

VISUAL ART

**Elizabeth Zvonar**

by Dagmara Genda

the faux danger and the punning titles (i.e., *Ikea Be Here Now*).

All of which tends to refocus the viewers' attention on the pleasurable formal spectacle unfolded before us each time a fragment of imagery or seemingly coherent storyline begins to maintain its shape. We can see that there are themes of interest and consideration at work here, but as we try to assign a linear structure to the way concepts might be intended to rank themselves into file, the clear invitation the works offer to just look at their visual music, rather than try to make out a verbally coherent meaning structure comes back. It seduces us away from assigning a too easily defensible statement of purpose to the goings on. The title of the show (and the piece it's named after), "Yard Salsa," seems to turn into an encouraging metaphor for how to best decipher and enjoy Williams's production, in that his goopy mixture of distinct but blurred, recombined spatial and figural elements somewhat reveals and then coyly obscures any finalized knowledge of how to feel or what to say. The gorgeous 2014 canvas *Mauve Dog* is a case in point, where waves of beautiful activity jar against the quickly created expectation that we ought to be able to pin down what's what and where we are going. But we can't.

Many artists seem present in the matrix of this work, from Jean Dubuffet to Sigmar Polke, Philip Guston to Jean-Michel Basquiat—Williams manifests artistic family relationships that feel well assimilated and accommodated. The intellectual aggression of an artist like Albert Oehlen, and the theoretically charged pictorial ambitions of older contemporaries

like Laura Owens, Fiona Rae and Daniel Richter all come to mind looking at Williams—to be politely waved aside by a tripped-out, spiritually confident posture, that seems equally resolved if we decide to just accept as brainy culture jamming the medium messaging that is clearly going on here. Perhaps Williams's formalism and conceptualism have blurred into one another to the degree that they have salsa-fied, and the best thing we can do is just hang out with the paintings and kick back in his mental backyard. The victory Williams's work achieves is that the ironies that result from these seemingly contradictory, potentially cynical confrontations all appear to be comfortably living together and making their own sounds, mostly harmonizing but also making music in the disharmonies too. ■

*"Michael Williams: Yard Salsa" is on exhibition from June 9 to September 27 at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.*

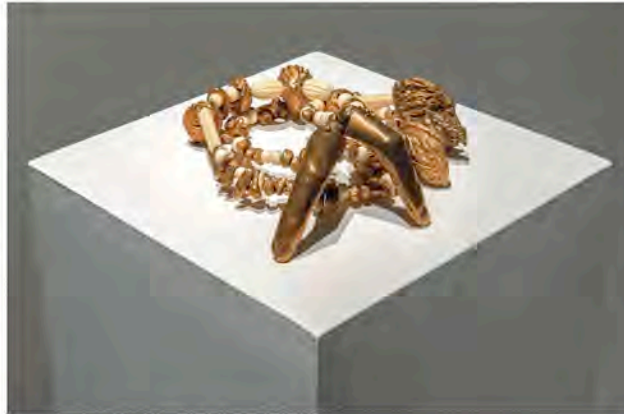
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One of the images in Elizabeth Zvonar's latest exhibition, "The Challenge of Abstraction," at Daniel Faria, Toronto is an edited Jürgen Teller photograph of Kate Moss standing in front of Albrecht Altdorfer's *Lot and his Daughter* (1537). This collage is one of three images printed on translucent silk, hanging as banners from the ceiling. Aptly suited to its subject matter, the airy banner has the feel of clothing, specifically printed chiffon blouses. In this particular photograph, Moss is wearing a Vivienne Westwood "Climate Revolution" shirt overtop a luxury evening dress. The words "Climate Revolution" are obscured by a phallus-shaped abstract cut-out leaving only "mate" legible. Below the photograph is a white band, reminiscent of Photoshop layering, onto which the abstract shape descends. Part of the painting in the background has been cut out with what seems like the elliptical marquee tool, again in Photoshop, to obscure Moss's face. Instead of her head we see a repeat of the leathery Lot leering at his daughter.

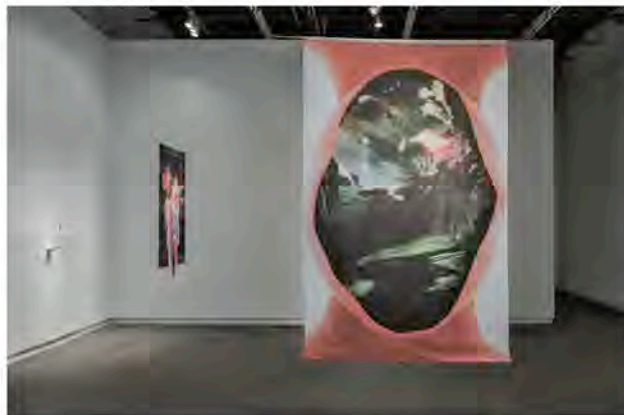
The reason for such a clinical description of the image, also called *The Challenge of Abstraction*, is that it functions as a visual synecdoche for the entire show by effectively combining the artist's various formal strategies and social concerns. As a whole, the exhibition is a combination of collage printed on silk or paper as well as a variety of sculptures, both wall-mounted and on plinths. All the objects are tied together in their allusion to commodity. Zvonar sources from fashion and commercial photography in order to use the very strategies of seduction they employ. She merges images into new, often sexually suggestive configurations

that in their rough-cut mixture of high and low have an edge not dissimilar to the aesthetics found in many independent publications or even the counter-culture-made-mainstream look of *Vice Magazine*, now the more sanitized *Vice* media. This overlap, or more aptly, reciprocal relationship, between counter culture and commerce is something with which Vivienne Westwood is also familiar. She is the British fashion designer largely responsible for bringing punk into high fashion. Indeed, the relationship between counter and mainstream culture is something art grapples with in its double position as luxury product and cultural artefact.

The show is interesting in light of the previous Valérie Blass exhibition which also focussed on commerce, desire and the female subject/object. Though where Blass's fragmented figures were often reflecting upon themselves literally indicated by the presence of mirrors, Zvonar's allegory of desire is somewhat more straightforward. Weaving through the sparsely hung banners and theatrically-lit plinths feels like being in an upscale boutique whose minimal aesthetic emulates the art gallery. In Zvonar's show, the tropes of the desire for consumption are most explicitly illustrated on the back wall where a print-out of plush, pink, slightly parted woman's lips hangs above a thin, white plinth. Atop the plinth sits an aggregate of concrete lumps that resemble from afar an acorn or a vessel. Close up, you see what looks like little bits of dried organic debris poking out from the cluster of concrete, making the luxury item resemble something closer to shit. Titled *NUTSACK*, 2015, the little hairy bits are actually



1. Elizabeth Zvonar, *TINY DEVOTIONS*, 2015, bronze, antique ivory, 9 x 8 x 3 inches.



2. Elizabeth Zvonar, installation view, "THE CHALLENGE OF ABSTRACTION," 2015, Daniel Faria Gallery. All images courtesy Daniel Faria Gallery, Toronto.

remnants of pantyhose used during the casting of a bag of mixed nuts. The commentary is cheeky though it's unclear whether it remains consistent throughout the show.

While installing the show, Zvonar burned incense inserted into a number of her small sculptural pieces and into an image of an especially phallic geological feature. The partially burned sticks remain in the exhibition and their scent is, at times, faintly detectable. According to the curatorial statement, the incense is "a specifically commissioned west coast scent" whose presence is meant to reinforce "the sacrosanct relationship of the meditative ritual of

arrangement." The words "ritual," "invisible" and "metaphysical" appear throughout the text and bear various degrees of relevance to Zvonar's work. It's true that art has long had a relationship to religion and some of the art historical references in the show speak to that, but the visual vocabulary and its presentation speak still more strongly to commodity. The smell of incense, in a secular Western culture, is also associated with stores selling "exotic" goods, or head shops—another aspect of counterculture made mainstream. If any physical transcendence is occurring here, it seems more intimately connected to the digital,

