ALMINE RECH

Sam McKinniss
Misery

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"You'll never know the fear of losing someone like you, when you're someone like me," says the torturous Annie, in the 1990 film adaptation of Stephen King's *Misery*. The line is delivered to Paul, a famous romance novelist with whom Annie is obsessed—a character necessarily equated to King himself, making Annie the horrifying, metaphorical readership of King books: demanding to the point of (literally) hobbling. Inversely, Annie will never know someone like Paul's fear of losing someone like her, the fear that the proverbial reader has taken over and is shaping the work more than can ever be known.

In Sam McKinniss's paintings, one sees the artist working overtly against this fear by leaning into and beyond it, painting subjects not from his own personal experiences but those with which most of us are extremely familiar, found in popular media, press photos, other artworks. And yet, Sam's paintings are necessarily of himself, of what has formed or is forming him. They are also of his viewers, of what has formed and is forming us. In redrawing snapshots of celebrities, for example, that are so recognizable they have become common, Sam reevaluates that very action of collectively flattening an image. The references are not unduly manipulated. These are captured moments, as we saw and continue to see them, heightened by virtue of their being paintings.

In this show, titled *Misery*, Sam's rendition of Kathy Bates accepts her only Oscar for playing Annie. Angela Lansbury tears up while holding an Academy Honorary Award, as does Will Smith, who has just made history by slapping presenter Chris Rock across the face. Cher wears what is called her Oscar revenge dress, hoping to get something out of showing up even though she wasn't nominated for *Mask* that year. Gwyneth Paltrow carries her Best Actress award for Miramax's *Shakespeare in Love*, speculated to be a strong-armed win on account of Harvey Weinstein's aggressive campaigning. Chris Farley, another presenter, crosses his eyes in front of a chiseled Oscar statue. Idols hold idols in front of idols.

Sarah Connor is made skeletal and glowing by a nuclear blast (a scene in *Terminator 2: Judgement Day*); a newly discovered pit viper, named after the *Harry Potter* character Salazar Slytherin, winds around a jungle branch; Holstein Friesian dairy cattle look serene in green pastures. The cows' placement and coloring are a little too perfect to be life studies, making them livestock stock images. Again and again, a golden figure is seen, or imagined—as in a copy of Francis Picabia's *L'Adoration du veau* (1941-1942), which itself referenced Erwin Blumenfeld's photograph *The Minotaur or the Dictator* (1937), and simultaneously a Biblical scene of early idolatry, the Adoration of the Golden Calf (Exodus 32:1-6). In the biggest of these paintings, Martha Plimpton and River Phoenix appear painfully uncomfortable on the red carpet as parts of a large crowd gawk and cameras document their entrance. This and others are moments of forced transition, when people are made into sacred cows, herded onto the stage of public opinion without question: this is what they get.

In the movie, Misery is not a feeling but the name of the protagonist in Paul's novels (It is also the name Annie gives her pet pig, after her favorite heroine.). Annie is defined by longing for the return of Misery and missing the irony there; Paul is defined by hoping to kill off Misery, oblivious to the futility in trying. In the end, Paul becomes a celebrated writer of another ilk, attributing his success to the life changes Annie inadvertently caused for him, and a loop closes, suggesting the whole narrative might simply repeat itself. Sam does his painting in a barn, somewhat isolated from a city life and its art worlds. Up there, he's neither Annie nor Paul, but in some ways both. In his works we can see him as the fan and the idol, the adorer and the sacred calf, two sides of the same coin, or an ouroboros with parts that both hinder and need one another infinitely.

— Natasha Stagg, writer and critic