

Some people are made more beautiful by the redness around their eyes. It calls attention to how perfectly the rest of their features fall into place around the pinkness. As spectators – on the subway, at the Laundromat, or any other place where private has no choice but to overflow into public - we're quieted by this kind of swollen energy, this sadness worn so close to the surface. We recognize it in front of us, like a relative, and yet (or and so), it remains wholly unreachable. There is a compelling power in it.

This is the power of Karyn Lyons' work, and determining the specific location of it is a tender enterprise. Perhaps the painting of the hairless dog is a place to start, because this little dog appears to be the only witness rendered in this suite of paintings, and moving through them feels like gathering bits of evidence. This one is a fragile animal, indeed. The kind that looks soulful even as it is shivering. There is a white and fluffy comforter beneath her shiny sealskin, but the dog's anxiety is not appeased. There is the light of morning in the room, but it certainly has not cleared the air...

Most of Lyons' other paintings are of a young woman. We almost always see her from the waist up; she is quite close to us. She is perfectly lovely – the artist has given her straight, shiny hair with a little summer left in it, blue eyes so clear they couldn't hide the skinniest shadow of doubt, slim, lean muscles. She even looks natural - and fabulous - in hats. She is stylish, but not trendy, sophisticated, but not pretentious - a classic American beauty, really, with brains to back it up. Delicate, but with gravitas. In contemporary terms, *the girl's got it goin' on*. And what could be more beautiful than a beautiful thing?

According to Rodin, only the ruin of a beautiful thing, and these images, like frames from a film, silently narrate a ruination. Consider Lyons' painting of the twister: It is as soft and non-threatening as the dog's comforter. It even shares the same pallet as the fur collar of our lady's sheepskin coat on another canvas – a fluffy breath of grey, a gentle feather of red. As a tornado, it is less about destruction than muffling; a slow suffocation - the kind you do yourself to survive the wrong choice. Although she is the only person painted on these canvasses, we never get the sense that the young woman is alone. These aren't the expressions one makes when one is alone; the

restraint would be unnecessary. These faces are made in the company of an intimately bad decision.

The apple imagery alludes to this. Of course, they speak to temptation – in art, apples are almost always in some residual conversation with temptation – but Lyons makes broader use of them. Somehow, in their associations with fall and the end of summer, and in the presence of these ever-woolen skies, the apple tree carts with it a feeling of “after,” like the moon is on the wane. Like the honeymoon is over. Like the happy couple never made it to the cocktail party because they fell into yet another “discussion” on the slippery walk to the car. Like she’s still wearing the silvery dress at breakfast because she thought they would be able to talk things out last night. It almost pains us how desperately she wants to make this work.

No. That’s not quite right. *Consider the painting of her with the fur hat.*

Consider, too, from the world of science, the Diogenes Project, which has recently established that there are forty-three distinct movements of facial muscles that can be arranged into three thousand combinations of universally meaningful expressions. Diogenes – “after the Greek philosopher of antiquity who used to wander around Athens with a lantern, peering into people’s faces as he searched for an honest man.” ¹ Look harder.

Maybe what pains us is not how desperately she wants to make this work, but how desperately she *tries to convince herself* she wants to make this work... and *that* is a complex state to portray with a picture. If Vermeer captured a young woman in the middle of her day’s restorative moments, Karyn Lyons, also with great sympathy and soft light, catches the moments of a young woman’s unraveling. There are the more hopeful images where, below her Glamour Girl sunglasses, her lips flirt with a smile – but taken in the context of this overall body of work, even these more pleasant pictures seem like painting a brave face on a bleak outlook.

Despite and because of all of this, these oil paintings are sumptuous to look at. Lyons’ model is runway gorgeous. As photo-realistic portraits, these are masterfully painted. The artist’s use of light is subtle but moody, and though the surface of the canvas itself is smooth, the pictures are rich with convincing and complicated textures: silk, fur, sequins, skin – we can’t help but be seduced, and that is Lyons’ means to an end. The designer clothes, the great hair, the glowing skin...

It all *appears* perfect...

1 Gladwell, Malcolm. "The Naked Face." The New Yorker August 5, 2002