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ArtSeen

A Painted Horse by JOE SOLA

(with MATTHEW CHAMBERS, SAYRE GOMEZ, RUDY K. SLOBECK, and others)

SEPT 2015

By *Liz Hirsch*



Joe Sola, *Hollywood Hills Living Room*, 2015. Pigment print on fiber based paper, 26 x 40 in. Edition of 3. Courtesy the artist and TIF SIGFRIDS.

Los Angeles

TIF SIGFRIDS

July 11 – August 8, 2015

Luminous autumn tones unfold across a surface divided by jagged diagonal bands. Streaks of fuchsia dissolve into lilac edged in silvery white beside umber patches gradually glowing orange, then chestnut. The effect recalls the hard-edged abstraction of the 1960s or the unusual geometries of a funky Mary Heilmann. But the painting isn't a typical wall work; rather, it is a living, breathing, softly snorting miniature horse named Riba, with an elaborately coiffed and dyed coat of hair. Los Angeles-based Joe Sola performs playfully through painting here and elsewhere, like the 2013 presentation of *Der Hintern in der Luft* (with Michael Webster), when he put a Laura Owens canvas through a wood chipper. Here Sola diverts his authorship, enlisting the hired, done-up horse to take the stage, following what Claire Bishop has referred to as “delegated performance:” participants perform their “authentic selves,” as distinct from the norms of theater or cinema, where a director hires an actor to portray a fictional character. Sola's intervention—foremost a deconstruction of painting—drops the “naturalism” of delegated performance, for a wild and crazy equine makeover, mocking posturing painters and collectors along the way.

Sola constructs a layered parody of trends here (successful in spite of itself and its overextensions), taking aim at zombie formalism, institutional critique, and interspecies communication. Assuming the mantle of an abstract painter, he critiques, through imitation, both the aesthetics of production and consumption of this genre, while experimenting with the incongruous addition of the zoological. It's Riba, as a good-natured burlesque, who saves the show from numbing cynicism. She appears neither perturbed nor impressed by her transformed appearance or surroundings, naively and

effortlessly holding court. Process-fetish in particular gets funny here: vegan dyes (safe, temporary, and harmless, we're assured) manually massaged into Riba's skin gradually fade as she rubs up against human hands or other surfaces. As a painting, Riba is not exceptional. As a horse, she shines.

Sola also prods at the premise that the desire for acquisition stops at the inanimate, utilizing contemporary tropes of collecting and specific motifs that might surface in the private home. The gallery space replicates the domestic interior of an imagined collector, complete with abstract paintings by other artists such as Sayre Gomez and Matthew Chambers. The walls are painted a deep, cool gray and the floors finished with Berber carpeting. A potted plant and a side table flashing antiquarian titles and bottles of gin and brandy greet visitors as they enter. A painted portrait on a bookshelf along the back wall imagines the likeness of the imaginary collectors. These props became performers just as the horse: a total performance distributed among actors live and inert. This clichéd portrayal of the wealthy, however, just doesn't carry far enough. Some barnyard references—a pile of hay in the corner and a wooden fence at the entrance—create a disconnect that's further muddled by the placement of the gallery staff front and center at a boardroom style table. Moreover, the dealers are instructed to focus conversation on Riba alone, and hesitate to identify the other artists on the walls, a kind of un-collector-like approach as far as I can tell. The horse hovers semantically between these three environments—home, barn, and gallery—providing a welcome distraction from the other conceptual antics. As if anticipating this disconnect, a series of large format prints of Riba taken in other homes and locales have the feel of an editorial assignment; they attempt to extend the context of the project to other sites, while serving as added performance documentation.



Installation view: Joe Sola, *A Painted Horse* (with Matthew Chambers, Sayre Gomez, and Rudy K Slobeck, and others), TIF SIGFRIDS, July 11 - August 8, 2015. Photo: Gina Clyne Photography.

You might characterize *A Painted Horse* more readily than usual as an “exhibit,” (increasingly a passé term, as it smacks of the exploitative 19th century connotations of early museology). As Sola alludes to in his selection of the synthesized miniature horse breed, exotic animal displays go back centuries, but the novelty of “animal as readymade” is also not new within contemporary art. Sola’s gesture nods to Jannis Kounellis’s 1969 *Untitled (12 horses)* (recently restaged in New York to the protests of animal rights activists) while altering it cosmetically as Pierre Huyghe did in his work, *Human*, a pink-legged dog. Others have instrumentalized non-human life forms, like Maurizio Cattelan (donkeys) and Bjarne Melgaard (tigers), or on a much smaller scale Anicka Yi (bacteria). What is the relationship between Sola’s work and that of other artists? They may be informed by the anthropocene turn of recent cultural theory, and an interest in social structures and authority, but they also verge on spectacle. Sola doesn’t seem to mind this inevitability—his ornamented horse is nothing if not amusing. Despite the distractions, this fun still does rub off on you, like the vegan dyes.

CONTRIBUTOR

Liz Hirsch

is a contributor to the *Brooklyn Rail*.

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