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“Celeste Dupuy-Spencer”

By M. Rooney
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CELESTE DUPUY-SPENCER'S wry, and sometimes ominous, paintings possess a self-deprecating humor. This tendency is spelled out explicitly in her painting *How to Scare People and Alienate Your Friends*. Here, a ghost, smoking a cigarette and drinking wine, reads a book of the same name. In *Eviction Notice* the danger appears to be eminent as a commune of renters react in faye and dramatic poses to bad news; an eviction slip is handed over to the most central figure in the painting who has chosen to ignore it in favor of his own distress. In both of these works Celeste's involvement, or guilt is implicit.

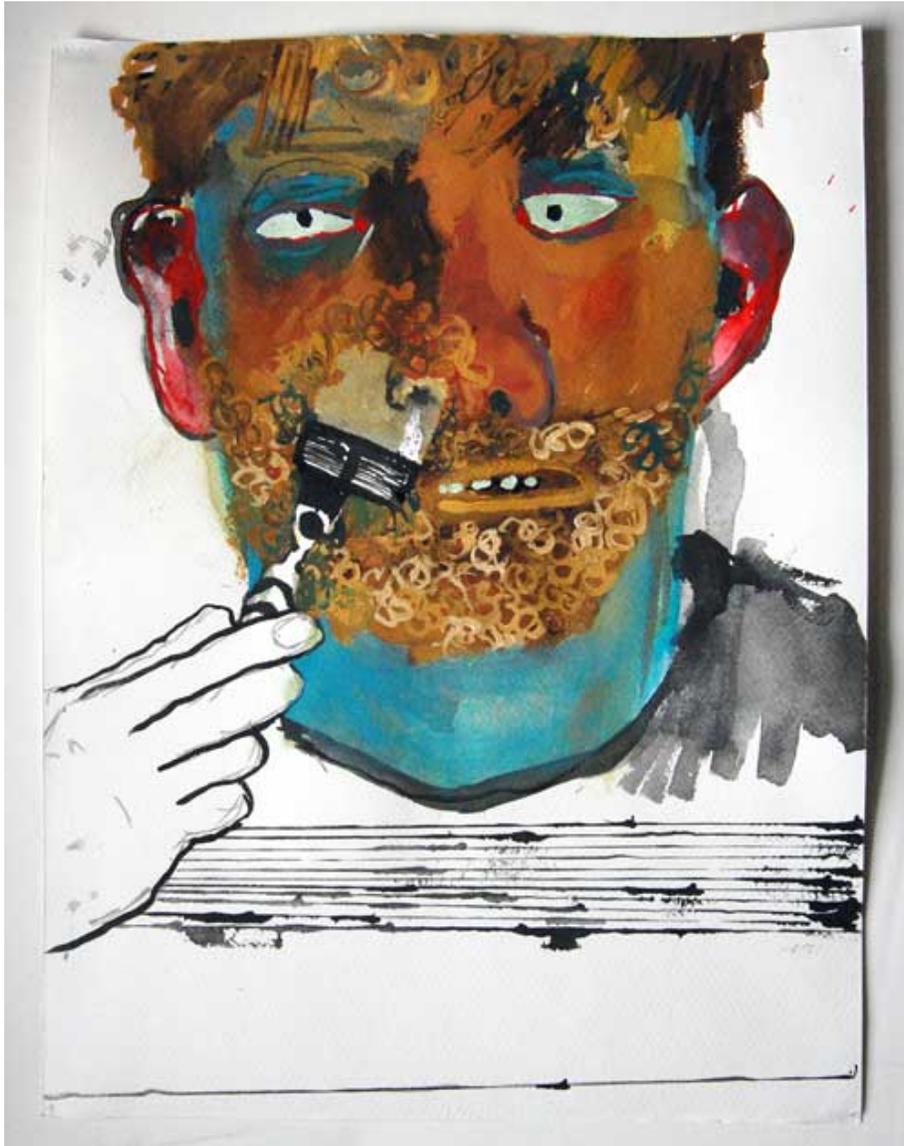
It is, in part, this humble, and humorous self-reflexivity that lends itself so well to a series of works Dupuy-Spencer made about Occupy Wall Street, with which she is actively involved. These paintings, track both the everydayness of the protests; general assembly, posters, occupying bodies, as well as the violence and intimidation stated in dark, and blurry tones, with softly painted figures sitting inside fenced areas, or being pulled away by the police.

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There is a language of protest, in her paintings, that seems to excuse the coexistence of defeat, humor, pride and hopefulness all at once defying the idea that one message must be understood—a capitalist notion to begin with. Poetic language, utilized in many of Dupuy- Spencer's paintings (as opposed to symbolic language easily co-opted by the rhetoric of protest, and inversely advertising) begins first as a disruption or destruction of meaning, and the signifying operations of social structures. In Julia Kristeva's essay, *From One Identity to Another*, she claims that poetic language will "accompany crises within social structures and institutions [at] the moment of their mutation, evolution, revolution, or disarray." She goes on to say that poetic language's "very economy borders on psychosis." It is exactly that place, where the banal and the psychotic meet, in which Dupuy- Spencer's paintings gain momentum.

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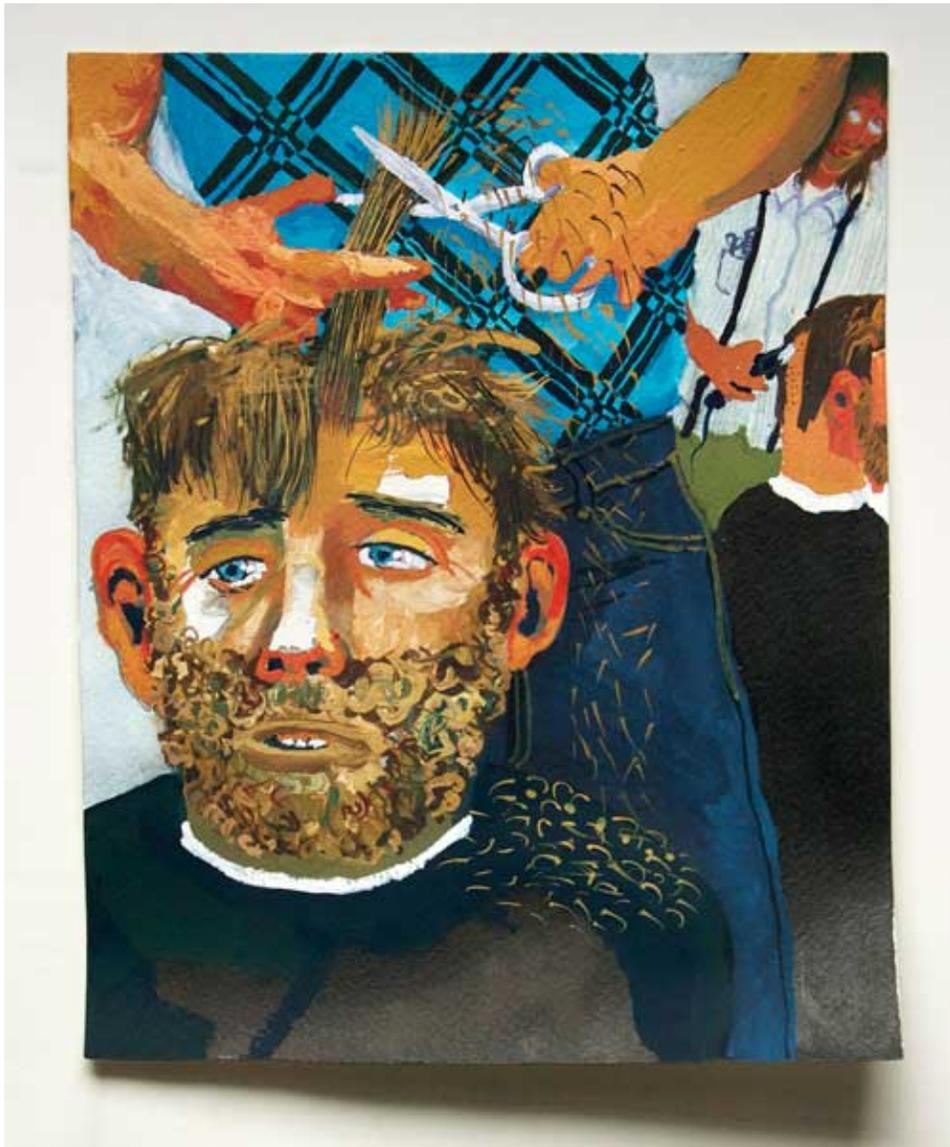


Even in her sexier paintings there is a sort of listlessness expressed. In one untitled work, a figure in an old-fashioned swimsuit kneels on all fours in a swampy river, while another figure (both ambiguously gendered) fingers the first one from behind. The top figure looks out toward viewer, while the bottom figure looks ambivalently straight ahead. Two dogs appear, in the background, with their tongues out. There is a picnic laid out to the side. The scene is idyllic, even Manet-esque, yet the positioning of their bodies, the closeness of their faces to the ground (and to the dogs) implies a feeling of baseness, in their act, or to their bodies, that runs rampant throughout the work.

Dupuy-Spencer's subject's bodies are often seen with mashed, discolored faces, distorted limbs, squatting in the woods with impending bowel movements, or in some sort of liminal physicality (i.e. between wrestling and dancing). The phenomenon of "base seduction", at work in Celeste's paintings, is a predicament of our species, Bataille argues in his essay, *The Big Toe*, in which we place our selves in likeness to the gods – in praise of our uprightness, concerned with the air, and the trees, and all things pointing upwards, towards the heavens. We have come to think of hell as a place below us, inadvertently tied to the ground, the mud and therefor our feet. In this

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separation between the tops and bottoms of things our feet have become grotesque hand-like extremities that thrive in filth— ever complicit in the sinful deeds of the world beneath them. It is only through, or because of, this baseness that they become fetishized or achieve what Bataille refers to as “burlesque value.” How Celeste’s paintings achieve this seductiveness, without any transpositions (without becoming fetishized objects) is in the movement between types of seduction. One, safe and superficial, caused by the luminosity of the paint, the vibrancy of the pallet, and the familiarity with its form (it’s two dimensionality). The other seduction caused by an attraction/repulsion to formlessness, her subject’s dislocations (an unfinished meal, an unpleasurable sex act, an unidentifiable face), and an unsettling presentness to it all—as though the artist is completely resistant to the idea of nostalgia.



Like the new casualists, described in Sharon Butler’s Brooklyn Rail piece about new abstraction, Celeste Dupuy-Spencer’s paintings “seek to accommodate a world in which there is often no clear truth or falseness. They are more intrigued by the questions and contradictions than by any definitive answers the work might provide.” But unlike many new abstract artists, and even her figurative abstraction mentors Amy Sillman, and Nicole Eisenman

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(all of whom have worked to complicate traditional painting discourse with feminism – in varying forms) Celeste Dupuy-Spencer's work continues to grate down on the figure, and it's detritus as if to reassert that our own bodies are still the best political agents we can hope for, as subject to chance, change, disaster, and abuse as they are. In recent months, Celeste has taken a break from oil painting in favor of watercolor and gouache. The resulting pictures are a series of small, fresh works including the aforementioned OWS paintings, a series called Butches of My Childhood, and a handful of paintings made especially for our first edition of The Deal. You can see more of Celeste's work at: <http://celestedupuy-spencer.tumblr.com/>

