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NEW YORK – MELISSA BROWN AT DEREK ELLER THROUGH JULY 6, 2018

June 30th, 2018



“The fantasy that reality is changeable: it’s what keeps us alive,” writes Melissa Brown in an anecdotal text for the press release of “Between States,” her first solo exhibition at Derek Eller Gallery in New York. Brown describes a road trip from Tennessee down south to Summerville, Georgia to visit outsider artist Howard Finster’s Paradise Garden, a kitschy wonderland of mosaics and mirrors, the folk art equivalent of Antoni Gaudi’s Park Güell.

The seven paintings in this show contain within them multiple versions of reality, reminders that experience depends on perspective. In *Swamp* (2018), an alligator lingers by a lagoon, his elongated body curving along the water as he snacks on a newspaper. The reflection of a silhouette in the distance is minutely rendered in his beady eyes. Brown shifts the role of protagonist to a figure outside of our field of vision—a helpless bystander watching in horror, or a complicit enemy of the printed word?

In a world bound by four corners, a reflective surface is a good plot device, foreshadowing what lies outside the frame. Brown is intimately familiar with the history of painting, which is laden with such allusions to the enigmatic space beyond the canvas. *California Common Law* (2018) depicts an interior setting where a small convex mirror reveals a third person in the room, someone otherwise absent from the composition. In *El Pueblito* (2017), a howling wolf rendered on a decorative wall plate is reflected, abstracted and distorted, in a bowl of punch on the table below it (the oddball cousin of the moon in the water trope.)

As in the digitally inspired paintings of Jacqueline Humphries, stenciling allows Brown to iterate a motif, but she tends to source these patterns from observations of her physical surroundings. Unlike the raster dots of Sigmar Polke's paintings, for example, the halftone gradient along the border of Brown's *i, 25* (2018) is not an enlargement of a reproduced image, but the actual dot-matrix of a car's windshield; the cutout skulls that look like ink stamps in *El Pueblito* are paper garlands adorning a Mexican restaurant. Reminiscent as these visuals may be of the pixel era, Brown points to the space where our two visual existences overlap or imitate each other by chance rather than reduce her work to an Internet specificity.

An escapist thread runs through the exhibition in references to a historical past that feels distant (a copy of Mari Sandoz's American Western classic *Old Jules* sitting on a bookshelf) and to urban sanctuaries, as in the incense smoke billowing from a windowsill facing a cityscape in *Double Blind* (2018). The impulse to flee, however, is less apparent in Brown's paintings than the exercise of looking inward for an alternative scenery. The most adequate word to describe the works in "Between States" may be "phantasmagoria"—a spliced montage of people and places, culled in equal measure from memory and the imagination.

— Valentina Di Liscia