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## Beyond Binary: Joshua Friedman on “Engender” at Kohn Gallery

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“Engender” opened this week at Kohn Gallery in Los Angeles. The group show is curated by Joshua Friedman, and investigates the way gender is explored in painting by 17 contemporary artists. The medium has traditionally approached male and female as a binary. Today, that’s being challenged by artists like Hernan Bas, Natalie Frank, Nathaniel Mary Quinn, Nicole Eisenman, and more. Whitewall spoke with Friedman about the exhibition, on view through January 13, 2018.

**WHITEWALL:** *What was the starting point for the exhibition, “Engender”?*

**JOSHUA FRIEDMAN:** My initial interest was the way contemporary artists working today are visually treading the line between figuration and abstraction. While this concept is not entirely new to art, the current inter-blending of genres felt different and new to me. After numerous studio visits, it was clear that the underlining concern for many of these artist was seeing gender in a way that is beyond visual and conceptual restrictions, not being constrained to binaries that have been constructed throughout history.

***WW: Why did you want to focus on painting?***

**JF:** Painting has such rich and deep lineage when it comes to the depiction of gender, so I loved the notion of focusing the show specifically on contemporary artists who use that historical medium as a means to break away and challenge these traditional binaries. These creative parameters are not easy to adhere to but the artists in this exhibition manage to do it so well and so beautifully. They're looking to the past to reshape the future.

***WW: Who are some of the artists challenging the gender binary in painting?***

**JF:** All of the artists in this show are challenging the gender binary. A few examples include: Jonathan Lyndon Chase's paintings that highlight the quotidian episodes of black queer men and the difficulties faced by defining one's identity as such in contemporary society; Jesse Mockrin's oil paintings that marry the romantic aesthetics of 18th-century Rococo portraiture with contemporary imagery to question how gender codes are prescribed, performed, and disrupted in popular culture; Tschabalala Self's figurative works that obscure biological characteristics to reflect her own experiences and cultural attitudes toward race and gender; and Christina Quarles's use of excessive representation to explore identity politics and her own personal experience as a multiracial, queer feminist.

***WW: What role does identity and individual experience play for the artists included in the show?***

**JF:** For "Engender," it became clear quite quickly that you cannot properly discuss these topics without showing many different voices and approaches. Gender and identity exists in many layers of our lives and has different meanings for every person. My hope with this show is to really capture that dimensionality. Each artist was selected for their unique skills and strength in speaking to this topic.

NATHALIE KARG

***WW: What understanding of the role of gender in contemporary painting do you want viewers to walk away with?***

***JF:*** If the show can expose people to questions about gender, questions that they may have never known to ask, that would be a success in my book. When you have something so tethered to a long history of cultural categorizations such as gender, assumptions occur. Assumptions that negate proper exposure, discussion, and education on a very complex and multilayered component of all our lives. The artists in the exhibition are reclaiming that narrative, visually crafting languages that speak to their own unique experience, and yet can very much be understood by all.