

Meliksetian MB Briggs

ARTFORUM



Shagha Arianna, *there is a room and a window and a window and a box*, 2020, acrylic and Flashe paint on canvas, 48 x 72".

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Shagha Ariannia

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On the cover of the first edition of Kathy Acker's 1978 novel, *Blood and Guts in High School*, is an image by Sue Coe: a gleaming scene of nighttime danger wherein sentient, money-hungry tenements spit out ghostlike apparitions. They are in turn inhaled by the painting's central figure, a lanky gang member whose chest tattoo indicates that he's affiliated with the Scorpions. Sitting on his knee is a cat that opens its mouth in a furious and frightening yowl. Hard glints of light—like sparks struck off a dense flint—provide only the barest of illumination. It is not the kind of image one might expect to illustrate a book about the life of a ten-year-old girl. But Acker's protagonist, Janey Smith, is imperiled and ravaged by the sexual violence that suffuses her life; her episodic adventures lead ultimately to her death before her fifteenth birthday. Acker traces Janey's existence over the course of four years: She leaves her sexually abusive father, moves to New York, joins the aforementioned gang, is involved in a car crash that leaves her poor and extremely vulnerable, is captured and sold into prostitution by a Persian slaver, learns Farsi and uses it to write poetry, and finally absconds to North Africa, where she meets Jean Genet, with whom she travels and shares a cell. Irate, fugue-like, and experimental, Acker's text appalls as it seduces.

A picture of the author appears on the front of nearly every subsequent edition of *Blood and Guts*, indicative of the swiftness with which the author

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was herself mythologized. But should this trend ever be interrupted, a new cover of Acker's book might do well to feature any one of Shagha Ariannia's acrylic-and-Flashe paintings, which were recently exhibited at Meliksetian | Briggs. All of them were inspired by the section of Acker's text known as "The Persian Poems." *Janey's hair, Janey's chair* (all works 2020) was the only canvas that made direct reference in its title to the novel's central character. In this piece, a spectral depiction of a girl's head is veiled by washes of semiopaque, mucousy greens, and is caught between a pair of limbs. (Are they legs? Arms? And are they hers or her captor's?) In this and several other paintings here, Ariannia's fluorescent palette was subdued by the introduction of black and pale puce—lights and darks that formally mirror the shifting moods of Acker's tale. In *there is only a chair*, another figure is painted in cyclonic brushstrokes as though seen from above, with the result that the form and the swaddled phallus it holds achieve a monumental presence. Meanwhile, a man in *to see, to come* lies prone on his back behind a pair of blue translucent curtains, which frame his seemingly unfortunate predicament, while a road flows out of his crotch toward a far-off horizon. Although not literal illustrations of moments from Acker's book, Ariannia's paintings nevertheless amplify the spirit of a rebel familiar's work.

Perhaps the most ambitious painting in the show, because of both its size and its compositional complexity, was *there is a room and a window and a window and a box*. Its organic forms, ersatz hues, and rough architectural line work are together alchemized into a paean to indeterminacy. In this picture Ariannia, who is better known for her video and installation work,

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turns to painting to visualize fantastic mise-en-scènes of pleasure and misery. Legs are spread like book pages as pates emerge from pudenda like cartoon suns on the horizon. In *It's a Date*, the exhibition's namesake work, an N95 mask is rendered over the crotch of a body, the overall image roughly resembling the black-and-yellow radiation trefoil. Arianna's painting thus applies Acker's allegory of metastasized trauma to the current conditions of quarantine and contagion, asking the same basic and vexing question: And what of sex?

— Andy Campbell