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DISSER

GALLERY SCENE

Paintings Inspired by the Real Housewives and 'Comfort Creatures' Coming to Greenpoint



"Blue Onsie", painting by Kharis Kennedy (2015)

Next week **Kharis Kennedy** will unveil a series of new paintings as part of her solo exhibition, *Comfort Animals*, at **The Greenpoint Gallery**. Though Kennedy has been living in St. Croix for the last five years, her work is still imbued with trappings of high-society life and obsessive consumerism she picked up on while living in New York City. But a midnight-hued vision of her new home in the tropics is slowly beginning to take over.

“I left because I felt like I needed some emotional space to create,” Kharis explained. “I hadn’t realized that this kind of dark spiritual thing that’s so prevalent here would affect my painting. I wonder if I’m going to be one of these strange people who come here and live on the island forever.” The result of her relatively new setting and increased focus are paintings that depict a haunting cacophony of context and misperception. There’s an almost disturbing tension at the center of the work, something Kharis acknowledges.



"Comfort Animal, Albino Tiger", painting by Kharis Kennedy (2015)

I spoke to Kharis via Skype, as a storm was blowing in to St. Croix during a hurricane season that seems to expand with each year. Kharis is used to this, however— she’s been on the islands for several years. Before permanently moving, she would come down there a dozen or so times a year with her husband, an ophthalmologist who had found work there. She chalked up the decision to relocate indefinitely at once to an uninteresting “business story,” but also as a means of escaping the intensity of New York City and giving herself more time to paint.

“Space is way cheaper here,” she admitted. But her husband’s work also called them to St. Croix. “It just became appealing to be here because you’re dealing with actual pathology, you’re making a real difference. It’s a lot more work, because there’s a lot more need,” Kharis explained. “Whereas in New York you can just take the two-hour lunch. When we were in New York he was working on the Upper East Side, and there are people who want a lid lift, or when you diagnose them with glaucoma they’re like, ‘How could you do this to me?! Tomorrow’s my birthday!’ That kind of thing.”

Kharis complains about the city like only true New Yorkers can, and though she’s shifted her attention to life on the islands, she still feels a strong pull to her former home. “New York feels the most like home,” she said. “It feels like an international city, there’s different types of people and I still have an affinity for it, just because there’s so much energy there, especially with the arts. But the problem is, I kind of get sucked into it.”



White Collar Goes Black: "Logo Lab Coat", 24x24 in., Oil mixed with glue on Linen Board, painting by Kharis Kennedy

The transition to St. Croix has made her life “easier,” she says. “You get so tired of having to get dressed every day in New York— I just wear the same cotton shirt down here every day,” she sighed. “The standards for the children are so different, like as long as you have them in underwear, it’s fine.”

The relaxation of Northern social mores and overriding chill factor of “island life” are definitely the epitome of how most New Yorkers probably imagine existence on

St. Croix, but Kharis’s work has shifted in much less predictable ways. Many people have commented that her work has gotten much “darker”— this is true not just in color palette but in the persistence of heavier themes, too.

“People always wonder, ‘Has your work gotten brighter?’ You know, because you’re living in the tropics. But there’s this kind of voodoo atmosphere on the islands, that I think has really seeped into the work,” she explained.

At first, this might seem like a throwback to the days of British imperial rule, when *Heart of Darkness* (the artist’s anti-colonization bent) portrayed “uncivilized” Africa as a monolithic, savage society which was, in all its mysterious darkness, the anti-thesis of “civilized” Europe. But Kharis’s depiction of the “dark” islands in her work, is actually evident of a deeper understanding that imperialism is alive and well, and a painful self-awareness of her place within this context.

Kharis grew up all over the world, and was often the only white, blonde kid in the bunch. “My dad was a basketball coach, so we would move every nine months,” she recalled. “We started in Europe, then Malaysia, then different countries in the Persian Gulf, so it’s kind of in my blood to not really stay in one place too long.”

Not only does her sense of place within the larger context of *place* play a huge role in her creative output, but Kharis says her perception of economic disparity and post-colonial arrangements is heightened, too. “I think definitely my understanding of the haves and have-nots is sharper, and my guilt,” Kharis said. “I’m a consumer, and I think, ‘Oh, I want to wear the fancy clothes and the nice shoes,’ especially when you’re in New York. And my feeling of unresolved guilt regarding that is definitely sharper than a lot of my friends.”



Glove Scarf by Dolce & Gabbana", painting by Kharis Kennedy (2015)

That might also explain Kharis' quickness to indict American culture for its perpetuation of ugly histories. "I was interested in blackface because for a long time in America, it was the only home-grown kind of theatre export," she mused. "We like to pretend like that chapter didn't occur in a way, but that was our theater tradition for 50, 70 years or longer. Even today, there's still such a strange portrayal of blackness— those character archetypes that black people can occupy, still, were largely set by that tradition."

Despite the sense of unease that comes through in some of her work, Kennedy seems to be at home painting about and, for that matter, preoccupying herself with things that make her uncomfortable: neo-imperialism, self-indulgences of the one percent, celebrity worship, post-post-capitalist creature comforts, and how women are portrayed in the fashion industry.

Fashion is a persistent theme in Kharis's work, and one that remains as potent as ever, despite her feeling that on St. Croix, she's exempt from the pressure she felt in New York City to remain on-trend. "I'm really interested in fashion, I use it to heighten disparities in my work," she said, pointing to a photo of a woman splayed and stretched out in a fashion editorial, part of a composite which Kharis utilizes to help work out her ideas for paintings. "That's a very reasonable fashion pose for women to aspire to," she laughed. What Kharis refers to as "comfort animals" (the title of this solo show) are abundant in her latest paintings. She seems to think of pets and purebreds as the epitome of status, wealth, and the inherent masturbatory quality of having immediate access to anything all the time, even living creatures for your entertainment.

"With the comfort animals, I want to see how vacant I can get the dogs' eyes to look," she explained, pointing to one of her works in progress for the show.



The Little Black Suit by Chanel, 48x48 in., Oil mixed with glue on Linen on Board, painting by Kharis Kennedy

This dog was taken off one of *The Real Housewives* [episodes], which is a very important show that I spend a lot of time playing in the background. That pose was taken from one of the housewives, too."

Thankfully, Kharis still has a potent sense of humor about these things, something that's palpable in her work. "I just like to poke humor at grim situations," she explained. "I've always found humor to be a useful coping mechanism. Growing up moving so often was hard. If you want to make friends, if you can make people laugh and make them enjoy something, they'll remember you more. So I think it helps to make a canvas more memorable if you're talking about these extreme status symbols, if you can do that with a bit of humor I think it makes a piece more poignant, and it just helps us all get through the day for god's sake."

Humor definitely explains her love for *The Real Housewives*, too. In a follow-up email, I just had to ask who she'd pick as her favorite real housewife. "I'm very glad you asked about the housewives," she wrote back. "It goes without saying that a dream cast would include Lisa Vanderpump, Nene, and Mama Elsa (but obviously not that boring daughter of hers). And they'd all be forced to wear 'She by Sheree' all day long." (It should be noted that my good friend who's also obsessed with the *Housewives* confirmed this was the kind of answer only a true fan could articulate.)

But not all of Kharis's focus is exterior— in fact, some of it hits close to home. One of her most recent series, *White Collar Goes Black*, depicts a hideous vision of what can be, at worst, a neo-imperialist relationship between aid-givers and receivers. Her husband participated in a Doctors Without Borders trip and returned with the conviction that the money they had spent getting the doctors to West Africa for a brief period outweighed what it would have cost to build and run a clinic in the area for at least two years. "They come for two weeks and when they leave, the population has become more dependent upon them, as opposed to going there and building a clinic or helping people set up something," Kharis argued.



"Comfort Animal", painting by Kharis Kennedy

Her paintings were taken directly from photographs of the trip. “It was very jarring, because when I saw him and all the other doctors, they were literally wearing Prada and this kind of stuff and the people next to them were in rags,” Kharis recalled. “When he came home and I saw those photos, I was like, ‘Jesus Christ! Does no one realize this looks crazy?’ He was like, ‘No, in fact they use these photos to raise money for future trips, everyone thinks it looks great.’”

Kharis adapted these images into her paintings, exaggerating the distance between the white doctors and the people of color. “The people, the ways in which they were photographed, they didn’t seem like patients, or individuals even,” she said. “They’re terrifying, though, these pictures.” One wonders how her partner feels about being depicted like this (then again, white doctors’ feelings are probably at the very bottom rung of things we should be concerned about). “My poor husband has to be the subject matter,” she laughed. “I think that’s one of the terrible things about being married to an artist, you appear in unflattering circumstances.”



Pony with Pleated Headdress
2015
Oil on linen
23 x 19 inches



Seeking with Pleated Headdress
2015
Oil on linen
23 x 19 inches

(via Kharis Kennedy)

Mostly, I was surprised to hear Kharis downplay the political aspects of her paintings. “Essentially I’m very much a painter’s painter, for me it’s a lot about the brush work and the composition and the building of it,” she explained. “So I do spend a lot of time making them look really strong as paintings, as opposed to making them any particular type of political statement. I’d say they’re social commentary-light— definitely that’s not the main goal.”

Nevertheless, there’s a calling out of twisted logic here, and a mocking portrayal of the Western, white eye in Kharis’ recent work, a way in which she turns a cracked mirror on herself and others like her. The paintings are objectively beautiful, with intermittently globular and complex layers of oil, but they also invoke an anxious sense of wrongdoing. And though Kharis feels like they’re a lighthearted poke at social hierarchies and Neo-Imperialism, they work to inspire a deep sense of glamorous rot in the viewer. All these complex feelings and gut-rot vibes demonstrate Kharis has succeeded in transferring her inner-experience as an artist to people on the other side of the work.

“I’ve always been kind of uncomfortable,” Kharis explained. “I’m depressive, that type of personality, so I’ve always just been uncomfortable inside. I think that creating makes me feel more comfortable, I get it out that way. There is a tension in the art work, because that’s how I express myself or purge myself.”

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