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Deborah Oropallo @ Wirtz & Gallery 16

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Belle, 2009 permanent pigment print and silkscreen on paper 36 x 22 1/2 inches

Deborah Oropallo is an artist who consistently shocks and amazes. She doesn't do this with violence or brutality. Instead, she does it subtly, with images that challenge how we feel and think. While many conceptual artists rely on explanatory texts to support ambiguous visual statements, Oropallo makes her ideas explicit; so much so that they seem to be embedded in her materials at an almost cellular level. I first saw Oropallo's work in 2001, at her San Jose Museum of Art retrospective, *How to: The Art of Deborah Oropallo*. There, she took abject subjects — 55-gallon drums, canisters of gas, nylon rope and a variety of other derelict industrial objects — and transformed them into something exquisite. The drums, for example, she painted bright orange and turquoise and presented them in cellophane, like shrink-wrapped gifts whose lurid colors recalled the toxic waterways documented by photographer [Edward Burtynsky](#). But unlike the realities Burtynsky documented, Oropallo's fictions made the banal iconic, and it was unnerving. Having lived and worked in Silicon Valley, I knew the chemically tainted environment of these objects all too well, and I was shocked to see them in a museum, much less in one so close to areas where local groundwater had been contaminated. But more than anything, I was struck by how beautiful these paintings were and how strongly I was attracted to them. This uneasy, bifurcated reaction was further complicated by Oropallo's seamless mixture of painting and photography.

I later experienced an even more disquieting juxtaposition of real and unreal at *Guise*, Oropallo's 2007 show at the de Young Museum. There, she grafted the faces and bodies of female models onto reproductions of 17th and 18th century portraits,

the originals of which depict men and women in Napoleonic-era garb flashing displays of wealth and power. There was talk about them being symbols of female empowerment. But there was quite a bit more going on. By today's standards, the men in the original paintings, with their tights, wigs and high-heeled shoes, seem positively effeminate — a fact that Oropallo exploited to demonstrate what the world might look like if humans were truly hermaphroditic.

The pictures had a gauzy, now-you-see it, now-you-don't quality. They seemed to shift in and out of focus like anamorphic images, making it easy to think that if viewed from a certain angle the figures might suddenly reveal their true nature: male or female. Instead, they clung to their *Middlesex* status, creating the eerie possibility that Oropallo's digital sleight of hand might somehow be capable of incarnating their biological equivalents in real life.

Her experiments in this realm have not been without controversy. Painters who've stuck to their brushes and palettes regard Oropallo's digitally assisted efforts with wary, grudging respect, aware that painting, in the '90s, was declared extinct by some. And while her work makes no attempt to simulate the tactile joys of paint, it does



Pipe Ends, 2001, Iris print with silkscreen overprinting, 47 x 35 inches



Napoleon, 2007, permanent pigment print, 60 x 40 inches

yield plenty of eye-dazzling effects that, by themselves, generate new visual possibilities, if not an altogether new *pigment-derived* language.

Wild Wild West Show, her latest series at [Stephen Wirtz Gallery](#) (and at [Gallery 16](#), which has prints from all three series on view), is her most radical effort to date. As with *Guise*, *Wild West* relies on downloaded images for its source material, and like *Guise*, it also employs fetishistic images – this time women in scanty western garb wielding lassos and other rodeo implements. These Oropallo enlarges to a height of nearly 7 feet and then digitally erases body parts to create pictures that look as if they’ve been hit by a shotgun blast. Rendered in super-saturated colors, they appear simultaneously vivid and vaporous. The blurred backgrounds we see through these partially transparent figures, look like they were photographed from a speeding car, but are really just artifacts of Oropallo’s multi-layered, digital “painting” process.



Cody (left) and Coy (right), 2009, both permanent pigment on aluminum, 81 x 51 inches

While the idea of faceless, skimpily clad cowgirls in come-hither poses sounds like a pornographic fantasy, the abundance of so many beautiful elements in these pictures makes it difficult to sustain any real or implied notion of misogyny. Rather, these seductively posed apparitions drive us to question whether we’re seeing photography, painting or some new hybrid. While they’re definitely hybrids, they also bring to mind several noteworthy fusions: Sigmar Polke’s silk-screened and painted photos of the late ‘80s and early ‘90s; Gerhard Richter’s blurry photorealistic portraits and squeegee-made, abstract oils; and Francis Bacon’s *Screaming Pope* series, with its grotesquely blurred features. The latter echoes strongly in Oropallo

pieces like *Coy*, where the transparent figure of a woman — viewed from the rear, ass-out, — stretches in a more or less continuous blur from top to bottom, leaving only her hat and garments in sharp relief.

The result is a hypereal surface texture that I've not seen in painting *or* photography. In *Star*, for example, a disembodied, sequin suit practically jumps off the surface, and in the void where her face once was, the background blur forms a ghostly mask — one of only two instances in this series where anything resembling a face is present. The other, *Drill Team*, mixes Warholian replication with what appears to be an overlay of silk-screened marks, a carryover from Oropallo's earlier works where hand-stenciled patterns appeared over digitally altered photographs.

I was also reminded of the stop-action photography of [Harold Edgerton](#) by *Cody*, where the blur of a whirling lasso is positively kinetic. But even more Edgerton-like are the pixilated scraps of digital “debris” that appear to float on the picture plane. They resemble posters peeling off weathered city walls — or, to keep the Edgerton comparison running — like fall-out from bullet-shattered objects that photographer froze with strobe lights.

Wild West isn't so much an exposition of an idea as it is a retort to those who complain that a painter can't really be a painter if she uses a computer. But after Rauschenberg, Richter, Polke and so many others who've mixed photography and painting, the subject hardly seems debatable, computer or not. Fact is, there are few pixels in these pictures that remain untouched by Oropallo's “hand”.

Some might say that in the absence of a concept as strong, say, *Guise*, Oropallo in *Wild West* is simply shooting blanks. To me it feels like she's playing with live ammunition.

—DAVID M. ROTH

Wild Wild West Show at [Stephen Wirtz Gallery](#); *Deborah Oropallo: New Editions* (in conjunction with the publication of her new book *POMP*), at [Gallery 16](#). Both shows through Oct. 31, 2009.

Lead image: *Drill Team*, 2009, permanent pigment on aluminum, 51 x 81.



Star, 2009, permanent pigment on aluminum, 81 x 51 inches