

The Blush Upon Her Cheek

25 JANUARY - 22 FEBRUARY 2023

LEO COSTELLOE
FLORENCE REEKIE
KI YOONG

STUDIO WEST presents *The Blush Upon Her Cheek*, a multidisciplinary exhibition of works by Leo Costelloe, Florence Reekie and Ki Yoong. Drawing from Restoration Court painter Sir Peter Lely's *Windsor Beauties* (1660s), a set of eleven portraits depicting ladies of the court of King Charles II, the exhibition sees a trio of contemporary artists examine the problematics entrenched in the cultivation and appreciation of beauty.

Mirroring the Restoration Court's penchant for the decadent, Leo Costelloe's sumptuous and subtle sculptural pieces speak to the relationship between gender and adornment. By recasting women's beautification tools - ribbons, bows, combs and necklaces - in incongruously hard materials such as glass and silver, the artist disrupts these items' presupposed gender affiliations. When a ribbon is transmuted from silk to silver, its recognisable fluidity and smoothness give way to an almost threatening sharpness. What remains is an uncanny object that, through its material dissonance, rejects functionality while breaking free from its feminine associations. By isolating these intimate items on plinths and offering no suggestion as to whom they may belong, the artist further dissolves the assumption that they are intended for women: when standing alone, a necklace is both for everyone and no one. This act of separation also imbues Costelloe's pieces with a unique self-determination - the inanimate become beautiful in their own right. The viewer comes to understand the powerful contribution of objects used for adornment to the construction of beauty, and the trappings of self-fashioning are revealed.

Like Costelloe, Florence Reekie is similarly interested in the art of beautification. The artist liberates drapery from its classical role as mere staging in painting - exemplified by Lely's *Windsor Beauties* - and instead deploys it as a tool to examine an individual's self-presentation. Positioned as the primary subject of each piece, items of clothing take on deeper meaning in Reekie's work; a single silk glove, for example, stands in for the figure who wears it. Disguised in elegantly flowing swathes of fabric, her sitter's fashion becomes the conduit or concealer of their identity. The luxurious and perfectly rendered fabrics that ripple across her canvases become synonymous with the implied beauty of her hidden subjects. The artist also positions her pieces in dialogue with the contemporary beauty-industrial-complex, with titles inspired by the promises of cosmetic products, such as *Even Toned* and *Flawless*. Toying with the idea of 'beauty secrets', she underlines the false assurances at play in the enhancement tools most commonly marketed to women in search of perfection, while illuminating the inherent unattainability of culturally enforced beauty standards. This is further reinforced by her deliberate use of recycled fabrics as canvases. In leaving traces of the fabric's past life visible in the final piece, she plays with the dichotomy between decadence and frugality, alluding to the central theme of her work - the space between real and heavily cultivated appearances.

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216 KENSINGTON PARK RD, LONDON, W11 1NR

Drawing direct inspiration from the Windsor Beauties, Ki Yoong's eleven tender portraits exist almost as a revision of Lely's original set, further expanding the definition of beauty while engaging with the seventeenth-century proposition that outer beauty is mirrored internally. Featuring a spectrum of individuals, Yoong's presentation of each of his sitters is true to life. Unlike Lely's idealised Beauties, Yoong illuminates what makes each person uniquely alluring. Owing to his fastidious attention to detail, made manifest by his intricate brushwork and bespoke framing, every piece feels precious and demands to be cherished. This in turn, implies that all those pictured, despite their differences, harbour a distinct charm worthy of the artist's immense affection: their open, welcoming faces inviting the viewer to discover their latent beauty. Yoong's use of light further accentuates the attractiveness of each sitter: every one is framed by an amber-hued glow that seems to emanate from within. In foregoing background detail in place of an intense and closely cropped focus on the face, meanwhile, Yoong deliberately leaves much of the sitter's story to the imagination. By merely regarding the tranquil visage before them, the viewer must infer the emotions and identity of the individual pictured. Their peaceful expressions and harmoniously balanced features, coupled with the artist's aforementioned use of a gentle, enticing light, draws the viewer to only one conclusion - that the sitter's outer beauty is reflected within.

Peter Lely's Windsor Beauties are emblematic of the timeless struggle to attain inherently inaccessible societal beauty standards, most commonly associated with women. By examining Lely's portraits through a contemporary lens, artists Leo Costelloe, Florence Reekie and Ki Yoong create new works that unpick age-old ideas of beauty, ultimately leaving the viewer to question the extent to which modern society has surpassed the Restoration Court's obsession with aesthetic perfection.

ABOUT STUDIO WEST

STUDIO WEST is an art gallery in Notting Hill, founded in 2021 by curator Caroline Boseley, that platforms the UK's most exciting emerging and newly established artists. The gallery is known for its concept-driven group exhibitions, authentic community engagement, and offering comprehensive support to London's emerging artists.

STUDIO WEST

Unit 1, 216 Kensington Park Road, London, W11 1NR

Nearest Tube: Ladbroke Grove / Notting Hill Gate

@studio_west_gallery | www.studiowest.art

Press Enquiries: bella@studiowest.art

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