

‘Adriana Lara: NY – USA’ at Albus Greenston

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According to a recent video report by fashion photographer Bill Cunningham, the city's men are dressing up again. "The whole disheveled look, I think, is on the wane," Mr. Cunningham announced giddily. "The direction's to clean up your act." Some recent exhibitions hint that something similar is under way among artists, male *and* female. Think of the luxurious new work—including a designer clothing collaboration—that Seth Price just showed at Petzel, the uncharacteristically slick photos and fashion line that K8 Hardy presented at the Whitney

Biennial and now the immaculate paintings Mexico City-based artist Adriana Lara offers in her debut at Albus Greenston.

New Yorkers may recall Ms. Lara's oddball hit in the New Museum's 2009 triennial, a sculpture that was nothing more than a banana peel placed on the floor each day by a guard after he or she had eaten its contents. Since then, she's been a rare presence in New York, with just a wily, unusual work here or there, never in one identifiable style. And so the Albus Greenston show, chock full of ambitious paintings in distinct series, arrives as a revelation, confirming she has more up her sleeve than just conceptual japes.

Glamour shots of a dark-haired femme-fatale type who looks plucked from a noir flick have been silk-screened onto a handful of transparent, taut sheets of plastic attached to wood stretcher bars that are arrayed around the gallery. These are among the most unashamedly beautiful paintings I've seen in the past year. The show's gloriously (and, one suspects, intentionally) impenetrable news release claims that the subject is a Mexican actress who was briefly famous in the 1930s. Ms. Lara has printed a variety of symbols and shapes—an exclamation point, a percent sign, an ampersand, a large oval—onto the woman's face, as if some eccentric semiotician had attempted to codify exactly what, precisely, is conveyed by her alluring gaze.

The signs and symbols of desire take even more concrete form in a second gallery, whose walls hold what appear to be eight oversized cigarette packs that turn out to be paintings. The artist has printed perfect images of cigarette packaging on linen, then wrapped them in the clingy PVC film similar to the shrink-wrap on actual packs. The paintings' seemingly soft, gentle feel is countered by their titles: *Smoking Kills (American Spirit)*, *Smoking Kills (Marlboro)* (all works 2012) and so on, through several other brands.

By putting visitors face to face with objects of desire that she has in various ways reworked or short-circuited—cigarette boxes that are actually made of linen, a beautiful, tragic star who is see-through and covered with symbols—Ms. Lara toys with the ways in which vision, knowledge and desire work with and against each other. Peoples' obsessions can look quite strange, even surreal, when examined intently. (Have you ever noticed that Caesar's famous line, "Veni, vidi, vici," is printed in Marlboro's crest?)

Throughout this exercise, Ms. Lara keeps viewers off balance with a handful of curios, like three short wooden plinths scattered through the space that are not listed on the checklist. One supports what appear to be two lustrous red eggs, another a scrap of cowhide. The third has a deep indentation in its surface—a garbage can for cigarettes? A text on one wall offers a press release for another, fictional exhibition that is apparently "legible only to someone fluent in an endangered dialect spoken in the Republic of Mali." One's curiosity is piqued by the sense that there are other stories Ms. Lara is keeping hidden, at least for now. (*Through Jan. 19*)