ALMINE RECH

Kurt Kauper
Women

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I define the Neutral as that which outplays (déjoue) the paradigm, or rather I call Neutral everything that baffles the paradigm (...) Thus I propose that the desire for Neutral is desire for:

—first: suspension (épochè) of orders, laws, summons, arrogances, terrorisms, puttings on notice, the will-to-possess.
—then, by way of deepening, refusal of pure discourse of opposition. Suspension of narcissism: no longer to be afraid of images (imago): to dissolve one's own image (...)

- Roland Barthes, *The Neutral*

Almine Rech Gallery New York is pleased to present *Women*, featuring recent paintings and drawings by Kurt Kauper.

Kauper employs astonishing craft, combining his reverence for masters like Ingres with contemporary subject matter. His work layers historical and contemporary traditions, incorporating both elevated and vernacular subject matter. He subverts his seemingly academic style with a radical, but subtle vanguard sensibility. The effect of his paintings is uncanny. They hover in an indeterminate state between reality and artifice. An uneasy balance between opposing concepts: real and unreal, representation and abstraction, and most interestingly, avant-garde and kitsch, characterizes Kauper's unique and original approach to painting.

In his new *Woman* series, Kauper takes on one of the greatest artistic traditions, the painting of the female nude. For years, Kauper wasn't interested in painting nude women. He recently questioned his self-imposed prohibition, however, and wondered if it was possible to sidestep the paradigmatic categories through which the female nude had been conventionally understood. The titles of the works, *Woman 2, 3, 4,* and *5*, are inspired by de Kooning's celebrated Woman paintings of the early 1950s. Kauper's paintings share de Kooning's tension between figuration and abstraction, but their approach to the female figure is otherwise almost completely divergent. Kauper's figures are nude, but not erotic. They project strength, not vulnerability. The effect evokes the nudity in classical statues. They have the solidity and serenity of kouros sculptures, but they pose with both legs together, rather than with one leg forward, giving the body more tensile strength. They are like modern Olympic sprinters or hurdlers, but project a grandeur that evokes Leni Riefenstahl's Olympia, rather than contemporary track stars on ESPN.

Kurt Kauper is a great student of nineteenth-century academic painting, but his work subverts, rather than extends a desiccated academicism. He delights in Mannerist distortions and reversals of aesthetic hierarchies. He crosses the border between "serious" figuration and kitsch, challenging conventional definitions. His work reenergizes a discredited academic tradition.

In addition to his sophisticated knowledge of the history of painting, Kauper is well versed in the history of figurative sculpture. His study with the contemporary sculptor Charles Ray at UCLA in the early 1990s was a formative influence. Looking at Kauper's *Woman* paintings, I am reminded of Charles Ray's lecture on the position of the hands in classical kouros sculptures. Like Ray's sculptures, Kauper's paintings are conceptual, rather than following conventional approaches to representation. His compositions are informed in an unexpected way by Ray's mannequin sculptures and more recent works like *Aluminum Girl* and *Young Man*. Kauper combines the illusionistic brilliance of bravura figurative painting with the weight and gravity of sculpture.

An analysis of Kauper's women takes the viewer on a journey through the highest and lowest points of the history of figuration. The influences begin with Archaic Greek sculpture and proceed through da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*, the Mannerism of Pontormo, the Neo-Classicism of David and Ingres, the New Objectivity of Otto Dix, and an unsettling detour into the work preferred by authoritarian regimes. The paintings embody the contradictions that have elevated and depressed the complex history of figurative art. Kauper has built on the history of the medium to create images of women that are deeply rooted in history, but completely contemporary.

- Jeffrey Deitch

Kurt Kauper's works are included in the public collections of The Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA; The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; The Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, CA; The Oakland Museum of Art, Oakland, CA; The Weatherspoon Art Gallery, The University of North Carolina, Greensboro, NC; Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT.