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Pool at JOAN May 14–June 11

By: Nahui Garcia

At its best, collaboration involves learning from one another—not for the desired outcome, but for the enjoyment of seeing how the process might unfold. When both parties engage in a discursive exchange, new ideas start to blend and emerge in unexpected ways. This approach manifested in the exhibition *Pool at JOAN*, a collaboration between performance artist Emily Mast and CarWash Collective, a duo made up of visual artist Beverly Semmes and fashion designer Jennifer Minniti. Each artist's multidisciplinary approach complemented their collaborators' practice, initiating a pertinent dialogue about the visual culture of both pornography and fashion.

A performance directed by Emily Mast inaugurated the exhibition. In it, five performers danced to club music within the bounds of quasi-circular, twisted blue shapes on the gallery floor; they moved in energetic stunted motions and, occasionally, took time to lean against peach-colored rectangles painted on the walls, freezing their bodies in motion as if posing for a director's camera. Every so often, they walked around Semmes' installation *Pool* (all works 2022), a large puddle form made of satin, organza, tulle, and LED lights in the center of the gallery. The creases of fabric, similar to the ripples of water, echoed the continuous motion of the performance.

The performers' costumes were the first nod to collaborative practice. Their bloomers, skirts, and halter tops were designed by Minniti and inspired by Semmes' Feminist Responsibility Project (FRP), an ongoing series that traces back to a collection of *Penthouse* and *Playboy* magazines that Semmes acquired from a neighbor in the '90s. The artist did not engage with them seriously until the early 2000s, when she became interested in making feminist alterations to the male-gaze-motivated photographs and began painting over elements of the pictures that she deemed misogynist, keeping visible those that seemed aesthetically interesting.¹ The censoring and complicating of these images were her tongue-in-cheek way of taking "responsibility," protecting these models from sexualization while still indulging in healthier, and nonetheless seductive, qualities of the human form. One of these altered photographs appears in the painting *Silver Hat* (2018), in which a nude woman poses against a banister with her legs spread open. Semmes covered her in a thin veil of blue paint, placed a black smudge around her pelvis, and scribbled in silver-colored, knee-high boots and an oversized bergère hat, evoking 18th century portraiture. Though *Silver Hat* was not on view at JOAN, the photograph was digitally printed onto silk fabric to make some of the performers' garments. These wearable forms carry the legacy of men's objectifying gaze—the traces of how effectively so many of us have been conditioned to see through the lens of heterosexual desire.

Immediately following opening day, the three artists set up the gallery for the remaining exhibition. They projected video documentation from the performance onto a wall and displayed the performers' ensembles on a nearby clothing rack. (Each costume is titled after a dancer's first name—Gregory, Eunjin, Jessica, Micah, and Darrian—a gesture indicative of appreciation.) In the video, Mast can be heard repeating the words she spoke during the performance: "... four, three, two, one, pose!" These commands allude to runway shows, spectacles known to homogenize beauty ideals and fabricate a sense of glamour typically ascribed to thin and youthful (and often white) bodies. Yet in the show's choreography, the performers strayed from such clichés by moving in erotic, and at times awkward, ways: Gregory humped the floor; Jessica, Micah, and Eunjin jumped in lurching outbursts; and Darrian flaunted a series of round, flesh-colored cushion works called *CarWash Purses*. The performers all appeared to be in control of their subjectivity, of how they wanted others to see them. Aware of the audience's presence, they embraced their sexual freedom, physically channeling the empowered spirit of the FRP.



Traditionally, the fashion industry has been set apart from the canon of fine art, suspected of lacking intellectual rigor by those who see historically female practices as minor forms of creative expression. By contrast, in a recent interview, Semmes detailed her initial interest in textile as a medium. It began early in life, she said, as she watched her aunts construct quilts or her grandmother tailor clothes.² Culturally embraced as a part of daily life, these activities have a long-standing history of collaboration. Much like the impetus behind *Pool*, many hands are involved in the labor of producing textiles, a process that is often done in community.

Femme and gender nonconforming bodies have learned to navigate the world by making fashion choices that, while seemingly mundane, are rooted in survival. In *Pool*, Mast and CarWash Collective addressed these choices by thinking of sexual freedom quite differently than mainstream media would suggest, as something that has less to do with the representation of nudity and more with the right to defy the patriarchal gaze. Through layers of clothing, paint, and movement, these artists used collaboration—which often took the form of collective disobedience—as a lens for playful experimentation with the exposure and concealment of the body.

1. Beverly Semmes, "Beverly Semmes, Rubens & Antiquity," interview with Tyler Green, *The Modern Art Notes Podcast*, January 6, 2022, MP3 audio, 59:47, <https://soundcloud.com/manpodcast/ep531>.

2. *Ibid.*