Janet Werner, *Untitled (Curtain),* **2016,** oil on canvas, 74 × 60 1/4".

Janet Werner

MUSÉE D'ART CONTEMPORAIN DE MONTRÉAL

Through painterly and conceptual ingenuity, Janet Werner has created a visual language to explore the multiplicity of the self. Her portraits revel in their provenance, explicitly referencing both fashion magazines and a range of precursors, including Francisco Goya, Édouard Manet, Alice Neel, Francis Picabia, and the sculptor Allen Jones. Werner, who attended the MFA program at Yale in the late 1980s with John Currin and Lisa Yuskavage, is a far more expressive painter than either, although she, too, strains the female figure through the sieve of popular culture, yielding a burlesque of idiosyncratic contortions and juxtapositions.

Working with female subjects whose bodies are exposed and deformed by the glossies, Werner either exaggerates their grotesqueness or obfuscates them. With bends, folds, cuts,

and distortions, she illuminates an interiority that otherwise refuses to make itself visible. Fittingly, curtains abound here, along with veils, masks, and other metaphorical defenses against the disclosure of both her and their interiority. In the breathtaking minor masterpiece *Scar Curtain*, 2019, Werner hovers on the threshold of abstraction: Diaphanous drapery leaks light from a window, partially obfuscating a painting of unruly blue brushstrokes, pining to be anything other than a tree. In Werner's masquerade, even the idea of a curtain, capable of concealment and compression, is applied to complicate the form of the body: In *Folding Woman*, 2009, a slender figure dressed in a white nightie and a gilded military jacket sacrifices her face to a cruelly placed crease in the image from which she presumably sprang. The fold deprives her of the facial markers of individual subjectivity and becomes a metaphor for interiority itself. It also suggests a daring feat of self-fashioning: Just because we don't consent to our negation doesn't mean we can't wear it well.

Werner's work is too often reduced to a critique of female objectification and commodification. Widening the scope of her work's interpretation, curator François LeTourneux brilliantly situates Werner's gestures of effacement in dialogue with her equally forceful moments of revelation, emphasizing that her dilemma is not only feminist but existential. Without subordinating the artist's profound evolution over the past decade to a simple chronology, he charts Werner's trajectory from her earlier carnivalesque impulses to her more psychological portraits. In a culture that fetishizes slender white models and treats visibility as an opening for violence, Werner creates space for the expression of complex identities and ugly feelings within the seductive images of mainstream paradigms of femininity. Her images not only imagine her subjects' emotional lives, but also reflect her own attempts to grapple with vulnerability, anxiety, and self-doubt. With her gloved hand clutching three loaded paintbrushes, her visage camouflaged by paint splotches, and her breasts exposed through transparent voile, one of the artist's many doppelgängers appears in *Dreamer*, 2012, negotiating the perils of exposure.

Several of Werner's paintings detour through her studio, illuminating her highly mediated process of image poaching. In paintings of atelier walls plastered with images and of tables littered with photographs, Werner explores the tensions between the three-dimensional-object world and her two-dimensional source material. Punctuated by cropped faces and

other fragmented body parts, these otherwise empty rooms read as still lifes but are hardly liberated from the psychological dimensions of portraiture. In *Untitled (Curtain)*, 2016, a papery image of a woman with a torn forehead suggests the devastating indifference with which a frontal lobe might be parted like a curtain. Still, the woman bears her lobotomy with grace and equanimity, as if to afford us what the poet Maggie Nelson describes as the "dimly painful . . . sensation of space where it had once been dense and full were nothing special."

When the figure reemerges from this emptied space, she is a monster of hybridity. *Beast*, 2019, taunts the viewer to guess which of the three foliage-encrusted women depicted might be the "real" one, only to throw up a menacing, leaf-fringed shadow that corresponds to none of them. The artist's mother once shrewdly asked, "How does one go about putting one's best face forward, if one can never figure out which face that is?" Dwelling in the mysteries of this quandary, Werner is nonetheless capable of dazzling the viewer. Luckily for us, she asks us to face so much more—and we do.

— *Ara Osterweil*