

**Melissa Carter: *New Masters***  
**Institute 193**  
**Lexington, KY**  
**August 31 – October 13, 2018**

Melissa Carter is unafraid to confront the long history of art that preceded her. Known initially for her photography — in which she engages with the rich tradition of Southern photography, creating contemporary compositions that recall the photographs of William Christenberry, William Eggleston, and the greats of the Lexington Camera Club — her current work, on display in the exhibition *Melissa Carter: New Masters* at Institute 193 in Lexington, Kentucky, takes on the history of Western painting in much the same way.

Carter's paintings evoke many canonical references through her use of subject, style, and composition. For instance, Carter's *Astronaut in a Red Jacket* clearly references the Fauvist portraits of Henri Matisse, both compositionally and stylistically. In the painting, Carter depicts a seated woman in a lavender skirt, black shirt, and red jacket, leaning on her elbow while her fingers simultaneously hold her chin and extend up the side of her face. Her figure, like those of Matisse, is created both by thick outline and by heavy concentrations of bright color, and the space around her is constructed in a similarly flattened and painterly way.

Yet while Carter's work clearly aims to create the connection to Matisse, she appropriates his style to subvert the conventions he created. Whereas many of the women that Matisse painted existed solely as passive objects for the male gaze, Carter's women deny that passivity. While the figure in *Astronaut in a Red Jacket* does recline in our presence, her body is

self-contained and closed off to the viewer. She rests one hand in her lap, turning the body slightly inward and definitively denying any voyeuristic impulse. Similarly, her facial expression is passive but confrontational; her face actively resists the classic, coquettish "come hither" stare, as if this woman has neither the time nor the desire to put up with the fantasies so often projected upon women in the canon of Western art history.

Moreover, the title of the work, *Astronaut in a Red Jacket*, further underscores the agency of the woman being depicted. Whereas the titles of works by men like Matisse function to deny the individual identity of the women portrayed by referring to them as vague nouns — such as "Music," "Dance," or even "Souvenir" — Carter gives her woman an identity beyond this image. She is an astronaut, a position that requires both skill and intellect, and one that as of 2016 has only been held by 537 people worldwide, only 61 having been women. In bestowing such a rare and dignified occupation upon her subject, Carter challenges the objectification of women in the titles they are given by men painters.

Carter carries out a similar subversion of the masculinist and, often, misogynist traditions of Western painting throughout the works in *New Masters*, referring not only to this tendency in Fauvism, but also highlighting its prevalence in other movements like Symbolism, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, and even contemporary American painting, such as in her direct evocation of Richard Diebenkorn in her painting *Diebenkorn Fellow*. In some cases, such as her painting *Cosby Sweater*, Carter uses her work to call out the long-ignored history of sexual violence within the art world by drawing a clear parallel to contemporary

feminist activism. *Cosby Sweater* is a large, abstract canvas, clearly alluding to the tradition of New York School painters, many of whom were known for their hard drinking, womanizing lifestyles. Alluding to serial rapist Bill Cosby in her title, Carter calls attention to how the celebration of individual, masculine genius, be it in art or comedy, works to obscure and normalize sexual assault.

Carter's work, at the same time, engages with another tradition within art history, specifically feminist art. Since the Women's Art Movement of the 1960s and 70s, feminist artists like Sylvia Sleigh, Mary Beth Edelson, Miriam Schapiro, and Cindy Sherman have subverted the masculinist tendencies of Western art history to critique the iniquitous treatment of women in our society. Carter's compositions pay homage to this tradition, while also situating them within the context of our contemporary feminist moment. In so doing, Carter's works not only illustrate the long history of misogyny in painting, but also the duration of the fight against it.

On the whole, Carter's paintings, which dominate the gallery space of Institute 193 through both their scale and their color, offer a contemporary feminist reimagining of the history of art, one that feels quite refreshing in our current climate. Carter's works simultaneously call attention to and call out the passive objectification of women throughout history, providing a clear provenance for our contemporary #MeToo moment. At the same time, her engagement with feminist traditions points out that, for generations, women have had a strong arsenal in the fight for gender equality, and the decades-long struggles have only honed the tools needed to battle systemic iniquities.



Melissa Carter, *Astronaut in Red Jacket*, 2018, 72"x48", oil on canvas. Photo courtesy of Paul Brown and Institute 193.



Melissa Carter, *Cosby Sweater*, 2017, 60"x48", oil on canvas. Photo courtesy of Paul Brown and Institute 193.



Melissa Carter, *Diebenkorn Fellow*, 2018, 72"x48", oil on canvas. Photo courtesy of Paul Brown and Institute 193.