ALMINE RECH

Madelynn Green
Dolls

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For her second solo exhibition with Almine Rech, Madelynn Green has created a body of spirited paintings and drawings that unveil the ironies of self-fashioning, or “dolling up.” The paintings consider the notion of spectacle from the lenses of subject versus spectator, individual versus collective, and styled versus stylist. *Dolls* is a vivid departure from Madelynn Green’s 2021 show *Birth of a Star* at Almine Rech Paris and her 2020 show *Heartland* at Taymour Grahne Projects, which respectively explored stardom and her hometown. While these shows centred on aesthetics of celebrity, the celestial, and the American Midwest, Dolls considers aesthetics more literally by examining beauty through the lenses of performance and self-fashioning.

Dolls inhabit many forms. They can be tiny human figures meant for children or elegant mannequins draped in jewellery. To “doll” or “doll-up” is also a verb. And dolls can come to life: a beautiful woman is often colloquially called a doll. What does it mean to get “dolled up?” It, of course, depends on the occasion. The subjects in Dolls are not adorned in funerary black. They are primping to go out – *out* out. They strive to position themselves as beautiful under public scrutiny, beautiful even among a crowd of dolls. The paintings forge a narrative that begins with wigs on eerie mannequins, intensifies with anxious layers of makeup, climaxes with ebullient crowds, and concludes a lively night with a lone foray home.

In *Female Figures*, lifelike mannequins sport flawless wigs and melancholy expressions. They are either offended that they are on clearance, or their pouts hint at something deeper, and perhaps darker. These unsettling plastic "dolls"; are mere canvases of women. Despite the fraudulence of their humanity, they are considered archetypes of beauty. The titular work, a multi-part painting installation called *Dolls*, is peppered with Black hair products and beauty tools like hair gel, moisturising lotion, eyelash curlers, and tweezers. The metal tools have a clinical look despite performing “surgeries” far more aesthetic than medical, pointing to the clinical precision with which women are expected to style themselves for public consumption.

Spectacles hints at the extravagant possibilities for how we choose to show up in the world. The choices, while liberating, can also feel overwhelming. After all: how can we decide how to be perceived? Perception is key in Dolls and Madelynn Green analyzes ways of seeing from all angles, from flashy glasses to impractical contact lenses. The talon-like nail in *Starry Violet* hovers dangerously close to an eye, engaging in a risky dance between beauty and danger that asks: what do we risk in order to see? In order to be seen?

Rouge puts beauty products to use and uncovers the often-clandestine process of dolling up. The car's leopard upholstery and glossy façade sharply contrast the subject's vulnerable position. The body's eager tilt suggests an insecurity perhaps at the root of self-fashioning: do I look good? *Starry Violet* and *Self Portrait* also expose the ironies of dolling up by conjuring the intimate and the visceral. The works in Dolls are not trite reckonings with beauty standards. Rather, they gesture toward an unveiling of the veneer of confidence that can slip when we are trying our best to look better. Dolling up is a blatant admission of insecurity. It is a confession that we don't think we look good enough. And who wants to admit to that? *Perfect Nails Spa* further considers the beauty industry's ethics as nail technicians bow at clients' feet. With this Madelynn Green not only examines the tools and processes of dolling up but considers the position of those doing the dolling.

From wigs and beauty tools to applying make-up, the paintings then journey into crowded nightclubs and dance floors. Crowd dynamics have been a consistent theme in Madelynn Green's practice. Her paintings explore the transformation that occurs when one enters a social space. The crowds in Dolls examine the dynamic between public and private, along with the reckoning of self with the collective as bodies "lose themselves in the crowd." Madelynn Green asks: when does somebody become *a* body? Paintings like *Ensemble* and *Masquerade* portray compact bodies alight with beauty and longing as they train eager eyes toward a stage. They are spectacles in search of spectacle. Meanwhile, *Flawless Finish* removes the barriers between the performative and observational realms. In *Touch-Up*, the line between preparation and presentation blurs further as a crowd sees a performer's make-up retouch—yet another crack in the doll's veneer.

Glamour foregrounds a lone, dark figure against a flamboyant salon, unmasking its eponymous assertion. This painting's haunting figure is the final stripping of the doll. There is nothing glamorous about stumbling home alone after a night out, head likely swimming with alcohol and stomach rumbling with either vomit or hunger. Hunger for food or something less practical. Perhaps it is the original hunger that had you dolling up before a mirror hours earlier, curling lashes and adjusting wigs. The hunger that made you squeeze your body into a humid crowd and join its swirling rhythm in a kind of performative bliss. Hunger that had you on your feet for hours, painted eyes aimed elsewhere. An endless hunger that, even on the darkened walk home, is still reflected on the street via promises of glamour – that hazy concept of beauty that few seem to be able to put their finger on, no matter how lacquered the nail.

— Leila Renee