

# An Incident of Desire

A voyeur's love affair with looking can transform the human subject into an object of desire. In 1966, Marcel Duchamp completed his tableau, *Étant donnés*, in which a female body made from pigskin, was laid, legs spread, in the countryside holding a lantern. The only way to view this work is one at a time, through a small peephole in a wooden door. The view obscures the body, but focuses mainly upon mutilated genitalia. The face of the woman is hidden beneath her blonde hair, and her lower legs and upper arms remain out of sight. In turn, the woman becomes merely a torso, devoid of control and sexualised for the viewer-as-voyeur. In this process of transformation, those being gazed upon lose autonomy, and become, instead, a symbol for their spectator. In art, this process has long implicated the female in a passive role of objectification, while the male gaze actively controls this metamorphosis. Janice Gobey's exhibition titled *Voyeur* explores scopophilia, or the love of looking. Subjects, seemingly sexual, are fetishised into an inanimate state, however the usual female and male roles are disrupted. Here, desire has abstracted the sexual event into a *mise en scène* of lustful objects that form an erotic, occasionally violent meta-narrative.

## He's got the Look

In 1973, British feminist film theorist, Laura Mulvey, explored the unequal gendered relations of looking in her iconic essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. According to Mulvey, the voyeurism exposed in film (and watching film) is based upon woman as image and man as bearer of 'the look'. While women in film appear "isolated, glamorous, on display, [and] sexualised", men control the female subject through objectification<sup>i</sup>. In this instance, the male spectator is omniscient, as both the film's protagonist and the viewer in the cinema. Similarly in painting, the female has persistently culminated as nude or object. While painting has seen to be masculine, conservative and linked to Modernism, it remains an exciting contemporary platform for a rejuvenated social politics. As feminist art critic and editor, Katy Deepwell, argues, painting has broken many times with its inheritances to take on new forms, making it an ideal "space of representation in which social and sexual hierarchies are figured"<sup>ii</sup>.

With this in mind, how does the feminist artist approach scopophilia? Through the use of psychoanalysis, Mulvey explains that scopophilia works in two ways. The first involves gaining pleasure from looking at another person as an object of sexual stimulation. The second involves a narcissistic development of the ego through identifying with a particular image. As Gobey's paintings create a window for the sexual incident, it is this first psychoanalytic perspective that is of particular interest. In *Three Essays on Sexuality* (1901-5), Sigmund Freud defined scopophilia as an area of sexuality separate from the erotogenic zones, which involved taking other people as objects and controlling them through the gaze<sup>iii</sup>. As Mulvey elaborates, it is Freud's castration complex that explains the desire for objectification and fetishisation of the female form. For Freud, the female lack of penis creates anxiety in the male as it evokes the notion of castration. In order to circumvent these feelings of emasculation, the male spectator must objectify the female subject, making them unreal, in order to disavow this fear. For Mulvey, the effect of these anxieties on the culture of looking imparts a need for a feminist reassessment. She argues that it is important that art avoid narrative forms that invite male identification and female passivity<sup>iv</sup>.

In Janice Gobey's exhibition, we are given a voyeuristic view into sexual space. However, this space is unconventional, and decisively interrupts the gendered culture of looking. With a theatrical, or even cinematic, approach to picture making, Gobey's canvases acts like peepholes into an incident that teeters between wooing, intercourse, masturbation, exhibitionism, violence and foreplay. In *Voyeur*—a prominent work to the right of the gallery space—ten satin gloves circle in a serpentine choreography, caressing their way through a checkerboard of velvet and fur. The glimmer of white satin in the gloves is Edenic, silkily entering and exiting throughout the picture plane. Where the gloves come from and to what (if anything) they are attached, makes us question the painting's subject. Are there any real human elements here at all? Or are we, as spectators, stuck in an uncanny space where our desire has mutated reality? Flanking the painting are two heavy, crimson curtains that mimic the swaths of painted red velvet that peep

out from between patches of white fur. Acting as a veil to entice further exposure, these curtains also mirror the silent, fresh drips of blood that appear in the centre of the painting. To the right, *Splitting*—a lurid, turquoise detail that could have been taken from the larger *Voyeur*—features a lone glove pressing tentatively into the surrounding fur. Here, a suggestive cleft has formed, and perhaps begun to open, yet once again there is no definite human contact. The glove exists as its own entity. Alluring as a gem, *Splitting's* subtle, yet fervent innuendo embarrasses the viewer to look away. This sublime quality, that simultaneously attracts and repulses, relies upon Gobey's decisive evasion of a direct narrative and instead upon the objects' desire to imply both pleasure and violence.

### Obsessive Streak

While voyeurism is associated with narrative, fetishism is a fixation that hinders narrative. It slows things down, plays things on repeat, and cuts things (even bodies) up until the part symbolises more than the whole ever did. According to Mulvey, the pleasure found in voyeurism lies in a sadistic controlling of the subject. In her more recent, *Fetishism and Curiosity* (1996), Mulvey argues that this directly relates to Freud's castration complex, as the male spectator needs to control the female in order to quell his anxieties. However, fetishistic scopophilia takes looking one step further, building up the physical beauty of the object until the object becomes satisfying in itself. In this respect it exists outside the linear narrative, with the erotic instinct focused not on the story, but on the look alone<sup>v</sup>. Freud believed that the fetish object acts as a 'sign' that is substituted for the thing thought to be missing: the maternal penis<sup>vi</sup>. Mulvey explains this substitute also acts as a mask, "covering over and disavowing the traumatic sight of absence, especially if the 'absence' sets off associations with the wounded, bleeding body"<sup>vii</sup>. Gobey calls upon the symbolic value of popular fetish objects such as velvet, satin, fur, blood, shoes, and gloves. The only living creature, a mottled cat, appears in a small painting titled *Disturbing* to the left of the gallery entrance. However, even the cat appears as object, cheekily symbolising the *other* feline of erotic depiction. Where velvet could be seen to represent flesh, genitalia or blood, fur is commonly understood to represent pubic hair, as it is the first sighting of the female 'lack'.

On the left of the back wall, two paintings sit side by side. The smaller of the two, *Desiring*, hangs slightly to the left, and shows a crimson velvet curtain that mirrors the fabric flanking *Voyeur* on the adjacent wall. Here, the omniscient velvet (that appears in nearly all of the paintings in this exhibition) conjures a plethora of references including flesh, bed sheets, the veil, blood and female genitalia. In the larger, *Curiosity*, another red velvet swath of fabric, bolstered by something unknown, leads down to an iconic red high-heel shoe in the bottom corner. The scarlet stiletto gleams, like blood or the light outside a brothel. Atop the velvet, a creamy stole hangs impotently; its fur parted in a traditional formation, culminating in four fur droplets at the base. There is a tenderness and stillness in the way the fur and velvet interact. However, a pool of blood forms beneath the stole, implicating the objects in a violent incident.

Adjacent, in *Ritual*, the same stole is perched on a rock in the wilderness. If the stole were human, her legs would be crossed, the mauve satin revealed as a flash of genitalia. A subtle gleam of car head beams cinematically light and glamorise the object, revealing more blood drips among the reeds. Interestingly, Gobey's painting illustrates a similar setting to that of Duchamp's *Étant donnés*, where an abstracted female form, constructed of animal skin, is found within the landscape. However, instead of the peephole, Gobey has placed a wooden chair lined in velveteen in front of the work. Across the back of the chair, a full-body fox stole watches over the shoulder of the seated viewer. Of all of the works in the exhibition, *Ritual* has the most present narrative, veering between highway abduction, horror film and tales of cult ceremony. In these commonly digested narratives, the female subject is endangered by violence, sexual abuse or paranormal activity. However in Gobey's work, the blood that hints at this violence does not sully the fur objects in any way: in *Ritual*, the stole is flawless. Therefore, if the stole is symbolic of the female subject, this narrative becomes uncertain. By denying the spectator a common narrative of female subjectification, the story comes undone, leaving only objects performing an incident of desire.

## Dénouement

As in the tying-up of a film, when all trace elements come together to form a conclusion, Gobey's *Interrogation* vaguely promises a solution. Situated to the right of the back wall, an orange plastic chair sits in a blue room. The chair is bureaucratic: the type found in schools or police stations, uncomfortable and firm. The blue of the room is suspiciously calm, and soaks the walls. A fur stole, plump and brown and real, is out of place hanging from the back of the chair, yet it appears to be involved in some form of questioning. Whether the stole is the perpetrator or the victim is unknown, yet there is certainty, by this point, that the object has become a subject. Blood still hangs from the image as it has in other works. However, in *Interrogation*, this blood outlines a series of abstract forms that hover in the picture plane. These forms gather like DNA, floating up from a body at a crime scene. The incident still has no narrative, but the incident of desire appears to be over. The red has lifted, and the dénouement has arrived.

Janice Gobey invites the viewer to act as spectator, and perhaps also perpetrator, in the art of looking. Without any gendered human subjects, Gobey has managed to conjure a cast of fetish objects who make repeat appearances throughout the entirety of the exhibition. The evasive narrative is both horrific and sexual, culminating in an inquiry into erotic scopophilia. Within these works, the artist has reorganised the unconscious formula for patriarchal 'seeing' and thinking about the female sexual subject. By subverting an awareness of who is looking, and what is being looked at, the spectator is punished for their overt tendency to find the human in a room full of objects.

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<sup>i</sup> Mulvey, Laura, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Visual and Other Pleasures*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 21.

<sup>ii</sup> Deepwell, Katy, 'Claims for a Feminist Politics in Painting', *Contemporary Painting in Context*, (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2010), p.144.

<sup>iii</sup> Mulvey, 1989, p. 17.

<sup>iv</sup> Mulvey, 1989, p. 16.

<sup>v</sup> Mulvey 1989, p. 22.

<sup>vi</sup> Mulvey, Laura, *Curiosity and Fetishism*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 5.

<sup>vii</sup> Mulvey, 1996, p. 5.