

WHITNEY CLAFLIN

As Long As You Get To Be Somebody's Slave, Too

THOMAS ERBEN GALLERY | MAY 24 – JULY 28, 2012

BY JONATHAN GOODMAN

Whitney Claflin is a young, Yale-educated painter who creates raw effects that remain in the thoughts of her viewers long after they have made their way from the gallery. Her surfaces are complex and often deliberately repellent; she belongs to a school of artists, à la Paul McCarthy, who want to confront their audience with work that remains consciously unattractive—as a way, I think, of refusing to succumb to the rules of the game. But Claflin is also a thoughtful and dedicated painter, so her strategy doesn't quite work—rather, we read her art carefully for the diversity of its surfaces and especially for the presence of words and phrases that are taped to the exterior layers of the paintings. Ironically (and likely despite her intentions), she sparks interest with an anti-Romanticist approach that can be every bit as mannered as works that mawkishly celebrate the worth of a particularly close friend. Her installation at the gallery even sported wine bottles covered with candle wax, lit and placed in small groups on the floor, as if to memorialize an old-fashioned bohemia that looks backward for inspiration. The work is all very tongue in cheek, so much so that the cynicism nearly overwhelms the visitor. But, as I have said, her exteriors are dense with signs and, therefore, demand more than a cursory reading.

“Don't Get Pissed Off at My Burnt Lips while the Noose Hangs Dry” (2012) dons a long list of materials, including a silk dress, razor blades, stickers, and earrings, just to mention the first four entries in the group. There are small, thin, curving black lines of paint against a sky-blue ground, along with patches of dotted fabric with flowers sewn onto

the surface of the painting; safety pins, a zipper pull, and magazine clippings intensify the effects. Claflin also provides us with seemingly random phrases attached to the piece—a sampling includes “but, whatever”; “because the meaning”; and “the body played a role.” The lack of sense in Claflin's choice of language seems to be, generally speaking, an attempt to evade meaning in literary as well as visual ways. The question facing her audience is simple: Why would she eschew the traditional rhetoric of painting—a beautiful surface, a well-designed composition—in favor of an art that repudiates attractiveness? It is not an easy question to answer, but the fact that Claflin is forcing the question says a lot about the way she proceeds in her art. Inevitably, a predecessor such as Bruce Nauman, a champion of the ugly and the confrontational, comes to mind.

Rejecting pretense in favor of razor blades gives Claflin's art a seemingly untutored power that transcends the weight of sameness and history facing a young artist today. Her work, painted on a curtain and titled “Most Lies R Listening to Find You” (2012), is an inspired mess, complete with Spandex, marker, magazine clippings, and even a lyric object in the form of a sprig of dry flowers. More or less dead center is a printed note that reads as follows: “I'm not sure if you feel a spark, but I feel fireworks when I think of you.” Despite the complicated surface, replete with all manner of materials, Claflin manages to present her feelings to the audience. It is the ongoing cry of youth in love. Even so, it becomes clear that the artist's rough-hewn aesthetic has its own emotional implications, which are urban, related to detritus, and more



Whitney Claflin, “Web of Lack/ IT IS MY GRAVE,” 2012. Mixed media on found fabric, 23 x 15”. Photo: Andreas Vesterlund. Courtesy the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York.

than slightly antagonistic toward naïve ideas of beauty. Claflin takes a lot of chances in her art, refusing to pull punches in favor of a graceful but meaningless surface. The result is unusual, even extraordinary. ☹