

KATE O'DONOVAN COOK: "I'LL BE YOUR MIRROR"



The Mirror by Kate O'Donovan Cook

Kate O'Donovan Cook doesn't bother with models in her frank, freakishly appealing digital photographs. She is at once model, muse and artist, a commentator on the reflective gaze. In her work, which features full frontal nudity, she becomes all of the characters in her ambiguous narratives. By digitally manipulating the image, she creates narratives that are alternately erotic and disturbing.

O'Donovan Cook's work is deeply entrenched in art history, so that in "The Model," in which we see her nude, from the back she

creates allusions to Corot's "The Repose" as well as some of Ingres' odalisques. But this time, O'Donovan Cook is both model and artist. We see her lithe body exposed, but the students in the life drawing class in front of her are also exposed as they feverishly attempt to capture her likeness. In cinematic works like this, O'Donovan Cook recaptures the power of the viewer, giving her the agency Corot's models lacked. So, too, in "Manet: Revisited," which riffs on the classic Manet work "Le déjeuner sur l'herbe," the modern work that scandalized the art world with its picnic image of a naked woman lounging on the grass with two clothed men.

In O'Donovan Cook's version, all of the party are women, some of them dressed and not, once again claiming a feminist perspective on a deeply provocative and iconic work.

The Mattatuck exhibit includes two other series by the photographer. One, "Baltimore: the Family," was inspired by living in an area

of Baltimore's classic row houses, which reminded her of dovecotes. In all of these austere images – a couple eating in a bleak kitchen, a woman reading in a stark bedroom, the subject wears a beak-like mask. The suggestion is that the identity-concealing masks we all wear may never come off.

The idea of masks and impersonation comes to full fruition in her most elegant, if disquieting series, "The Webster." These images take place in the dressing room of a famed New York music venue. All of the women in the image are O'Donovan Cook, who clearly has no scruples about sharing her enviably pliant physique with the rest of us.

Whether viewers will find that uncomfortably self-referential or deeply provocative depends on how comfortable they are with nudity and self-presentation. For her part, O'Donovan Cook seems to suggest that artifice is an abiding inauthenticity to which we all pay some degree of homage.

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