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Art in America



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Celeste Dupuy-Spencer

NEW YORK,
at Marlborough Contemporary

by Eric Sutphin



Celeste Dupuy-Spencer: *Love Me, Love Me, Love Me, I'm a Liberal*, 2017, oil on canvas, 20 inches square; at Marlborough Contemporary.

Los Angeles-based painter Celeste Dupuy-Spencer frequently mines news stories and her own personal experiences for her work's content, producing contemporary genre paintings that are politically charged but ambiguous in meaning. Most of the twelve paintings and five drawings featured in "Wild and Blue"—the first solo exhibition in New York for Dupuy-Spencer, who was included in the 2017 Whitney Biennial—were made after the 2016 presidential election. Overall, the selection foregrounded the complexity and texture of American life today.

The jovial group of people shown in *Rokeby* (2017) suggests a mix of blue-collar workers, artists, and liberal-arts professors. The scene is set on the porch of the main house at Rokeby, a sprawling estate in New York's Hudson Valley that serves as an artist retreat and rooming house. In the background of the image, the sky transitions from deep blue to acid orange, as if the sun were beginning to set, and a cloud formation casts a vaguely ominous glow. *Not Today Satan* (2017) offers a more overtly sinister image. In a dark, cloudy city, a troupe of demons and spirits, reminiscent of the grotesque creatures in Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* (1490-1505), haunts a police cruiser bearing the slogan protect and serve on its side. The two white male officers visible through the car's front windows stare straight ahead (perhaps panicked, perhaps oblivious) as these specters that might symbolize brutality, injustice, or rage descend upon them. Which is the evil force here? The demons or the officers?

Love Me, Love Me, Love Me, I'm a Liberal (2017) is titled after a satirical 1966 song by Phil Ochs and likewise pokes fun at American liberals. A forlorn woman sits at a cluttered table with a bankruptcy statement in one hand and a cigarette in the other. On the tabletop,

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which occupies about half of the picture, are a handmade vase with the phrase FLOWERS NOT BOMBS scrawled on it, an NPR mug, and a book whose title, *The Burden of Blame: How to Convince People That It's Not Your Fault*, humorously conjures an image of third-party-candidate supporters working through a sense of post-election guilt. *R. DiMeo III* (2017) is a portrait of a sunburned man with a receding hairline holding a fawn in his arms. The man's rugged masculinity at first appears tempered by his seemingly tender relationship with the animal. As one continues to look, however, it seems possible that this image of caretaking is instead one of entrapment and conquest. Such shifting meanings are a constant in Dupuy-Spencer's work. Though she gives her scenes a great deal of specificity, the details rarely add up to single narratives. Rather, they allow for a multiplicity of possible, at times conflicting plotlines, much like those of the national narrative itself.