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A SUBTLE KNIFE

A delicate hand with exacting precision informs the nuanced works of artist Michelle Rawlings.

Born in Dallas, Michelle Rawlings's art career has taken her to Boston, Providence, New York, Los Angeles, and Paris. When she returned two years ago to her home city, she found both the physical and mental space to create her art. Rawlings's paintings, photo collages, and animations draw from a wide pool of source matter. Ranging from stock photography to the aesthetics of early childhood education, the artist's mining of art history and her own upbringing place a strong emphasis on nostalgia. She taps into the romance and malaise of youth.

Many of Rawlings's paintings focus on images of women. She investigates the omnipresence of the sexualized female form throughout visual culture and the commodification of women's bodies. The artist's culling of source material evinces the mass of information we are bombarded with via the Internet and advertising. The strength of Rawlings's work is derived from her ability to translate different subject matter into paintings that are both considered and intimate. She is a painter's painter with a masterful understanding of the medium.

Located in Old East Dallas near Fair Park, Rawlings's studio, from the outside, is an unassuming two-family home. Inside, rooms are bathed in an ethereal soft white light. In the first room, two small in-process works hang on the walls. A stack of small canvases lean in the corner. In contrast to current trends in painting, which favor large, bombastic works, each of Rawlings's canvases recalls the size of a book.

In the next room are a variety of works in different stages of completion. The artist often experiments with the buildup of paint and different forms, a deeply labor-intensive process. Many pieces are built on top of older works. If she does not feel that a work was successful or resolved, she simply allows it to once again be approached as a raw canvas. These ghostlike under-paintings appear as scars and result in lush, textured surfaces.

Health pamphlets, clothing catalogues, and film, in addition to her own archive of personal images, have become the subject and source material for Rawlings's female portraits. These diverse figures are intentionally selected for their projected naïve quality or purity, which is perhaps best captured in an image of a young Brook Shields included in her 2013 print, *Digi-collage*. This interplay between seduction and innocence causes an arresting tension in the work. Each image unpacks the complexity of the appropriation of the female form and how gender is presented in mass media.

An interest in digital culture is manifested in Rawlings's paintings, inspired by failing computer screens and highly pixelated images. In these works, distorted digital information is meticulously recreated as painted color blocks on canvas. Though executed with exacting precision, there remains a strong presence of the artist's hand. The more abstract of these compositions were inspired by her own malfunctioning computer that distorted images on her artist website, creating distortions of earlier works. In other paintings, color spectrums are broken down into countless small squares. These pixelated rainbows are comprised of blocks of color that have each been individually mixed so that no two colors are exactly the same. The resultant image is a vibrant patchwork that taps into the emotional associations we have with color. Rawlings relishes in the simple, sublime beauty of juxtaposed hues.

This exploration of color is continued in animations that bring Rawlings's paintings to life. These works appear as a hybrid of the

iconic Disney film *Fantasia* and GIF culture. In one work, a mermaid in a watercolor landscape stretches as if she has just awoken from a nap. In another, bars of color travel across the screen in time to music. They illustrate Rawlings's interest in nuance, as small movements have great resonance.

Rawlings has been garnering much attention recently. At the last NADA art fair in Miami she was featured in the booths of two galleries, Warsaw's Raster Gallery and Houston's Hello Projects. Not long before that, she was the subject of a solo exhibition at Raster Gallery, titled *A Gentle Creature*. Currently, she is the subject of a two-person show with Matt Morris at Permanent Collection in Austin. The show explores gender politics as well as gender fluidity. Additionally, she has two upcoming exhibitions at the Dallas-based And Now gallery and will be showing at the Liste Art Fair in Basel this summer.

Rawlings is present in all her work, no matter the subject matter. Be it through the repetition of her likeness or her carefully honed, repetitive brush stroke. Her works elicit repeat viewings due to their subtle execution and nuanced content. Rawlings's ability to create paintings that resonate with contemporary Internet culture makes the medium feel fresh and not only timely, but timeless. **P**

