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The Policewoman Inside Our Heads: Dawn Mellor at Team

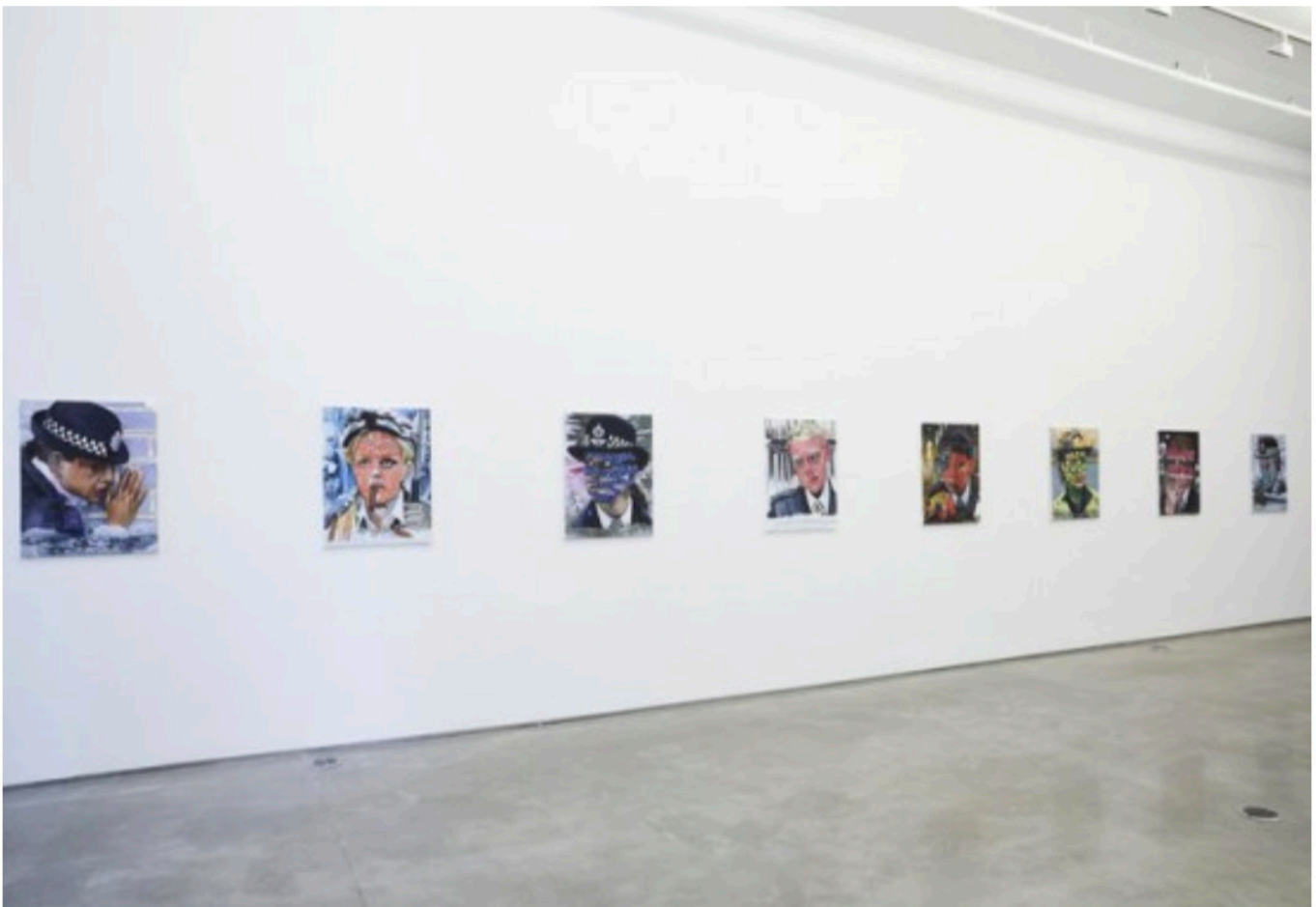
by Noah Dillon

Dawn Mellor: Sirens at Team (Gallery, Inc.)

November 9 to December 23, 2017

83 Grand Street, between Greene and Wooster streets

New York City, teamgal.com



Installation shot of the exhibition under review, Dawn Mellor: Sirens at team (gallery, inc.)

In a cliché of the desire for art objects, sometimes found in the critical literature, the beholder wants to *touch* or *caress* or *lick* the work, especially if it is a painting. This lust is often mentioned with erotic fervor (or its pretense) as if describing some profound, taboo-breaking magnetism. After all, contact with artworks is prohibited: they are too sacred or fragile for such casual molestation or frottage, even by a, like, *serious* admirer. We police ourselves against such fantasies, desires, but that physical and moral defacement of the image also seems to be the greatest compliment that can be given. At Team, the recent exhibition of paintings by London-based artist Dawn Mellor confuses these responses.

Called “Sirens,” the show is Mellor’s first solo with the gallery since 2008, and consists of 20 oil paintings, all made in 2016, each 32 x 24 inches and depicting a policewoman from a British TV series, such as Gillian Anderson playing Detective Superintendent Stella Gibson on *The Fall* (2013 – 16). Almost all of them are named for the character they depict, with the actor noted parenthetically. (Two are simply called *Unnamed Extra*.) Consequently, the exhibition’s title cleverly refers to both the bleating of alarms and the dangerously seductive allure of Mellor’s subjects. She is also working on an artist’s book by the same name.



Dawn Mellor, Detective Superintendent Stella Gibson (Gillian Anderson), 2016. Oil on canvas, 30 x 24 inches. Courtesy of the Artist and team (gallery, inc.)

Mellor’s painting moves between delicate and crude, depending on her need. In places, her affection for these characters is fraught. Their images are defaced—erotically, absurdly. Mellor’s career has included a lot of juvenilia, such as drawings made of the Jacksons when she was a teenager, and stiff paintings of celebrities that have been zealously roughed up with smeared paint and obscene personal notes. The paintings in this show follow a few patterns of disfigurement: each character reduced to a bust immersed in something resembling an apocalyptic flood, brightly colored lingerie-like coverings stretched over her head. The paint is candy-ish, often bright and smirking. The veils in *Police Constable Donna Windsor (Verity Rushworth)* and *Detective Superintendent Ellie Miller (Olivia Colman)* both echo the subjects’ high-visibility safety-yellow jackets. *Police Constable Ruby Buxton (Nicola Alexis)* has its heroine with pink fishnet over her head, purple lipstick, and similar colors reflecting, sunset-like, in the deluge around her.

The protagonist is nearly untouched in *Police Constable Jamilla Blake (Lolita Chakrabarti)*, leaning hard against a blue brick wall as icy water rises against her. Her face is a little reddened, but otherwise she is untouched by the growths, injuries, hallucinations, and other violations to the fantasy world Mellor uses.



Dawn Mellor, Police Constable Jamilla Blake (Lolita Chakrabarti), 2016. Oil on canvas, 30 x 24 inches. Courtesy of the Artist and team (gallery, inc.)

These characters don't menace. Cops are embodiments of abstract state authority still sometimes referred to with the colloquial metonym "The Man." Mellor's policewomen are pretty acutely objects of desire, whatever their demeanor in the original shows. Here, with a deluge rising, icicles forming, bodies defaced by scribbles and scrawls and suggestions of bondage, they're threatened, vulnerable. They invite TV spectator's secret thrill in watching the attractive and imperiled heroine skillfully turn the tables, a recurring trope of many police dramas, giving an audience all sorts of satisfaction in seeing archetypal fantasies play out: of female empowerment, female endangerment, of good's triumph over evil only after struggle, of the rhetorical power/authority of truth and justice over chaos and irrational violence.

A queer woman, Mellor's relationship with her subjects assumes suggestive valence, a desirous gaze. But it's a conflicted one, as well: In this era when the social gap between

the police and the policed is so visibly vast, expressing desire for a cop is a loaded act. For Mellor it has always been, not only for the erotics. She has described ways that police and military recruiters would trawl working class schools in Manchester during her youth. "Often it was those who did not expect high level academic achievements who would abandon study for job security, a pension and a civil service role," Mellor says. It was a good job with benefits for working people.

"People in the police, though," she continues, "would often hide the fact they were police officers from neighbors and, for example, not go home in uniform, because other working class people also condemned police." And now her work arrives at a time well suited to be seen, as police, and the sexual dynamics of those with power and those without, and racism have all come under intense scrutiny, and the public is hot to have some real and/or symbolic comeuppance, and maybe some role reversal, too, on the way to greater parity.

“Defacement works on objects the way jokes work on language, bringing out their inherent magic,” writes Michael Taussig, in the introduction to his book *Defacement* (1999). It flatters the subject by paying regard with violation, as Mellor does by her adoring vandalism, or her vandalism of adored subjects. It emphasizes both terrifying power and absurdity, earnestly recognizing authority by trying to negate that authority, or to cast it out. It attempts to drive the cop out of one’s head, or into one’s arms and mouth.



Dawn Mellor, Police Constable Jamilla Blake (Lolita Chakrabarti), 2016. Oil on canvas, 30 x 24 inches. Courtesy of the Artist and team (gallery, inc.)