

Art with Impact



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Guillermo Muñoz Vera, *Zara*, 2017, oil on canvas mounted on panel, 72 x 62¾". © Guillermo Muñoz Vera; courtesy of Forum Gallery, New York

New York's Forum Gallery has a well-deserved reputation for showing exceptional paintings and drawings by some of the world's greatest figurative and realist artists, and it has continued to maintain the high standard of customary excellence by assembling a group show titled *At First Blush*, including select paintings and drawings by some of the talent they represent. On display will be paintings and drawings by Steven Assael, William Beckman, Alan Feltus, Paul Fenniak, Alyssa Monks, Guillermo Muñoz Vera, Clio Newton, Susan Hauptman, Raphael Soyer, Kent Bellows, Gregory Gillespie, Richard Maury, Jules Pascin, Philip Pearlstein, Nelson Shanks and Bill Vuksanovich.

"There are some significant and impactful paintings in the exhibition," says Forum's owner and director Robert Fishko. Most of the paintings are large nudes, dominating the walls, and providing an overwhelming experience to viewers unaccustomed to the sensual intensity of superbly executed and highly skilled repre-

sentation. But even among the lavish display of dramatic canvases there are smaller images which stand out and demand scrutiny. "There's a small painting in the show by Kent Bellows," Fishko adds, "It's the kind of thing that you just can't stop looking at."

The clever frame-within-the-frame composition of Guillermo Muñoz Vera's *Zara* captures a mall storefront decorated with an oversized poster of a commercial model who stares us with unafraid self-assurance, while at the same moment, a customer browses the racks inside the store. The model is compensated for our examination by her transactional agreement with the international clothing retailer, while in contrast the shopper is unaware of our scrutiny, and we are turned into voyeurs of her intimate moment.

We are voyeurs again in the intimate spaces of Alyssa Monks' superb bathroom paintings. Monks is represented by two pictures created during the pandemic, each continuing her watery themes of steam and splash. One of them, *Selective*

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Bill Vuksanovich, *Woman with a Scar*, 2001, graphite & colored pencil on paper, 44 x 30". © Bill Vuksanovich; courtesy of Forum Gallery, New York

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Alan Feltus, *The Best of Times*, 2007, oil on canvas, 47½ x 39¼". © Alan Feltus; courtesy of Forum Gallery, New York

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Alyssa Monks, *Selective Perception*, 2021, oil on linen, 54 x 54". © Alyssa Monks; courtesy of Forum Gallery, New York



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Perception, hovers on the liminal boundary between abstraction and representation. Behind the glass an indecipherable and cryptic figure wipes the condensation away, but the gesture—which we might expect to reveal—creates more ambiguity than clarity as we are confronted instead by the hard contrasts of dark deconstruction and bright reflections. The mystery of the half-seen figure is deepened by her desire for self-revelation.

Clio Newton's *Harper*, a beautiful charcoal on paper, seems to fit the stereotypes of images of the sensual erotic female nude, but her pretty model is a young man sensitively drawn in a classically feminine pose echoing the nascent goddess in Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* and treated with the same sensuality usually reserved for renderings of attractive long-haired girls, gazing away in a soft pretense of embarrassment and refusing to meet the viewers' eye.

The punning title of the show—which does include an abundance of nude works that may initially cause the cheeks of easily embarrassed viewers to redden—also points to the thematic ambiguity which drove Fishko to choose the paintings, for the female subjects of these work are unapologetic. Many of these naked women look at us, gazing directly and unashamed as we view their bodies. Who is blushing here? Certainly not the confident models. "I think there's no question that that's the effect that the direct gaze has," Fishko explains. "It's very, very compelling. These are contemporary women who are pleased to confront the viewer and are doing so with strength and purpose." We meet the eye of Susan Hauptman's *Self-Portrait (La Perla #1)* whose weirdly seductive magic is baldly true to the artist's customary austere form. She has drawn herself veiled but bared, clothed by the fascination and alienation of her deliberately dispassionate self-examination.

Bill Vuksanovich's exquisitely observed *Woman with a Scar* hovers on the edge of erotica while also offering the idea that her healed wound may be a metaphor for the injuries suffered by women under the scrutiny of the male gaze—it's a tricky balance to maintain, and the intriguing drawing is both sensual and challenging. The frank model is seductive, but she is strong, and she seems to suggest there may be hope for healthy relationships which acknowledge and transcend violence and exploitation. Nevertheless, she—and Vuksanovich—remind the men who gaze at her that perhaps we should, at first, blush. ●

Forum Gallery 475 Park Avenue • New York, NY 10022
(212) 355-4545 • www.forumgallery.com