

Chloe Wise on hyperreality, painting during the pandemic, and the weirdness of smiles

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Gideon Jacobs



View of "Thank You For The Nice Fire," 2021.

Chloe Wise's work has always walked a tightrope between sincerity and satire, romance and irreverence, gravity and levity. More recently, another duality has become an increasingly important part of her tonal high-wire act: the real versus the unreal, or perhaps the real versus the hyperreal. It's telling that the press release for Wise's new show, "Thank You For The Nice Fire," on view at Almine Rech through April 17, quotes Jean Baudrillard not once, but twice. So, as neither Wise nor I have been vaccinated yet, it felt both epidemiologically and thematically appropriate to conduct this interview in a Covid-free simulation: the online virtual world of Second Life. Chatting over the course of an hour spent at several digital locales—we got reprimanded by other users for wearing clothes at a nude beach—Wise spoke about her pandemic year in painting.

REAL VERSUS FAKE, candidness versus performance, public versus private: There are many different manifestations of these kinds of contrasting ideas in the show. Of course, in the sculptural work, there's always a blurring of the line between what is real and what is fake. For example, with *Caesar Salad Chandelier*, 2021, I want your first glance to betray your second glance, your second glance to betray your third glance, to challenge your ability to discern whether the object is made with real lettuce or something synthetic. But even if you decide it's not real lettuce and that classification of the material somehow delegitimizes the experience for you, then you're suddenly faced with the fact that it's both a functioning light fixture and a functioning piece of art. Depending on these subtle shifts of seeing and viewing, the object is either real or fake or simultaneously both.

ALMINE RECH

The pandemic is blurring these lines even more. Earlier today, in the tangible world, I was doing a walk-through at the gallery with my friend Richie, and we were talking about how we have gotten so used to these mediated everyday experiences. There is a sheet of plastic between us and the cashier at the grocery store. There are masks between our faces. There are six feet between everyone's bodies. And of course, most socializing is occurring via text, calls, or FaceTiming.

The distinction between aloneness and togetherness has blurred too. We are physically isolated in our homes, and yet there is this uniquely shared experience of solitude, and for a while, there was even some camaraderie, as we honked our horns and clapped our hands every night at 7 PM in the early months. And this alone-togetherness occurred in an already very fragmented moment of the complete 24/7 connectivity of the internet age. During the pandemic, I've been alone at points and had great phone calls with friends that left me feeling a sense of community—whereas, before the pandemic, it was of course possible to be at a party, surrounded by people, and feel very alone.



This is part of what I wanted to explore with the motif of smiles in the show. Smiles, in public, are usually a way of acknowledging someone without wanting to get any closer to them. They can be an invitation or they can be a polite barrier. And smiles are meant to be short, fleeting. This is what makes smiles in paintings so weird. Traditionally, a subject has to hold a pose for hours; and a smile, held for hours, will always become the most unnatural thing in the world, or maybe not a smile at all. I was interested in this, expressions that suggest multiple, possibly conflicting layers of experience. Dissonance.

Have you ever seen the meme of the dog in a house that's on fire, and the dog is saying, "This is fine?" The title of the show is a reference to a scene in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* where the characters connect and bond over watching a building burn to the ground. They have a constructive, positive experience during a destructive, negative event. I made a lot of these paintings at 4 AM, alone in my studio with the news playing loud in the background, giving me constant updates on the tragedy of the pandemic, the disaster of Donald Trump's presidency, and the horrors of systemic racism. If I was going to make art—itself a kind of a ridiculously narcissistic act of autofellatio—during a catastrophe, then exploring dissonance felt like the only way I could go about it. If the show must go on, you have to be able to hold both realities in your head at the same time.