

*A collaboration by Michelle Rawlings and Nan Coulter using paint, pencil, photography and collage.*

***Michelle Rawlings is ascendant. Her friend and fellow artist, Arthur Peña, lets us in on an artist not so easily understood. (Even by Rawlings herself.)***

by ARTHUR PEÑA


portraits by NAN COULTER

digitally blended illustrations by MICHELLE RAWLINGS

*Michelle Rawlings is an artist who works in — and was born and raised in — Dallas. She graduated with honors in 2012 from the Rhode Island School of Design, where she received a master's degree in painting. She also studied at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts Boston and Pepperdine University, where she received a bachelor's degree in studio art and philosophy. Her work has been in group exhibitions in Brooklyn, Houston, Malmö and Copenhagen, and in Dallas at the Dallas Contemporary and the Talley Dunn Gallery. Solo exhibitions have included OFG.XXX in Dallas, the Fort Worth Drawing Center and the Cité Internationale Universitaire de Paris. And, yes, she is the daughter of Dallas mayor Mike Rawlings. Moving on. Through December 12, recent paintings and a documentary-like short film by Michelle Rawlings are on view in Feature, the Goss-Michael Foundation exhibit series that folds important Dallas artists into the foundation's predominantly international programming, a focus being the work of the YBAs, a group of*


young British artists born in the mid-1960s who became internationally prominent — and collected — beginning in the late 1980s. Rawlings is, then, a YADA, a young American Dallas artist, squarely in the cultural cross hairs and poised for same.

—Rob Brinkley

 *Royal blue, oil on linen and Plexiglas frame, 2014*

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For three of the past four years, I have not lived farther than 20 feet from Michelle Rawlings. Our time together as graduate students at the Rhode Island School of Design was spent mostly in our neighboring studios. (We surely clocked more hours there than in our respective residences.) After her return from a year in New York, Michelle moved in next door to me in Old East Dallas, where I had settled into what we lovingly call “the Compound,” a cluster of modest buildings populated by a handful of young artists. Needless to say, I’ve gotten to know Michelle and her work on many levels and through many paintings. It is through

 *(self-portrait), oil on linen and wood frame, 2014*

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her paintings that I’ve come to understand her as best I can. This is a difficult task, given that Michelle occupies several painterly genres and consistently indulges her stylistically promiscuous hand. Her deceptively sophisticated simple? paintings portray anonymous women, appropriate European masterworks and cultural icons, and put her own anxieties of influence on full display.

This is the core of the paradox of Michelle’s paintings. They are personal, but not divulging — as if there were is a concern that by seeing if we saw the real Michelle, we just wouldn’t understand. The work is vulnerable in this way and achingly sincere in its diaristic presentation of her passions and inspirations. All of her paintings are composed to be liked, to be accepted; moreover, they are built to be believed. From her delicate handling of paint and consideration of a frame to their modest size, these paintings are polite to the point of suspicion; a stranger with the sweetest candy whose intentions are not quite clear. It is this side of her pieces that challenges any attempt to fully comprehend her work. Any revelation from her is offset by the misleading importance regarding where she chooses to settle her restless gaze and attention. Imagery sourced from Google searches or anonymous portraits found in pamphlets are given the same care and consideration as her reworking of a Degas or a Courbet. All is equalized and everything is of dire importance, removing any hierarchy that may be assumed.

 *Michelle Rawlings*

This is particularly true with her monochromes, the emblematic model for modern abstract painting. Their recent injection into her lexicon turns the work back on itself and underlines Michelle’s meditation on painting and its history. As she does in the vein that runs throughout her oeuvre, Michelle takes the familiar and makes it strange, in this case downsizing the historically large monochrome, which serves to pull you in instead of push you back. They monochromes function more as mirrors with their dreamy undulating surfaces pulsating in an endless echo-plex.

Seen as a group, Michelle's paintings begin to agitate each other, teasing out relationships that which we are compelled to build upon. A more direct example of this can be seen in *Digital Collage*. Portraits of the artist and her family are shown with pop-culture references seemingly organized by free association. The apparent amateurish layering of images coupled with the abundant use of rainbows point to a certain aloof innocence. When coupled with a work, such as her endearing glitter painting of Hello Kitty, we can, if only for a second, relate to the artist in her tender reverence of the ideal existence. Then she is gone. Her limber yet decisive hand bounces between pieces each and every piece, emptying out any personalized romanticism and stripping away undertones of a singular reading.



In this flattening of content, her works operate as painted vessels that host our projections and multitude of associations, however frightening or banal they may be. This is the generosity that is embedded in Michelle's work. It is willing and capable to accommodate whatever you want to bring to it,



*Naomi Campbell, oil on linen, 2012*

*Rainbow, oil on linen and Plexiglas, 2013*

welcoming you to be a part of the remarkably open and still unfolding narrative that Michelle does not know the ending to.

Each painting pulls from the ordinary and familiar and weaves together a subversive revision on our accepted visual history and cultural expectations. There are no conceptual aerobics or exaggerated strategies. In the most direct way, what you see is what you see. We are left with no single direction, forced to fill in the blanks ourselves.

ARTHUR PEÑA is a painter, arts educator and writer. He is the founder-director of the experimental art space WARE:WOLF:HAUS, the founder of the progressive-music venue Vice Palace and the co-founder of Deadbolt Studios in West Dallas. Peña has shown throughout New York and extensively in Texas including the Dallas Museum of Art and his 2013 solo show "slight shift, steady hand" at Dallas Contemporary. He received his master of fine arts degree from the Rhode Island School of Design in 2012 and lives and works in Dallas.