicates, she gathers the shadows for cover, or maybe safety, or maybe modesty. In any case, the figure is aware that her body is not alone.

The figure is seductive and reclusive in its positioning and cropping. She isn't judging you for looking, but she wants you to know that she knows. The communication or the interaction between the audience and the subject is not mitigated by the gaze of the subject. With the omission of the face, there's no indication that the subject is comfortable with being viewed. While they aren't beckoning us with a gaze - not smizing like supermodel - both viewer and subject are cognizant of the body on display.

West's work doesn't shift the agency of the subject in an overt way, but implicates the viewer in an inescapable way. Her latest body of work pushes the queries of her

show *Looker*, specifically the themes from *The Shadow Gathering* further. West transitions from the interior to the exterior, moving the forms from a private, domestic sphere populated with linoleum and Venetian blinds. She translates them into the external environment, where they are sown into the language of public consumption alongside bones, stones, and pocket knives. She explores the relation of the body to earth and time, as well as space.

Working in a tradition of representation, particularly the representation of the female form, West navigates the complications and gendered prejudices through her nuanced approach to the body. The potency of the work lies in the representation of the form as it directly acknowledges and confronts the gaze, while referencing previous iterations of the female body and bodily mortality throughout history. West adapts the visual language of Dutch *vanitas* and *memento mori* paintings with her inclusion of bones and knives, heightening the reflexivity of the work. The vanity and fragility of existence exposed. The placement of the bodies in relation to their natural environment recall Mendieta's *Siweta* series, in which the artist created iterations female body in the landscape, allowing the environment to interact with her form, alluding both to the archetypal power of

the female as earthen goddess, perhaps societally inflicted violence, and the complicity of the viewer.



Two Bones, 2020
Oil on linen mounted on panel.
50.8 x 40.6 cm

In direct comparison with *The Shadow Gathering*, West depicts another truncated torso, *Two Bones*. Where *The Shadow Gathering* seems to wriggle, *Two Bones* is in repose. In *Two Bones*, the figure is no longer collecting shadows - she has collected two bones, pressing them into the skin of her breasts. She arranges the bones on her body, offering them, rather than using them to hide from view. The tip of her middle finger grazes the top of her exposed nipple, implying its exposure is a conscious act. West again, extends an invitation to look at the figure highly palpable in nakedness, yet elusive in intent.

The bend in the waist is gone. This distinct shift in positioning indicates a subject far more comfortable, perhaps complicit in the viewing. She has gained an incredible sense of agency as she lays on a blanket of tiny flowers, presenting her bones.

To quote Joan Didion, it appears as if the figures have followed some “imperceptible but fatally eschew rainbow” into this surreal, outside land. The peachy colored flesh of *The Shadow Gathering* has been wholly subsumed by a viridian glow. Though the figure evokes a greater degree of agency, the color treatment indicates something unescapable, something palpable, perhaps melancholic or mystical to which the figure is still beholden. The use of color shuttles the figures into the uncanny midway between representation and artifice, but there is no dissonance to their being.

The forms appear relaxed in the ambiguous state, embodying and achieving the essence of freedom as outlined by French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, as they acknowledge the burdens of their existence, their presence in space and time, and accept that they are nowhere but where they lay, bare on the Earth.

“I should like to be the landscape which I am contemplating, I should like this sky, this quiet water to think themselves within me, that it might be I whom they express in

*flesh and bone, and I remain at a distance.
But it is also by this distance that the sky
and the water exist before me. My
contemplation is an excruciation only
because it is also a joy. I can not
appropriate the snow field where I slide. It
remains foreign, forbidden, but I take
delight in this very effort toward an
impossible possession. I experience it as a
triumph, not as a defeat.”*

— Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*

Her latest work is on view with PM/AM
Gallery in London.

View the exhibition online here.

<https://pmam.viewingrooms.com/viewing-room/6-11/>

(<https://pmam.viewingrooms.com/viewing-room/6-11/>)

Chloe West is on instagram @chloe.m.west
(<https://www.instagram.com/chloe.m.west/?hl=en>) and her website is www.chloe-west.com (<https://www.chloe-west.com>)



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