

Kelli Vance

Kelli Vance is the director of and principal actor in evocative and disconcerting dramas. She photographs herself using a camera with a remote shutter release and then creates powerful large-scale paintings based on the photographs. Although Vance uses herself as a model, her paintings are not self-portraits. The women she depicts are presented in sexually charged situations — some are wearing restraints, some are disrobing, and others are clearly aroused. The viewer is placed in the role of voyeur and becomes an unwitting accomplice to these staged narratives.

In “To Be Aware of Your Own Momentum,” a woman wearing a short green dress and high heels bends over to fluff her long, luxurious hair. The women in these paintings have abundant hair, here a familiar symbol of sexuality. The artist excels at painting hair, capturing the delicate strands skillfully with feathery brushstrokes, while in other parts of the painting, she keeps her brushwork loose, working quickly and not laboring over details. In the charcoal and pastel drawing “So as to Accept What is Waiting for Me,” the figure’s strands of braided hair are rendered expertly as well. Depicted from the back, her arms are crossed over her chest, and her hands gesture expressively. The abstract pattern on the wall behind her is in marked contrast to the photorealist detail in the foreground. Vance adeptly includes these areas of abstraction to her mainly photorealist paintings and drawings.

Ironically, “Self Portrait in Pink” is neither a self-portrait nor pink. It is a large black-and-white drawing that shows a young girl gasping as a white liquid is poured over her head and cascades down her hair and face. Vance often uses fluids resembling milk, honey or lotion in her work. One of the strongest paintings in the show, “Between the Before and After,” is an extreme close-up of a woman’s hands and feet bound in braided purple cords, her hands coated with a viscous white substance. There is also bondage in “It Was Sort of Peaceful,” a large oil on canvas in which a woman is tied to a chair that has been tipped over. An orange garment is strategically draped over her face and upper body. Vance implies that these restrained women derive pleasure from feelings of helplessness and immobility. Blindfolds are sometimes part of the situation. The woman in “All I Cannot See” wears a black sleep mask and appears to be frightened. Her smeared lipstick adds to the implication that she is being held against her will and in this image is not enjoying the encounter.

The title of the show, “Recital,” reflects the theatrical nature of Vance’s work. She chose the title because she sees a similarity between the choreographed moves in a dance recital and the performances she conjures up and presents in her work. Most of her ambiguous narratives leave unclear whether the participants are accomplices or victims. The equivocal subject matter raises psychological questions about women and relationships that involve sexuality, power, and violence. It’s a fascinating exploration, though many viewers may experience

unsettling anxiety or distress. Vance smartly deploys her media to test the limits of just how far she can go before images of flirtation and fantasy morph into danger and brutality.

-DONNA TENNANT