

Clara-Lane Lens

***It's cold in the cactus garden***

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In a garden full of flowers, cacti are the odd one out. If flowers in bloom remind people of the female sexual organ, then cacti stand tall like a phallic erection. Their unique character forms a contrast to seemingly benign and harmless flower beds. Cacti have prickly leaves and spines of various shapes and sizes to protect themselves from predators. Like camels, cacti can store large amounts of water and survive in challenging conditions, such as in the deserts. While 'regular' flowers may symbolize love and beauty, cacti often represent endurance and strength, which explains their popularity as a motif for cheesy things that motivational speakers say. In Clara-Lane's cactus garden, there are barely any cacti, she plays with themes of the cactus, presenting something unexpected that prompts viewers to question the relationship between expectation and reality.

The Belgian artist Clara-Lane Lens is known for her large-sized portraits of people whom she depicts in intimate spaces like the bathroom. In the exhibition "It's cold in the cactus garden" at Galería silvestre, we see the artist stepping outside of her comfort zone, which is a challenging thing to do "technically, emotionally, and conceptually", she tells us. Technically, drawing tends to be more playful and spontaneous than painting – like "a thought on paper". But, at the same time, drawing is more unforgiving because you cannot add to the paper and take away from it as easily as with paint on canvas. Clara-Lane Lens takes this directness one step further by not allowing herself to use a rubber eraser.

While drawing is close to painting, finding one's bearings with this medium takes time. Clara-Lane Lens developed a language of drawing through a series of experiments that culminated in the work cycle on show. She started out by sketching flowers and cacti or people, before combining them into a unified composition.

Flowers and in particular cacti are an unusual motif for the artist. In her previous paintings, she focused on bathroom interiors and the physical intimacy they create.

The connection between past and current works is a contradiction between the foregrounded subjects and their backgrounds. In her paintings, she contrasts the heated moments and warm feelings with rather cold glances and icy stares from the people who look back at the viewer: a weird paradox of close-up intimacy held at distance.

In her new drawings, Clara-Lane Lens creates an ambiguous effect by juxtaposing the very dry and hot conditions of a cactus garden with a chilling "unmasking" of her subjects.

The disconnect between the external environment and the internal state of the individual is a recurring theme in her work. By exploring this theme through different means and media, she evolves as an artist in a natural progression. This dynamic of becoming and being is representative of life itself and a source of inspiration for Clara-Lane Lens. She uses “the irony of feeling cold in a cactus garden” as a metaphor for when something is not quite right. Like all of us, Clara-Lane Lens sometimes feels cold in the cactus garden, clashing with her environment. The raw canvas that hangs in the gallery space depicts an autobiographical scene conjuring this moment of mismatch.

At the center of her works are humans and their emotions. She spends time with her subjects and builds relationships with them, aiming to penetrate to the core of their beings. Clara-Lane Lens’ portraits, whether painted or drawn, show a version of someone’s “true self” shaped by her individual perception and that of the viewer. Drawing is “a more immediate transcription” of a particular moment, the artist explains, because there is less time to project one’s emotions onto the image and create a desired expression. The result is a more direct appeal: a work of art just as “serious” as a painting.

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