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Karin Bubaš: With Friends Like These

Vancouver artist immortalizes MTV reality "characters" in pastels

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BY DAVID BALZER August 19, 2010 18:08

EDITORIAL RATING:

Part of "Reality Check." To Sep 19. Tue-Sat 10am-6pm; Sun noon-5:30pm. Clark & Faria, 55 Mill, bldg 2. 416-703-1700. www.clarkandfaria.com

I've only seen a few episodes of The Hills, but Vancouverite Karin Bubaš' chalk pastel drawings of the reality TV show's "characters," from a series entitled "With Friends Like These," part of which is now on view at Clark & Faria in their summer group exhibition "Reality Check," make me wish I'd seen it all — indeed, make me ashamed that I haven't, considering how much I admire melodrama and kitsch and their contemporary iterations.

Bubaš is best known for her photographs of solitary female figures in beautiful landscapes that match their clothes and, presumably, their highly pitched emotional states. It's not a stretch from this to the The Hills portraits — the show's brassy, dappled, West Coast palette, a complement both to its stars' complexions and to their dialect, inflamed and narcissistic frames of mind — but between these two projects, Bubaš did some Dynasty watercolours; a great bridge, with Krystle et al.'s modes of distress rendered in puddles of colour, as if mixed with the artist's tears. Pastels suit the boys and girls of The Hills better, lending a cartoonish soft focus to their vicissitudes, which, while not purely fictional like the cast of Dynasty's, are also archly constructed (sadly missing is Bubaš' portrait of Lauren Conrad featuring her trademark single mascara tear) and, arguably, more confectionery.

In interviews about the series, which, despite its one-off quality, is now among the artist's most well known work, Bubaš has claimed as inspiration a show she saw at Paris' Musée d'Orsay, which featured late-19th-century pastel works, including those of witty, decadent society portraitist Paul-César Helleu. That connection to the past is interesting and relevant — one sees similar tactics in art-star painters Karen Kilimnik and Elizabeth Peyton — but it's not the only way to read the series.

As a technician, Bubaš is not at Helleu's level, and this actually helps her. The drawings come off like studies: one of Whitney Port giving someone the stink eye has a physiognomic awkwardness, and seems intended to, as if it were freshly ripped from the project notebook of some precocious high-school art student. A similar awkwardness in Brody Jenner's face, simply amplified by Bubaš from real life, is alluring and unsettling. The Hills cast members are like toy dogs, she seems to be saying, their expressions so engorged by breeding and luxury as to convey a pathos beyond whatever vapid circumstances have caused them. Come to think of it, maybe just one more high-period episode of The Hills would do: on weed, with the sound off, and Angelo Badalamenti playing in the background.

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