

LOS ANGELES

Monica Majoli

L&M Arts // November 8, 2012–January 5, 2013

MAJOLI MADE her best play for the outré—the kind of kinky, winking, but earnest exhibitionism that realist painters of a certain ambition seemed to find necessary around the turn of the millennium—with a series of washy, explicit watercolors of bondage fetishists and devotees of an offshoot gay leather subculture, which she showed in 2006 in the Whitney Biennial and at Gagosian. Those ethereal, nearly monotone figure studies promised that something subtle and smart might emerge from her earlier pulpy and rawboned oils, which also found their subjects in the lonelier, odder quarters of gay sexual life, like an Ashcan School for the psychosexually, rather than economically, marginalized.

This exhibition, however, seems like a step backward. It pairs high-gloss paintings of bedroom scenes of Majoli's former lovers—seen through a black mirror and titled with their names—with abstract lithographs meant to refer to her abandonment by her father, a lithographer. The material, obviously near to her heart, demands the gritty probity Majoli seeks to claim, but her visual imagination can't quite muster it. The paintings are

the least stylized, least distanced of her career, yet their effect is the most sentimental; their acts are the least titillating, but the effect is the most pornographic. All breasts are round and full, all eyes are closed or hooded, all light has the dimming romance of a distant fire.

Sex, in this light, is all touch and no mind, and painting, all surface and no form. Except for the particular tousle of their hair, Pamela, Jarrett, Kate, Amy, and Judie are more or less indistinguishable in both body and face. The lithographs only repeat this absence of character.

Majoli's technique here is mired in the movies to a degree that even the cinematically inclined Edward Hopper could never have imagined. The paintings, with their clean curves and soft focus, are Rotoshopped right into the uncanny valley of desire—too close to the way sexual yearning feels to be novel, but too far from the way sex is experienced with another actual human being to be true.

And if Majoli's cinephilic memory is no vice, her incurably ironizing eye is a form of contemporary bondage that couldn't possibly get anyone off. —Ian Chang



Monica Majoli
Black Mirror (Kate),
2010. Oil on
panel, 16 x 20 in.