

New
American
Paintings

Soul Seeking
Alexandra Grant at Lora Reynolds Gallery

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Have you ever Google'd yourself? (Is it profane even, to use 'Google' as a verb?) As we leave digital footprints over multiple social media platforms, like a slightly exaggerated profile on an online dating site or a carefully composed Instagram shot (to one-up our friend's idyllic beach photo), we may ask ourselves 'how much of me is there?' And how much of that factors into our presence in and understanding of the greater physical world? In *Century of the Self*, organized by independent curator Sarah C. Bancroft at Lora Reynolds Gallery, artist Alexandra Grant dives into feverishly detailed compositions that embrace language as both quotable texts and visual tools.

First impression: Grant's works are colorful: hues contrast boldly with one another, as multiple media (ink, paint, marker, what appears to be crayon in at least one instance) ripple across varying matte and iridescent surfaces. I would posit that these colors and techniques are conversing loudly with one another, but that would be jumping ahead to the next major compositional force here: the words. For now, I'll call Grant's color usage fearless and a provocative counter to the West's color-stigma described in David Batchelor's *Chromophobia*. In Batchelor's argument: "chromophobia manifests itself in the many and varied attempts to purge colour from culture, to devalue colour, to diminish its significance, to deny its complexity...colour is dangerous, or it is trivial, or it is both." Grant embraces this Other, like kindred artists Jessica Stockholder and Gina Beavers, elevating color into the realm of Serious Art. Grant's theme is super-relatable: searching for completeness in an over-stimulated society awash in consumerist taglines and self-help jargon, and her acid-punk color theory does little to diminish the gravity of her message.

Beyond the chromatic onslaught — if you're a chromophobe, give the layered tones a few minutes to sink in — the words shine through. Grant earned the title 'radical collaborator', following her intense and ongoing partnerships with philosophers and writers including Michael Joyce and Hélène Cixous. But *Century of the Self* is a point of departure, as this body of work utilizes no single author in its extracted texts. Instead, Grant culls from sources diverse as *Antigone* and Audre Lorde, combining the two in the heavy *Self* (I was born to love), its Pop-ready Rorschach inkblot firing off in front of a field of Lorde's affirming truth-bomb 'Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare'. This oft-quoted passage from Lorde's 1988 *A Burst of Light* came some four years after her diagnosis of liver cancer (plus breast cancer and subsequent mastectomy a decade before) and her position as an outsider, a Black lesbian feminist scholar living and slowly dying within a socially hardened America.

lora reynolds gallery

At times, memorable phrases coalesce into a blizzard of euphemistic banality ('To thine own self be true', mea culpa Hamlet). While this riffs on the universality of the text, it underlines another point in Grant's work, in her words: "what does it mean to read a text versus perceive it?" To state it another way, what happens when the words blur into the image, and how do we navigate that meeting of visual metaphors? Self (I was born to love not to hate) in the back gallery illustrates this in a series of mirrored echoes reverberating from the corner installation. Antigone's line, shared in the work's title, is forefront in electric warm impasto, yet directly behind that (half-hidden in the color-noise) is the lamenting 'who am I'. Further back, so wildly distorted in the meeting of panels as to render it abstractly legible, is what I deciphered as 'I am I'. I'm not sure I got that last part right, but in trying to read it while regarding the painting as an overall composition, I felt it made sense to me. There could be deeper psychoanalytics at work, as the exhibition title does recall award-winning 2002 British documentary series *The Century of the Self*, which focused on Freud (both pater and filia) and PR pioneer Edward Bernays' influence on corporations and governments in public 'suggestion'. I give Grant the benefit of the doubt in her compositional integrity: by matching semi-readable (and recallable) words with vivid imagery, we can more fully 'match' the puzzle pieces toward our own life experiences.

Adjacent to this dynamic corner work, and blanketing much of the back gallery's floor, are a flotilla of smallish misshapen translucent forms, all titled *Site/Self* (projections). Though Grant has used sculpture in the past, these recycled plastic curiosities are entirely found objects, merely selected by the artist from a bunch of other injection-molded rubbish for inclusion. And while there are some surface-level congruities to Grant's selection and her paintings (color, form, texture), I wonder how accurate that really is, or rather is it just me projecting my thoughts onto them? To be perfectly honest, these *Site-Self* (projections) resemble San Marzano tomato paste, blue-tinted udon, perhaps a head of bibb lettuce — yes I've got food on my mind, but I think that is the greater point: we project ourselves (our Selves) onto these anonymous abstractions, much like Grant's paintings, less to derive an Ultimate Meaning than to find the truth that matters to us.