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**IMPOSSIBLE GARDENS**

**ERIKA DEFREITAS**

June 2–July 8, 2017



Erika DeFreitas

I too question the flowers No. 4, 2016

Digital inkjet print

44" x 30"

Do you find it spooky, how well she nails it? This peculiar looking, that staunch gaze: the attention Erika DeFreitas brings to her work is the focus you bring to a vigil. It occurs to me that some threads tying together DeFreitas' works in this exhibition are women's labour, the work of dying, death and grieving, and what we inherit and what we lose. Spanning roughly four years of production, this focused presentation demonstrates her uncanny and elegant touch on these often heavy subjects.

*although it sometimes gives the illusion of paint (2016-2017) registers first as wallpaper, but wallpaper made strange: cuts, folds and repairs trouble the otherwise pristine surface, introducing recessionality into a medium not usually associated with dimensionality. Further complicating my reading are *untitled**

(*these textile works*) (2015 – 2017) the original fabric collages framed and placed nearby, the familiarity of cloth tugging at my haptic memory. DeFreitas sources her swatches second-hand, working with and against the exigencies of scraps. The results oscillate between hard-edged geometric abstraction and a grandmother's sewing offcuts. I'm sure the originals still hold the scents of cedar chest and dust, but DeFreitas has planted a hint of slow-drying linseed oil here, too. *I too question the flowers* (2016) again troubles this figure-ground relationship. Here the artist's hands and arms slide over an impossible, all-seasons-go garden rendered in fabric below. DeFreitas' gestures capture the elegance of dance, but what they communicate is inscrutable. Language falters this close to the body; what is transmitted here is shared through pre-linguistic shorthand.

The gestures in (*if you look closely, she moves*) (2016) are the sole province of a series of vintage Virgin Mary's, the icons wrapped in hardworking twine and enshrined on spools and candlesticks. The work toys with the competing ideas of being bound *by* and bound *to*: the first implying constriction, the second service. But there is also comfort: Mary's first recorded act of devotion to her firstborn son was to swaddle him tightly before laying him in the manger. (1) DeFreitas often works in this occult mode—a mode that has historically favoured the voices of individual women while simultaneously essentializing female expression more broadly—without a knowing wink to the camera to prove her (significant) conceptual bona fides. What does it mean to believe that these Virgin Marys move? I would answer that it means taking haunting seriously: "The ghost is not simply a dead or a missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life," writes Avery F. Gordon. (2)

*In Lieu of Flowers* (2013) comprises individually clipped newspaper obituaries stiffened with beeswax and stacked in the gallery. On the one hand, their material accumulation suggests the overwhelming task of keeping our dead individuated and present. Their embalmment in wax suggests something more lasting, however: I recall Plato's metaphor of the wax tablet, of Victorian memorial arts. If DeFreitas doesn't keep memory alive, the emotional weight of this work lies in her painstaking attempt to do so.

"In the hybrid field of "paraconceptualism," neither conceptualism nor the paranormal are left intact... the prefix "para-" symbolizes the force of contamination through a proximity so great that it threatens the soundness of all boundaries,"(3) writes A.M. Kokoli on the practice of Susan Hiller. I love this definition for the edge that it describes, the fraying threads of both woven into a new and dangerous field of investigation that DeFreitas now occupies. What DeFreitas captures in her uncanny works reflects the complicated lives lived by women: caught in the tangled web of social relationships, sustained by love, service, and defiant in the face of loss. What DeFreitas has done is capture the gritty, uncomfortable heart of this, and—I'll repeat it—don't you find it spooky how well she nails it?

Text by Emily McKibbin

1. The Gospel According to Luke, 2:7.

2. Avery F. Gordon, "From *Her Shape and His Hand*," in María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, eds., *The Spectralities Reader* (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013): pp. 107-108.

3. Alexander M. Kokoli, "Susan Hiller's Paraconceptualism," in J. Fisher, ed. *Technologies of Intuition* (Toronto: YYZ Books, 2006): 119-139. Available online: <http://openair.rgu.ac.uk>. Accessed May 5, 2017.