



Kelli Vance *She Became Frightened and Stopped Listening* 2008 Oil on canvas 36 x 96 inches Courtesy Chris Jay Hoofnagle, San Francisco, CA

Seduction, brimming with violence and danger, pervades Kelli Vance's large-scale, cinematic paintings of women. In one such work, a well-heeled foot steps down a spiral staircase behind the splayed body of a woman whose neck appears to have broken in a fall. In another, one woman straddles another who lies prone on a bed, the former's hands tight around the latter's neck. These paintings beg narratives laden with malevolence and homoeroticism—a vicious paring.

Taken together, the group of paintings chosen for Vance's solo exhibition at the Texas Biennial raises a whole set of questions for me about the intersection of violence, danger and homoerotic desire between women. What's so sexy about a cat fight? Why are lesbian thrillers and murder mysteries (*The Hunger*, *Bound* or this season of *The L Word*) so sensational?

Vance's paintings flirt with these questions, and the larger dynamics underlying them—dynamics of power and pleasure, of public and private, of personal and political. By flirt I mean that her paintings engage violence and homoeroticism experimentally, playfully and provocatively. Vance is still in the earliest stages of her career, (she received her MFA last year from the University of Houston,) and like the beginning of any relationship, her paintings are exploratory, agitated and brimming with anticipation.

Vance paints from photographs. Most often, she uses herself as model for these

images, setting up the scene so that she can pose for the camera and snap the shutter remotely. Using oil on canvas and a photo-realist style, she blows these images up dramatically (the smallest work in the show is 3 feet wide and 8 feet tall). Vance's sharp, polished style and impressive scale, coupled with her sadomasochistic subject matter, compound the seductive quality of the work.

Curator Michael Duncan's prominent positioning of two works—Sometimes I Hate You at the front of the first gallery and I Kissed a Girl, depicting singer Katy Perry of "I Kissed a Girl" fame, at the back of the second—heightens the homoerotic charge of the entire exhibition. A chillingly beautiful painting of Vance pinned to the ground by another woman, She Became Frightened and Stopped Listening (2008), feels sexually predatory, and a portrait of Vance with honey dripping over her face and bare collarbone seems made for a woman's delectation.

Vance's repeated appearances in her work point to the fabricated quality of her images. These are fantasy—fantasy as a productive opportunity to escape the limitations of culturally constructed identities and socially acceptable situations. The fantasies Vance paints rehearse a common cultural wet dream/nightmare. Yet again, the threat of physical violence stalks in the shadows behind homoeroticism; lesbian attraction threatens moral order.

Beyond her own recurring presence in the images, Vance is still looking for ways to trouble these narratives and imagine new possibilities. There's potential, for example, in the places where she lets her finish fetish collapse in on itself, as when the glaring light of a bedside lamp offers an opportunity for a looser, more abstract style and the image's perfection breaks down. In these moments may lie one such opportunity to interrogate pop culture's glamorization of female homoeroticism and disrupt the culturally sanctioned image of the vampiric lesbian.

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