

FAMESQUE

*"I ain't no motherf- -ing celebrity....
All I do is sit in the studio and make real s- -."
And that's it. That's motherf- -ing it!"*
Kanye West

Commonality (whether this is "excellence" or something other) is explored in the series Famesque. In a contradictory manner, Barnett achieves this by refusing to group her characters by theme. The scenes bear no connecting thread by race, gender, or hair colour. Via this anti-selection process, the figures become homogenised, no longer "Cruises" and "Fannings", simply well known faces inhabiting a place beyond the ordinary. One could imagine these figures posing as illustrations to Debord's thesis. They reconvene together in Barnett's oil paintings, occupying a vibrant and hyper-coloured agora.

Before Barnett translates the figures onto canvas, they are first assembled and photographed in a miniature tableau – a type of paper Valhalla. Here, all our favourite gods are juggled together in their jeans and duchesse satin, creating a giddy excess of detail. At this point, however, the flimsiness of the paper causes a physical intervention, prompting the cut-outs to bend and disfigure, thus undermining the stars' poses. It is tempting to consider this as a nature-led act of sabotage, where arbitrary movement suddenly spoils the cultivated celebrity image. These representations certainly evoke a sense of mystique, with ghostly bodies slipping in and out of hazy visions. Indeed, the composition is reminiscent of seventeenth century ceiling frescos, with sweeping limbs and foreshortened planes creating a lofty sense of movement. In this case though, fluffy sun-touched clouds have been swapped for camera lens flare. Also missing are the gentle arcs and curves typically of the Baroque style. Barnett's paintings are whipped into more dizzying distortions, creating an exhilarating illusion of movement. One can imagine a centrifugal force spinning the images around, carrying the viewer's gaze across the canvas. Details blend into teasing obscurity, forcing focus inwards and outwards to vertiginous effect. Yet, now and again this heady motion is punctuated as a dark pair of eyes, or a coy smile arrests one's gaze.

Is that...?

The game of identification is almost impossible to resist. It's like hearing a snatched refrain that disappears into the air. Or finding an odd familiarity in a stranger's face, yet failing to match it with a memory. The haunt of recognition is intense and unsettling, a feeling which is amplified by the rotating carousel of figures in Barnett's paintings. The ever-present, pervasive celebrity image becomes lodged in our consciousness eliciting a sense of acquaintance where we would not usually expect to find it. Famesque plays on the concept of the audience's gaze, inviting us to scrutinise its subjects with increasing intensity. Our participation, in this way, is reflective of celebrity culture's obsession with minutia, and the ever-increasing need for more detail. At the same time, it obfuscates, turning shapes into ambiguous blurs. Celebrity identities become unidentifiable; they are glamorous, entrancing images that dance just beyond the grasp of recognition.

SARAH BARROW

¹ Christopher E. Bell, *American Idolatry: Celebrity, Commodity and Reality Television*, McFarland & Company, Inc., Jefferson, NC, 2010 p.1

² Guy Debord and Donald Nicholson-Smith, *The Society Of The Spectacle*, Zone Books, New York, 1994, n.p.

³ *ibid.*