

LOS ANGELES

Sadie Benning

SUSANNE VIELMETTER LOS ANGELES PROJECTS

"The 1950s were still very present," remarked Sadie Benning of their 1970s childhood. "Whatever happens in the moment, it's like a ripple effect. Something happens politically that affects people for many generations." *Gun/Egg*, 2017, a triptych on display in Benning's solo presentation at Susanne Vielmetter, subtly illustrates this point. In the work's photograph-within-a-photograph that the artist inserted into a colorful painted wooden construction, a small black-and-white photo of a girl (who bares her teeth with the awkward vigor of someone who has been compelled to "smile BIG!") is casually propped on the floor against a larger, '50s-era color promotional photo of Elvis. The King appears in left profile, hands clasped together as if in prayer. The photograph is nestled within the leftmost panel of the triptych, whose blocky forms suggest a basic linear, cinematic narrative—a halved egg,



Sadie Benning, *Gun/Egg*, 2017, wood, Aqua-Resin, casein, acrylic gouache, acrylic, digital C-prints, 48 x 95".

a deer in the cross hairs of a rifle's scope, and a close-up of a gun's trigger. By inlaying this photographic image within the broken-egg motif, Benning points to the pervasive violence implicit in 1950s gender roles, typified by that decade's nearly deified exemplar of white masculinity. This juxtaposition demands a comparison between the singer, who became famous for his gyrating hips and sensual beauty that tested the limits of gender roles, and the young girl attempting to comply with prescribed niceties though they appear quite foreign to her. Even after Elvis fundamentally changed—by the time of his death in 1977 he had found God, sold out the hippies, and shaken Richard Nixon's hand—his image as the teen idol persisted.

Time rounds some edges, and past eras leave in their wake a nostalgia uncomplicated by messy reality. This is reflected quite literally in Benning's material processes. Each wall work here was arrived at through a set process. An image (usually digitally drawn) is projected and traced onto a large piece of wood. The lines of this tracing are jigsawed, and the resulting pieces are then sanded, coated with various hues of bright acrylic gouache, and fitted back together. Drawn lines are thus translated into discrete shapes, the drawings themselves rendered via the sculptural process of reassembly. Because Benning sands the edges of the pieces, the forms within the limits of the painting appear bulbous and friendly, even when their content is somewhat distressing, as in *Gun/Egg* or *Underwater*, also 2017, in which a redheaded figure is submerged up to her eyes in a bright, impossibly blue pool. In a grid of eighteen sunsets, all 2016, that handily delivered on the clichéd sublimity of Benning's chosen subject, the wooden pieces alternately evoked expressionist painted lines (*Sunset 5*, with its messy ripples) or lumps of Play-Doh squeezed together (*Sunset 2* and *3*, with their thick, multicolored bands). Although Benning's process is labor-intensive and the materials rigid, the finished paintings appear improvised and plush.

Throughout the exhibition, Benning grouped singular paintings so that their sides abutted one another, creating long and short friezes that asked the viewer to imagine potential links. In pairing *Alien* and *Abstract Sex*, both 2016, the artist suggested the makings of an interplanetary romantic drama (or perhaps a porno). *Alien*'s purple humanoid form was placed next to an image whose tricky geometry defies easy description but impelled me to imagine what exactly this abstract sex was—an activity, an essentialized orifice, a concept . . . ? Most likely all three. Other paintings in the room emphasized the construction of gender through sexed bodies and such ostensibly girly symbols as rainbows and smiley faces. Positioned in close proximity, the works slipped from registering as iconic images to suggesting stories and panoramas, and thereby pushed the viewer to expand his field of vision and to read the room, gleaning clues wherever possible.

A hidden aspect of Benning's works brought me immense pleasure. Each painting was mounted on a shallow piece of board inset from the painting's edge, with the result that the construction seemed to "float" off the vertical plane of the wall. Benning covered these boards with metallic tape, and so what little light sneaked in between the verso of the painting and the wall was fugitively reflected in this secret space. There was never enough light to form a halo, but there was never so little as to be unremarkable. This quiet, material presence, counter in many respects to the visual bombast of the paintings' surface, bespeaks the artist's interest in how the hidden can connect, support, and amplify narratives and relationships alike.

—Andy Campbell