ARLENE TEXTAQUEEN

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The Queen awaits me: I am led through an echoing concrete space filled with art bar revellers, up a white-walled flight of stairs and into her exhibition room on the top floor of Sullivan + Strumpf’s new Waterloo gallery. I am greeted by a cacophony of colour. In an elaborate costume of red spandex, complete with strapped on bands of textas, Arlene TextaQueen performs for her subjects. A game of strip poker has just been played and the room is still buzzing about the naked body that had been on display alongside the twelve pinned up nudes on the walls.

Self portrait in Texas (Rainbow), 2011, felt tip on paper, 112 x 77cm

TextaQueen is armed with a pack of her TextaNudes pin-up playing cards, which she arranges on a green poker table. I take a seat beside her and survey the room. Arranged around each of the large scale felt-tip drawings on paper are the ranks and suits for cards in a deck. The works themselves are exquisitely decorative. The medium of texta creates the sense of a child-like naivety and brings with it a cutely, kitsch aesthetic. Yet this superficial reading is complicated by the undertones of queer politics and feminist theory, evident in TextaQueen’s interrogation and exploration of the nude portrait. Each nude is a different female or queer performer, ‘un-dressed-up’ in a space which they possess, surrounded by props and objects of their desire.
I like it when you use it self consciously (Kevin Blechdom), 2011, felt tip on paper, 112 x 77cm

TextaQueen and I chat for a while, and then she asks me if I would like my fortune told. I accept. I draw three cards from the deck on the table. The first card I have chosen is the six of diamonds, which also happens to be pinned up on the wall in large scale before me. I can see from my seat the striated texture imparted by the nuanced tone and concentration of the textas’ marks. Her name is Kevin Blechdom, an experimental electronic musician and performer from the USA. She sits with legs spread, surrounded by such seemingly incompatible things as a pink flamingo and an explosives device (or is that a bike-pump?). In her left hand she holds a drill in a suggestive fashion. There is a mirror resting on her right thigh shining back onto her vagina and torso. Sexual suggestion is made all the more explicit by the mirror’s illusory reflection of the model’s fingers spreading her genitalia.

"I like it when you use it self-consciously," is written in block letters in the background. The phrase is full of double entendres. During each sitting, TextaQueen writes down a snippet of conversation passed from model to artist, and then draws it into her work. TextaQueen reveals that Kevin was referring to her use of distortion. She claims she doesn’t consciously distort her portraits, it just kind of happens throughout the process of trying to put down what she sees. But in the case of this work, it seems the artist has self-consciously altered ‘reality’, in an explicit quip on the nature of Kevin’s sexualisation. TextaQueen isn’t giving much away when it comes to my future, but tells me something about finding myself some time soon.
She turns over my second card, a nine of clubs, which shows the naked Lindsey reading ‘Joy of Pickling’. She is reclined amidst an eclectic array of books ranging from The Second Sex to The Invisible Man. She looks at me over her glasses, firmly challenging my gaze, which is drawn first to the chaotic surface created by the piles of literature, and then across her naked body which is partly obscured by the books. Like all of TextaQueen’s subjects, she challenges the idea of the nude as it has been manifested in the history of art; she is no passive object of a male desire. Rather, she powerfully possesses her nakedness, undressed-up by feminist literature and science fiction. Yet at the same time, the exchange of gazes – between artist, subject, and audience – is still uneasily sexualised, calling into question the relationships of power that the portrait by nature relies upon. In person, TextaQueen looks deep into my eyes, and tells me that the card reveals that I am too involved in theory and books and need to go out and live life. An astute observation, I’ll admit. I giggle and agree in mock shock. Ah, the joys of superstitious belief in chance encounters with people and cards, and people on cards.

The performance continues as she flips the third card. It is another reclining nude. Laid on the art school drop out lies atop a multi-coloured checked rug which rests unevenly on a whitening tesselated wood surface, the slightest hint of a skirt showing and kitchen tiles can be seen along the top edge of the work. Something I notice in all of these drawings is the incredible density of composition, the sense that each frame is jam-packed with bustling colours and objects drawn together by the sub-consciously distorting will of the artist when it collides with the eccentric personalities of her numerous subjects.

TextaQueen tells me I will spend time in the future exploring what influenced me to get where I am. She probably divined this fortune because on the card reads the curvaceous question, ‘What are your influences?’ Her own influences seem to come from the creative community she has also helped foster – that mad world of ‘landscaped lassies’ and ‘heartly heroines’, ‘brash babes’ and ‘glamour girls’ who repossess and display, un-dressed-up in playful camaraderie. Her works speak of all those possible exchanges between performer and audience, artist and model, an artwork and its viewer.