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Mequitta Ahuja

Notations

13 April 2018 - 2 June 2018

Tiwani Contemporary is pleased to present *Notations* - a forthcoming solo exhibition, debuting new works by Mequitta Ahuja. Mequitta Ahuja's recent work explores the currency of the figure of the artist at work in the history of European and American figurative painting. Merging the roles of artist-maker and subject, her monumental paintings depict the artist engrossed in various stages of her artistic process, often within the clearly defined architectural space of the studio. Demonstrating an interest beyond the medium itself, Ahuja's self-portraits explore multiple modes of representation, including abstraction, text, naturalism, schematic description, graphic flatness and illusion. Working across multiple modalities of representation allows the artist to fulfil her own representational needs and to ask timely questions about the power dynamics underpinning image production and art history: who does the representing, who is represented and in what manner?

"My central intent is to turn the artist's self-portrait, especially the woman-of-colour's self-portrait, long circumscribed by identity, into a discourse on picture-making, past and present. This includes depicting my intimate relationship to painting - the verb and the noun, the act and the object - painting. I show my subject at work - reading, writing, handling canvases in the studio. I show the work, the mark, the assembling of marks into form, the brushstroke. In these ways, I replace the common self-portrait motif - the artist standing before the easel, with a broader portrait of the artist's activity."

In *Notation* (2017), Ahuja depicts herself in an intimate studio scene, leaning over her desk, writing, and surrounded by a proliferation of painterly marks. The free and colourful mark-making, which, beyond the architectural frame, extends into total abstraction, suggests the brushstroke as a form of notation. *Notation* exemplifies Ahuja's theatrical painting style, in which the posed figure, seemingly engrossed in work while surrounded by symbolic objects such as the brush and the mirror is clearly a scene contrived for a viewer. Along with the leaning pose, the objects refer to the evangelist portraits of early medieval art, in which the protagonists were often presented writing at a table and seen from an oblique angle. By representing herself in the traditionally role of the professional artist, Ahuja asserts her position within the history of her craft, as a woman artist of South Asian and African descent. She writes: "By positioning a woman-of-colour as primary picture-maker, in whose hands the figurative tradition is refashioned, I knit my contemporary concerns, personal and painterly into the centuries old conversation of representation and recast self-portraiture as a treatise on picture-making."

The subject of *Material Support* (2017) is also the model/maker, but the figure of the painter in the studio allows Ahuja to also explore other roles assumed by the professional artist: the owner, the agent and seller of the work. The space of the painting is a space of her control: she is seen unveiling a new painting, pulling a red curtain and partly revealing a figure - a mule. Stemming from theatre, the curtain, along with the studio-as-stage set, presents the studio as a realm of performance. In *Material Support* as in *Notation*, Ahuja acknowledges

the fiction of her painted self and the contrivance of painting. The iconography in this work refers to "40 acres and a mule", the unfulfilled promise made to newly freed slaves and the first systematic attempt to provide a form of reparation for slavery. In contrast, *Material Support* shows a woman artist of colour in control of her career and enjoying the fruits of her own creative labour.

About Mequitta Ahuja

Mequitta Ahuja (born in 1976 in Grand Rapids, Michigan) received an MFA from UIC in 2003, mentored by Kerry James Marshall. She lives and works in Baltimore, Maryland. Recent exhibitions include: *Champagne Life* at the Saatchi Gallery, London (2016); *Marks of Genius* at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, MN (2014); *State of the Art* at Crystal Bridges, Bentonville, AR (2014); *Portraiture Now* at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, DC (2013); *The Bearden Project* at the Studio Museum in Harlem, NY (2012) and *Global Feminisms* at the Brooklyn Museum, NY (2007). Mequitta is a recipient of several awards including a 2018 Guggenheim Fellowship, a 2009 Joan Mitchell Award and a 2011 Tiffany award.

List of Works

(clockwise from entrance)

Notation, 2017
Oil on canvas
213.4 x 203.2 cm
84 x 80 in

Annotation, 2018
Oil on canvas
160 x 152.4 cm
63 x 60 in

Paper, 2017
Oil on canvas
213.4 x 203.2 cm
84 x 80 in

Crossword, 2017
Oil on canvas
106.7 x 101.6 cm
42 x 40 in

Forty, 2017
Oil on canvas
107 x 102 cm
42 1/8 x 40 1/8 in

Material Support, 2017
Oil on canvas
213.4 x 203.2 cm
84 x 80 in

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#MequittaAhuja #Notations