

Art and Cake, June 2, 2017

Lezley Saar, *Gender Renaissance*
Walter Maciel Gallery
May 6 - July 1, 2017
By Jody Zellen



In her second solo exhibition at Walter Maciel Gallery, Lezley Saar continues to evoke awe. The paintings and mixed media works are not only impeccably crafted, but are also rich in content. Saar draws from personal experiences— specifically complex issues related to biracial and transgender identity— and uses them as a point of departure to create the works in *Gender Renaissance*. On view are a selection of older as well as numerous new pieces. Her latest works are a series of portraits depicting actual and fictional characters from the 19th Century. Painted upon patterned fabric backgrounds reminiscent of Victorian wall coverings, Saar's oval and rectangular portraits are evenly interspersed on the gallery walls.

Saar's paintings are realistically rendered yet playful as she repurposes different costumes and styles from the 19th Century. At first glance the smaller portraits are of men in stylish period garb, but upon close examination it becomes clear that Saar has imbued these men with feminine characteristics and has chosen subjects of varying races representing a wide range of skin tones. In *A Perfect Gentleman* (2016), Saar paints a portrait of a light skinned effeminate man. The subject has three tall mushroom-like protrusions growing from a patch of green grass

that serves as the top of his head. An ornate butterfly and pink rose partially cover his forehead; yet as 'the perfect gentleman' he ignores this augmentation. The figure depicted in *It's my nature* (2016) is also capped with fantastical head gear. Here, an antique pipe appears to grow from the tendril of a day-glow green beetle that covers the figure's scalp. A collection of sea animals and sea shells surrounds his head like a bonnet. Saar also depicts a flowered object perched at a jaunty angle atop a ball like orb that hovers over the whole assemblage. Dressed in a blue suit, with a high white collar and decorative brown tie, the sensual red lipped figure seems perfectly comfortable presenting his inner self, on the outside. In the rectangular, *The Silent Woman* (2015) a mustached man is pictured wearing a green coat over a floor length golden yellow dressing gown. He stands adjacent to a pentagram set within a black and white checkerboard patterned floor. On a table to the figure's right, a baby wild boar tries to balance upon an hourglass that is tipping over. In her statement, Saar remarks that these portraits represent people who frequented Molly Houses —meeting places for homosexual men in 18th and 19th century England— and that the figure depicted in *The Silent Woman* is once such attendee.

The image of cross-dressing is more clearly articulated in *Forbidden Fruit* (2017). Here, a dark skinned young man gazes intently at a glowing green ball in the mouth of a snake twisted around his arm. The young man has red finger nails and wears a red-satin high-collared dress. His dark nappy hair stands out against a bright patch of sky surrounded by darker clouds. Saar's depiction of these transgendered or cross-dressing men is tender and sincere, passing no judgements.

In contrast to Saar's depictions of young men who exude confidence and seem comfortable dressing up and revealing their inner selves and desires, she also exhibits large banners from the early 2000s— two works from her *Mulatto Nation* series (portraying Dorothy Champ and Nella Larson, historic biracial women) and one from her *Portraits of Prostitutes*. In these intelligent and seductive pieces she questions the concept of race and how one is perceived by others. *Dorothy Champ* (2002) is a delicate portrait of the Broadway actress who left her successful career to become a Bahai activist. Crystal jewels hang as tears from her enormous blue eyes, suggesting the inner conflict of her decision. In the banner, *Nella Larson...Passing* (2003), Saar pictures the author who explored issues of racial identity in her fiction behind an actual white lace veil.

The paintings presented in *Gender Renaissance* were inspired in part by the experiences Saar had watching her 24 year old son transition from female-to male as well as issues relating to biracial identity. The works are about both personal and universal issues of identity and acceptance. Saar humanely explores the contrasts and contradictions between who people are and how others see them. She allows both her real and invented figures to be who they want to be. *Gender Renaissance* investigates these ever present struggles and deals with complex issues in sensitive, inspiring and aesthetically impressive ways.

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