

Flash Art



Isobel Williams, “Back to Life” (2015). Courtesy of VI, VII, Oslo. Photography by Amalie Winther.

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Isobel Williams VI, VII / Oslo

Isobel Williams’s practice centers on observing and live-drawing at public gatherings, from the Notting Hill outdoor carnival to clubs where *shibari* (Japanese rope bondage) is performed. Her solo exhibition at VI, VII presents drawings she made over the course of *The Violet Crab at DRAF* (2015), a “cabaret” exhibition in London orchestrated by artist Than Hussein Clark. As an observer to the setting up of the exhibition and performance events, Williams sketched what she experienced. The resulting suite of drawings bespeak her commitment to human interactions as they unfold in space and time. Rendered in ink, watercolor and conté stick, they depict various activities and moments in what amounts to an incohesive temporality more than a linear narrative. A few ink drawings of dancer Ayumi LaNoire — a recurring subject — are hung on the gallery walls, accentuating the synergy of the moving figure against the stiff verticality of the dancing pole. Williams’s admiration for calligraphy is apparent. LaNoire’s body is captured in a few swift strokes of black ink, in contrast to other more delicately detailed watercolors of people, tools and works of art in medias res.

As an authoritative record of Hussein Clark’s earlier exhibition, Williams’s drawings offer little. Instead, these impressions give vital agency to subjective experience. Williams observes and renders situations she enters on her own terms, as suggested by her long descriptive titles: “I have seen muscular men without Ayumi LaNoire’s core strength unable to support themselves on the pole,” for example. She writes with wit, asserting a place for all aspects of the process of organizing, presenting and experiencing art in the exhibition context, as well as her own subjectivity. Williams the artist emerges as her observations congeal into words and compositions. She is deliberately close to what she renders, committed to whichever isolated detail of a situation captures her imagination in the moment. Rather than the full picture, her drawings invite consideration of the condition of memory and the inevitable emotional distractions that impose themselves when you’re trying to focus intently on doing justice to your experiences as they unfold in a situation shared with others.

by Milena Hoegsberg