

Erica Eyres

Do I Have To Love You?

20 April - 21 May 2023

OTP Copenhagen is proud to present *Do I Have To Love You?*, the debut solo exhibition with the gallery by Glasgow-based painter, sculptor and video artist Erica Eyres (b. 1980, Winnipeg; CA).

Featuring a selection of new paintings and ceramic sculptures, the exhibition presents a charged and radically ambiguous perspective on childhood and familial relationships. Here, Eyres' closely-cropped images invite the viewer into scenes that feel like frozen stills from a complex psychodrama or imprinted memories from a pre-adolescent stage of life that have assumed particular significance in later years for private or subconscious reasons. Similarly, the artist's series of ceramic sculptures reproducing variations in the book cover of Vladimir Nabokov's infamous 1955 novel *Lolita*, embody a definite but non-specific symbolic weight as they evoke nebulous connotations of girlhood, precocious sexuality, predatory relationships and childhood trauma.

The paintings in the exhibition take their source imagery largely from a series of educational books, published in Britain in the late 1980s and 1990s, aimed at helping pre-teens and young adults to navigate 'difficult' social situations. Covering such wide-ranging topics as divorce, adoption, smoking, drinking, romantic relationships, and child abuse, these books attempted to offer a standardised educational resource that could be used to provide moral and social guidance where parents were absent or unwilling to have the same conversations. The fact that Eyres has largely collected these books from eBay auctions selling off decommissioned library stock from small towns and villages in the UK is a testament to their historical status as a public social resource, particular to adolescence in the pre-internet era.

Filled with highly performative photographs used to re-enact or illustrate the sort of 'real-life' situations that the books discuss, Eyres has taken cropped sections of this imagery and re-purposed it according to her own subjectivity. Instigating an extreme sense of closeness to the subjects of these works, through the act of painting, Eyres presents us with moments from unresolved or incomplete narratives where emotional disposition and a sense of drawn out psychological interiority is prioritised above any explanatory contextual cues.

Bodies are cut off or faces removed to prevent a more total understanding of the social dynamics at play. What we are left with is the decontextualised faces of mostly young people caught in periods of reflection, the suggestion being that these moments will be (or have been) key in the formation of their adult consciousness. The paintings induct us into a childish perspective, prompting the viewer to revisit similar characters, environments or experiences from their own childhood. The fact that many of the paintings exist in non-specific domestic environments or vague landscapes gives the images a pronounced sense of placelessness which only heightens the potential for projection and transference.

When adult figures do appear in these paintings, they often help to establish a more sinister or uncanny tone which underscores a sense of unreality about the nature of the relationships depicted, even if the emotional effects of the interpersonal dynamics are so palpably real. This is a crucial point where the paintings and sculptures in this exhibition overlap. Whilst the narrative of *Lolita* is presented as the unedited diary of a charismatic paedophile, the text is of course a work of fiction. Regardless, the narrative as well as the uncomfortable archetype of childhood sexuality that the book's title has come to signify, have become so deeply ingrained in our cultural imagination that the book as an object brings with it significance and associations that can be understood without having ever read it.

Situating themselves within a specific and recent historical period, the works in this exhibition point towards broad conversations about how humans are socialised. Looking specifically at interpersonal childhood interactions, and how these experiences are dramatised in different forms of popular culture, Eyres infuses her own experience into pre-existing artefacts in a way that encourages us to do the same.