

THE OBJECT STARES BACK

Victoria Cantons | Lydia Pettit | Olivia Sterling | Xu Yang

Curated by Mattia Pozzoni

24th May – 15th July 2023

Tube Culture Hall is pleased to present the exhibition ***The Object Stares Back***, a group show of the artists Victoria Cantons, Lydia Pettit, Olivia Sterling and Xu Yang.

“Our gaze is never ingenuous. When we look around ourselves there’s a permanent set of categories that inform our seeing.

Art history is the history of artworks seen through a male perspective. The female body, a central focus of endless masterpieces from Botticelli's Venus to Courbet's 1866 Origin of the World, has rarely been portrayed by a woman. If women have never been able to tell their stories, their bodies have often been objectified. As English art critic John Berger wrote in his 1973 Ways of Seeing, describing media culture's shaping of gender politics and the woman as object: “Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.” Women perceive themselves through a male gaze laid on them. They are object more than subject of vision. After centuries, the object stares back. And confronts us, portraying the world in a new unique way.

We want to suggest a shift from a male, objectifying gaze, to a different and open perspective, one which identifies female as protagonists. We want to stop looking at women through a heterosexual male lens and identify them as a passive non-actor, secondary to the active male characters. Four artists, Victoria Cantons, Lydia Pettit, Olivia Sterling and Yang Xu share personal reflections, critiques and stories, embracing the active role of being the ones forwarding narratives.

Each artist presents a different nuance of what informs the notion of female gaze, a sophisticated, delicate yet powerful and firm way to challenge the norm and describe our relationships. They lay themselves bare, physically and psychologically, underlining the beauty and truth of what renders human and distant from conventions every living woman.

Female gaze is tender and warm, such as in **Victoria Cantons** intimate naked portraits, whose titles give poetic insights to the composition. She suggests that we are not just the clothed person we present to the world, but we have many faces. We are defined by our response to experience, our relationship with each other and by language, and yet we are also unique individuals.

Xu Yang's paintings reveal Rococo inspired compositions, where she aims to question the norms and politics revolving around gender, power, and representation. Her alter ego reflects on the quest for perfect body, confronting the gaze of the spectator in her enhanced femininity, confident, loud, and vibrant.

It is often underestimated how this shift of power can cause fractures, with an unexpected pressure for women that are entitled to feel powerful. **Lydia Pettit**'s violent and sinister character expresses a duality in power, a situation where women are sometimes the masters, sometimes the victims.

Olivia Sterling's paintings deepen on this notion; through humorous scenes and colourful palette, she cleverly confronts hierarchical systems of power. Her aim is the racialised way of seeing, focusing on whiteness's tendency to wallow in a perceived "victimhood" and the absurdity of being able to place yourself as the victor or victim.

Thanks to the intervention of these artists, we want to contribute to changing the ways of seeing. Through new lenses we want to describe different worlds, surpassing binary readings and banal models, to render the true meaning of every artistic and critical research."

**text by Mattia Pozzoni*

* **Victoria Cantons** was born in London (1969) where she lives and works. She received the Felix Slade Scholarship in 2018, and completed her MFA in Painting at Slade School of Fine Art, UCL, in 2021. She previously studied Drama for the Stage and Screen at the Academy of Live and Recorded Arts (ALRA South, 1995-97). She featured in White Cube Gallery's Tomorrow London group show (2020) and as one of six artists to watch in the Financial Times's How To Spend it Magazine (May 2021). She participated in numerous group and solo exhibitions such: What Birds Plunge Through is not The Intimate Space, Guts Gallery, London, UK; Transcendental, Cuturi Gallery, Singapore; Papa Ragazze, Nicodim Gallery, Los Angeles. Cantons also curated Slade masters graduates in 'London Grads Now' (2020 and 2021) at the Saatchi Gallery, London.

** **Lydia Pettit** completed an MA Painting at Royal College of Art, London and is a BA graduate of Maryland Institute College of Art. She is a two-time recipient of the Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation Grant and she recently had solo shows at Galerie Judin, Berlin 'Lydia Pettit: In Your Anger, I See Fear'(2023); White Cube, London, Introductions: Lydia Pettit (2021) and Galerie Sébastien Bertrand, Geneva 'Lydia Pettit: The Well'(2021). Recent exhibitions include: And in this Skin of Mine, To Live a Second Time, Guts Gallery, London, UK; GIALLO! Lydia Pettit & Scandeborgs, Trafalgar Avenue, London, UK; Introductions: Lydia Pettit, White Cube, London, UK. She was born in Towson, USA and she lives and works in London.

*** **Olivia Sterling** holds a MA Painting from the Royal College of Art. She participated in numerous solo and group exhibition such: (It's my party) I Can Cry If I Want To, Guts Gallery, London,UK; The Bioelectric Self Pit LA; Dinner with a Show, Meyer Riegger, Berlin, Germany, DE; Yowl, Nevven, Gothenburg, SE; Love your symptom, Blank Projects, Cape Town, ZA; London Grads Now, Saatchi Gallery, London, UK. Olivia has two upcoming exhibitions at Steve Turner Gallery, LA, USA and at Huxley-Parlour, London, UK.

******Xu Yang** is a Chinese multi-disciplinary artist based in London. She graduated with an MA in Painting from the Royal College of Art in 2020. Xu was recently awarded a commission by Tate Collective for LGBTQIA+ history month (2023). Xu was the winner of Barbican Arts Group Trust ArtWorks Open (2019). In 2020 she was shortlisted for the Contemporary Young Artist Prize. Xu curated a showcase of RCA Fine Art Graduates for Kovet.art gallery (2021). In 2017 Xu contributed to collaborative art projects Imaging Technologies with Painting Research at Wimbledon College of Arts at Tate Modern, London, UK; and Here she Comes with Monster Chetwynd at the Royal Festival Hall, London (2016), UK.