

## FEMME ART / REVIEW



**Celeste Rapone**, *Flirt*, 2018. Oil on Canvas. Image courtesy of Corbett vs. Dempsey and the artist.

### **The Figure Does Not Win Every Time: In Discussion with Celeste Rapone**

By: Elaine Tam  
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March in London gifted a few spring pleasures; memorably that telltale smell of oil paint, one takeaway impression among many from Celeste Rapone's exhibition *Retreat* at Josh Lilley gallery. Dressed by electrifying palettes and deftly rendered textures, her eccentric characters go about their daily dealings in paintings oscillating between figuration and abstraction. Swelling to their borders, they occupy "impossible positions" and defy gravity in multiplanar views. Yet it seems that — for all their brazen flair and over-zealous accessorizing — a maelstrom of incidental activity surrounds the figures, swallowing them.

Rapone never does preliminary studies, which means that any self-doubt, struggle, or transformation becomes part of a complex unfolding on the canvas as the painting is realised. The result of this highly personal process is not overtly autobiographical. Nonetheless, the paintings impart an intimate insight into the painter's psyche,

and the ways in which the discomforts and discontents of painting parallel universal human experiences. With remarkable reflexivity, Rapone explores the many personalities of failure and the possibilities for invention, humour and discovery that lie therein.

**Elaine Tam: How do you begin the process of creating new work?**

**Celeste Rapone:** I'll start a painting by mixing colour, usually with some sort of narrative prompt in mind. One of my favourite challenges is assigning a palette to a narrative that has no colour associations. I start my paintings like an abstract, rather than figurative, painter — with colour, shape, composition, form. The figure and environment are secondary elements that come after. There's a lot of wiping down; I really like figuring it out on the canvas and having the problem exist there.

**Elaine Tam: How does this tension register on the canvas or in its contents — with the presence of more control or less gestural swathes of paint?**

**CR:** I'm constantly skeptical of my decisions as a painter. That's one of the prerequisites of being a painter, right? Doubt about everything. The paintings I struggle through I have trouble seeing after they're finished; it's like seeing your significant other for the first time after a really big fight. There are ones that go a bit more effortlessly, but I'm also skeptical of those. Maybe I'll second guess the speed of something being resolved.



**Celeste Rapone, *Yawn*, 2020. Oil on Canvas. Image courtesy of Corbett vs. Dempsey and the artist.**

**ET: Slightly earlier works like *Flirt* (2018) or *Artist Wife* (2017) centre on Guston- or Eisenman-esque caricatures, whilst a recent work like *Yawn* (2020) is more scenic and features lots of minutiae. How do you relate to your earlier work and the way your practice has developed?**

**CR:** There's something about the idea of the women contained, occupying these impossible positions anatomically, but also in terms of expectations, ambition, defeat and self-awareness. It is a lot of what embodies painting as a process and practice. In the past couple of years, I started having the figures fill out the entire composition, taking away flattering cropping. When the whole body is exposed, there is a discomfort [and] vulnerability.

**ET:** The objects slip and slide through the viewing corridors created by the entangled bodies. On your flattened planes, there is no hierarchy — the body never seems to fully possess or grasp the objects. You have described your paintings as anxious. Is anxiety an intended effect?

**CR:** I don't set out to make anxious paintings. I see the paintings as an intersection of my personal history — growing up Italian Catholic in North Jersey — art history, and whatever the current circumstances are, both in my studio and in the world. Your comment about hierarchy is something I think about a *lot*. I'm interested in the figure sort of drowning in their environment and being totally overwhelmed by their context. When I was in grad school, an advisor once asked me: "How do you make figurative painting and not let the figure win every time?"



Celeste Rapone, *Practice for the Real Thing*, 2017. Oil on Canvas. Image courtesy of Corbett vs. Dempsey and the artist.

**ET:** Yes, and in many of your paintings, certain objects are very prominent. Some are even named or branded.

**CR:** There is a specificity to the imagery. But because of my illustration major at Rhode Island School of Design during undergrad, I'm aware of not being *too* specific — that the narrative is not overly linear or only hits one note. RISD is a pretty technical school, [so] my whole background is in observational figure and portrait painting. I realized quickly I was not an illustrator. That's why I went back to grad school for painting.

**ET:** So as to not be only illustrative or purely representational?

**CR:** It was about trusting and translating the skillset [so] that I had enough to make totally intuitive work, invent light scenarios or palettes for convincing flesh tones... For years, I was painting with a hyperrealist approach. Sometimes, I have to re-train my hand to paint in a way that's looser, more gestural, guttural [and to] not paint this thing the way I know, but paint it for what the painting needs. One of my favourite essays is Mitchell's *What do pictures want?* I'm interested in that dialogue.

**ET: Your background as an illustrator explains so much, as your work certainly exhibits moments of stunning technical prowess. Yet the faces of the characters are mysteriously smudged and less defined...**

**CR:** That's been happening more lately; the portraits are getting more generic or partially concealed because they are less overtly autobiographical. I don't know the identity of the person I'm painting, so it seems like a lie to give them a specific face. The more autobiographical elements have been popping up as objects and accessories, [such as the] sneakers I always wanted in junior high that my parents wouldn't let me buy. I'm making a painting of a woman fishing right now. It's a night-time painting, and just yesterday, I added those glow light necklaces.

**ET: Of course! The ones that crack —**

**CR:** And then they light up and they don't last long. That was a *very* popular thing [to wear] when I was growing up, [if you wanted] to look really cool.

**ET: Very raver chic.**

**CR:** Totally! Except back in Jersey we weren't ravers or chic. It was a thing you would wear to a party to have the *aesthetic* of raver chic. Some of these little nods in the paintings are [to] my own history and life, where I come from: a cough drop wrapper, tooth flosser, or a can of something on the floor of my studio that just makes it into the painting. But these are not things viewers need to know — I don't want the paintings to turn into an archaeological dig — it's about how they all collide in a composition.



Celeste Rapone, *Four Eyes*, 2019. Oil on Canvas. Image courtesy of Corbett vs. Dempsey and the artist.

**ET: For someone unfamiliar with “Jersey” as a cultural phenomenon, how would you describe it?**

**CR:** I was growing up in Jersey, amongst all these opulent, maximalist visual stimuli, adopting bad taste tactics. And now I'm working through some of that when making the paintings. I'll make a painting and look at an area and go, “That's a real Jersey move”.

**ET: That's so telling!**

**CR:** You know, I heard a recording of Charline von Heyl for her show at the Hirshhorn, and she talked about finding this level of “upgraded cringe”. What a wonderful phrase, right?

**ET: It's a fine line though. How do you distinguish between cringe and upgraded cringe?**



**CR:** That's a question I ask myself all the time in my studio. What's one step too far? What's *about* bad taste versus just bad taste? I've always been interested in this gentle idea of shame and embarrassment in the paintings, and that has become heightened in some of the moves I'll make in recent ones.

**ET:** Could we consider these kinds of questions the “narrative prompts” that help you to start a work?

**CR:** What gets me into a painting can come from anywhere, which is one of the reasons I reference Dutch Golden Age painting. I love the idea of a simple start. There's something in simplicity that allows me to have total freedom to take it wherever I want, like the women playing dominoes in *Yawn*. “What a dumb idea for a painting!” I'll say in my head, but I love that because it's something to push back against. What's more interesting to me is the absurdity in how a painting is constructed. A woman stretching canvas, who would want to look at a painting of that?



**Celeste Rapone, *Swan*, 2019. Oil on Canvas. Image courtesy of Corbett vs. Dempsey and the artist.**

**ET:** It's funny you say that, because I find this work of yours delightfully witty; the painting becoming the back of its own canvas, revealing its sub-structure. Why did you title it *Swan* (2019)?

**CR:** There's something awkward about your body stretching a canvas. I wanted to play with that in the title; the lack of grace and this idea of transformation. But even if there are sub-narratives occurring in the paintings, inherently they are all about trying. That notion of effort or expectation that goes into trying, which tries to counter failure. But failure is always one aspect of a larger cycle, in life and in painting.

**ET:** That reminds me of the famed Beckett phrase: “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”

**CR:** Absolutely. I see it as this overarching thing, and I like to think that failure enters the work in different ways: humour as a coping mechanism or trying really hard as the concealment of failure. It shows up in the painting as, perhaps, one too many accessories. She's trying just a little *too hard*. Am I trying too hard to paint this necklace perfectly?

**ET: It's like that fine line regarding "upgraded cringe."**

**CR:** Right, like I'm gonna paint this rainbow and it's going to be *très* embarrassing, but is it going to be more embarrassing if it's a perfect rainbow, or if it's a crappily painted rainbow? These are conversations I have with myself ten hours a day, so it's an all-encompassing practice: thinking about trying too hard, failing, starting over again. I always have to be really honest with myself about the painting. There has to be an evocative undercurrent. Then, there's the laughter, which lets me know I'm hitting on something. There are times I tell my husband, "I haven't laughed yet, so I don't know how it's going."