

Kate Meissner

Replica

January 21 – March 15, 2025

No matter how exposed, Kate Meissner's figures remain elusive. In the paintings included in *Replica*, not a single face is shown. The artist instead directs our attention to how these bodies inhabit thresholds. In states of undress with their backs to us or their heads cropped from frame, they're captured in moments where distinctions between revealing and concealing blur. Her feminine figures move through curtains. Skin and fabric converge in impossible ways. The bodies appear as pure surface, mannequin-like and potentially hollow. We are haunted by a sense that they might collapse, fold in on themselves, or vanish entirely. The tension of being looked at seems to hold the potential for this disintegration. If everything else about the scene is hazy, we're sure of this palpable weight.

Where we are, after all, is unclear. In Meissner's world, archways, room dividers, and tiled enclosures transform into makeshift stages, suggesting routine performances framed by the built environment. Reminiscent of nightclubs, hospitals, bank vestibules, subway platforms, boutique fitting rooms, gym showers, and hotel lobbies, the scale of the architecture creates an alienated intimacy. Together yet at a slight remove, you can look and be looked at, suspended in a zone where observation feels both distant and inescapably close. Meissner captures alcoves and recesses where private worlds become public performance while proximity stays anonymous. Are we just among strangers or strange to ourselves? Giving form to the tension between allure and discomfort, she illustrates the iridescent unease of liminal space.

Lurid color is one of Meissner's most seductive tools. Green, magenta, yellow, and red — the artist manipulates conventions of color temperature to craft a disorienting sensuality. Her signature electric saturation makes her figures feel dangerously beguiling and otherworldly inhuman. Meissner wondered how far she might push our embodied perceptions: could the coolest green feel hot? The colored lights of the nightclub and the theater, at once bright and shadowy, as well as the dramatic hues of Todd Haynes's and David Lynch's phantasmic noir are all references. Another is the green LED lighting in a surgeon's operating room. The logic behind this eerie clinical procedure is that green light contrasts sharply with the red of human tissue enhancing visibility and reducing strain on the eyes. Meissner's work seems to flirt with the grotesque, capturing a space where the seductive is almost unbearable, yet looking away proves impossible.

The stylish disquiet of Meissner's world evokes the psychological landscapes that George Tooker and Edward Hopper render in their depictions of the modernist city. Yet Meissner departs from their realism, embracing a more surreal, fragmented approach to space and form. Like Giovanni Battista Piranesi and M. C. Escher, Meissner masterfully manipulates perspective to create disorienting renderings of impossible built environments. Her paintings play with perception and illusion. The viewer grows distrustful of their first impression. They look and must look again, instability hidden in plain sight. Meissner composes the architecture as she renders her figures, bending and shifting

in ways that defy expectations. Arms end without hands. Legs without feet. Heads, at times, are absent, languishing in a space of ambiguity. Are they in fact absent from the scene, or just a casualty of perspective, explained by a combination of angle and pose?

In Meissner's surreal world, the deviations of these bodies from standardized ideals could easily be read as a metaphor for psychological alienation. However, knowledge of the artist's biography complicates this interpretation, as many traits of her figures mirror her own body. It's a subtle reflection on what it means to exist outside prescribed boundaries, highlighting how living in a specific body might make someone more sensitive to the theaters of perception. This alienation is relatable for many, but the artist's experience makes her especially attuned to the curiosity and isolation of the lingering gaze.

Though there is a relationship between Meissner and the figures she portrays, her practice is not self-portraiture. Naming this exhibition *Replica*, the artist instead summons a more mechanical mode of reproduction, one not focused on capturing an authentic internal essence, but of translating external likeness with a standardization that could be repeated endlessly. Within Meissner's compositions, a figure is often doubled or tripled, a meditation on the dissolution of self in a world obsessed with visibility. Does representation matter in the uncanny valley? Is the ultimate goal of spectacle-driven identity politics for everyone to see themselves in the soulless mannequin at the department store? The tension between the allure of visibility and its potential for distortion lies at the heart of Meissner's work. In her fragmented and multiplied representations, she not only points to the dehumanizing effects of hyper-visibility but also to the strange intimacy it can engender, pulling the viewer into an affective space where recognition is both desired and denied.

By embracing the mechanical nature of reproduction, Meissner engages the implications of living in a hyper-visual society, where identity is often reduced to emptiness. Through her fractured, duplicated figures, she explores the tensions between presence and absence, the self and its echo, forcing us to question how visibility in its most commercialized form can transform us into hollow vessels of surface. Meissner's compositions amplify the mechanics of reproduction and the flattening of individuality, rendering bodies, though recognizably human, distant, almost object-like. The repetition of forms—doubled, fragmented—evokes the discomfort of being seen, drawing us into a psychological space where perception is in flux. Yet this alienation is alive with an undeniable appeal. The seductive use of color, the electric vibrancy, makes this unsettling landscape strangely enticing. Here, in the space of lurid alluring unease, Meissner invites reflection on what it means to be seen in an era that both craves and warps recognition.

— Whitney Mallett