



Alix Pearlstein, *Harem ROOM-1* (detail), 2016. Installation view. Photo: Mario Gallucci.

Alix Pearlstein

UPFOR

In these exceedingly vulgar times, feminists have been forced to develop an array of responses to daily onslaughts of abuse, some blunt, some subtle. Alix Pearlstein's recent show at Upfor offered a particularly sophisticated take on contemporary power dynamics, in the form of an installation ringing with implacable ontological implications about gender and society that will, sadly, probably still be relevant a hundred years from now.

The show centered on a piece called *Harem ROOM-1*, 2016, a collection of toy kittens arranged on the gallery floor in various groupings. Over here, a trio; over there, a quartet; over here, a singlet, adding up to a complicated, deeply fissured congregation. All the kittens on display were identical in shape and equally expressive of industrial-grade cuteness—and yet, depending on their placement, their emotive charges waxed and waned. Implicitly, the viewer saw exclusion in the spacings between cliques, intimacies in the proximities, and psychosocial currents of power coursing through the circuitry of feline concubines. Everywhere and nowhere, the harem's absent sultan insinuated himself.

A strange video titled *Two Women*, reprised from 2000, screened on an adjacent wall. In the foreground floats a cutout paper image of a naked woman pulled from a vintage porn magazine (to deduce from the feathered hair and natural bush). In the background, a ginger-haired young man paces against a white wall, eyeballing her, trying to get something going. The audio track's breathy vocalizations, of a vaguely sensual nature, sound feminine, but

might be the masturbatory fantasies of the male “protagonist.” He takes off his shirt and unbuttons his pants. He comes closer to the cutout. Eventually he caresses and kisses the paper image. The video ends, and the seduction-assault fantasy begins again.

The video cast a thin, oblique blade of light onto the floor installation, drawing the congeries of cats into contemporary discourses on pornography, consent, and female objectification. What kind of workplace is the sultan’s harem, one wondered? Who are the alpha cats here? What kind of solidarity is possible? Is the sultan capital itself? For that matter, what group of subjugated objects couldn’t be considered a harem? And don’t the kittens on the floor look an awful lot like the shifting crowd at an art opening?

The late Mike Kelley famously coaxed throbbing psychological energies from groups of stuffed animals, but perhaps a more apt forebear regarding this piece would be the late Canadian sculptor Roland Brener—student of Anthony Caro and teacher of Charles Ray—who used kinetic toys in sculptural tableaux hardened by modernist intellectualization. Pearlstein, a choreographer and video artist invested in Conceptualism and Minimalism, brings similarly concise, almost effortless rigor to her unheroic social art. The critique she levels is trenchant, but it never flames out into ire. Her kittens are clearly players in a game they didn’t invent, subject to forces beyond their purview, but agents of power in their own right, too. The viewer’s reflex to assign innocence to all victims, to ascribe halos and pitchforks, is muted, redirected. We’re confronted by an image of coercion that’s unmistakably crude, but also modular, systemic, and multisourced.

This nuanced thinking comes as a kind of nourishment in our era of gross offense. The moment is now for mass insurrection, no doubt, and if there’s some uncomfortable public shaming and collateral damage along the way, well, those are the breaks. But as we hammer away with the rough tools of rage, we’re still left with the immutable complexity of reality underneath. Shit’s fucked up, no doubt, in some insanely blatant ways, but shit remains incredibly complicated, too, as this simply framed but theoretically mercurial gathering of kittens attests.

—Jon Raymond

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