

Fifty Shades of Photorealism

By Susie Tommaney



Kelli Vance, *All I Cannot See*, from the "Recital" exhibit at McClain Gallery

Intelligent, story-driven photorealism is at the heart of Kelli Vance's Recital exhibit at McClain Gallery, where the artist has imagined (and often posed for) scenes in which a woman is bound or blindfolded. The viewer is left to wonder whether she is participating in the bondage of sexual fetishism or has become the victim of a violent abduction.

In *All I Cannot See* the heroine is a woman with smeared lipstick and sleeping mask, wearing a navy bra or lingerie, her coiffed hair tangled against the striped sheets.

There is a tenseness to her neck muscles, but the close-cropped framing of the image is ambiguous and we can't quite tell if she is experiencing anticipation or resignation.

The paintings often leave clues, such as the fabulous diamond-encrusted ram's head bracelet in *Towards Who You Are Now Becoming*, drawing the eye to her fingers, which grip the sheets in expectation. Though her eyes are obscured, the black lace pushed up and around her shoulders suggests vulnerability.

I did not instantly recognize the thick, viscous fluid on the models in *Between the Before and After*, *Self Portrait in Pink*, *Untitled*, and *Untitled (Rorschach Faces in profile)*, but perhaps these allude to wet and messy fetishism (also known as sploshing) or lotion play. In the former, the ankles and feet are bound with purple rope, the plum-polished toes barely touching the ground and the fingers smeared with creamy, white goo.



Kelli Vance, *How Inseparably I Was Bound*, from the "Recital" exhibit at McClain Gallery

In *How Inseparably I Was Bound*, the model peers through sheer fabric that is pulled up over her waist, the inside seams of her dress visible and embellished with white lace trim. Like many of the other paintings, it is the hands which provide the tell, this time tense and gripping her arm in the uncomfortable pose.

All of the paintings tell a story, often open to interpretation, and the paintings are expertly executed with one-source lighting. There is a sense of empowerment in many of the vignettes, including *To Allow the Deconstruction*, where a young woman leans forward towards her stiletto heels, her manicured hands reaching to grip her ankle. Her surroundings are tastefully appointed with objets d'art, and her all-knowing eyes are open and aware. In *To Be Aware of Your Own Momentum*, a woman with an unzipped green sequined dress bends forward, hands hidden behind her back, with her long tresses touching the floor. There is one strand of hair, pulling upwards against gravity, which seems out of place but succeeds in its inference of movement.

A woman tied to an overturned striped chair with purple ropes, covered with a salmon-colored sheet so that her face is hidden, is still able to communicate with her tense fingers and curled toes in *It Was Sort of Peaceful*. The misty, gauzy background – purposely out of focus – invites the questions, “Where? Why?”

Kelli Vance: Recital continues through July 25, at McClain Gallery, 2242 Richmond, open Tuesday to Friday, 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., Saturday 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., 713-520-9988, mcclaingallery.com.