

Merlin Carpenter

Overduin & Co. / Los Angeles

Merlin Carpenter's "Decades" at Overduin & Co. will surely intensify the division between his critics and advocates. Skeptics have dismissed the artist's antics as pure cynicism, while supporters believe his practice is an essential mode of aesthetic and capitalist critique. Indeed, Carpenter seems to thrive within the fissures of art's reception.

The show presents a series of bi-chromatic acrylic paintings that depict an historical range of celebrity portraits. If the banalities of Warholian tactics and pop cultural icons elicit eye rolls from some and reassuring familiarity for others, this seems to be precisely the point. By positioning the works as "cafe paintings," Carpenter is not rehashing the subject of celebrity as much as he is underscoring the many contexts surrounding aesthetic reception and its varied modes of display. Cafes, IKEA showrooms and medical waiting rooms all consign "art" to a specific kind of visual functionality: comforting visitors, inducing calm or feigning a kind of intimacy in order to encourage consumption. Perhaps this is the more compelling reason for revisiting pop stars as silk-screens: in the same way that celebrity is not about the singularity of individuals but the construction and distribution of singularity by mass media, art now follows a similar logic of circulation and consumption. The portraits on view are unique, but they are also assuredly the same. A point further emphasized by their compact installation. Hung with a kind of surgical deliberation, there is hardly any distance separating the paintings from each other and the edges of the walls. Does their tight, collective articulation remind that each work is sold as separate commodity, or help us forget? It is unlikely that viewers will find the painterly craft of Carpenter's offerings impressive. Others may feel that aesthetic experience is only disrupted or burdened by highlighting the systems of production, distribution and exhibition that surround it. If the artist has embraced rifts in his work's reception, it is only to insist that the latter must not be dislodged from the former.

by Olivian Cha