

Ruckus



Above: *We must exist more and heavier // we are learning discipline everyday, bench pressing, jiu-jitsu training, training for our future study* (2021), acrylic and colored pencil on panel. All images are taken by Anya Lorenzo and courtesy of Institute 193 and the artist

→ Institute 193, Lexington

Olly Olly Oxen Free

Review

Megan Bickel

The term "olly olly oxen free" is defined in the Dictionary of American Regional English as a derivative of "all ye, all ye outs in free, all the outs in free," in other words, all who are out may come in without penalty¹. It's a call to safety: a disarming.

Olly Olly Oxen Free at Institute 193 is a small exhibition of paintings from Atlanta-based artist Dianna Settles. The show of seven paintings includes scenes from protests, prison intake rooms, jjimjilbang (찜질방, Korean spa and bathhouse), and jiu-jitsu in friends' homes. Settles' work has a place in the growing camp of contemporary art that uses the perils of our time to question, evolve, and discover improvements that will contribute positively to the "future." Most of which are things that we already have at our fingertips. The future, here, is a subject that, because of our inability to actually predict the future, is becoming more engrossing, romantic, alluring, and devastating by the day.

The weight of this exhibition is its very subtle look at power and language. Here, power doesn't necessarily designate malignancy, for it appears in the hands of a knowledgeable masseuse providing healing care, the power exchange between friends entrenched in jiu-jitsu training, or the fearsome power of citizens emboldened with state-sanctioned



Deep stretching, deep pulling, deep sweating, deep breathing (A feeling that at moments hinted at rivers running backwards) (2021), acrylic and colored pencil on panel.

authority to execute. In the exhibition statement, written by Jooyoung Park (Emma Friedman-Buchanan), the author mentions the parallel between visiting a jjimjilbang and being admitted into prison: the removal of one's clothes. One's personal belongings are replaced by another form of dress, whether for comfort or suppression of the individual's sense of self. I was able to ask Settles if this visual link is a point of entry into considering communal governance. Do the similar acts of de-robing and re-dressing act as a metaphor for how drastically different experiences can be altered or improved by looking at how they are similar to mutually beneficial experiences?

"The experiences depicted in the show all produce interesting echos of one another, which can take us beyond the superficial or purely visual similarities between the separate realms of the paintings. The connection I felt to the jjimjilbang, while being admitted into jail, felt like a reminder of the wider existence of my life that would not and could not be contained by my arrest.

In the jail, I saw plenty of moments of tenderness and care between incarcerated folks. It's important to me to think through those forms of care for each other as a survival strategy within a carceral world. On the other hand, there are absolutely echoes of a carceral experience within the spa. People are isolated based on arbitrary identities, and your personal belongings are locked up away from you. I'm interested in the reality of cultivating our abilities to care for ourselves and each other using the means we have at our disposal. My paintings are often about experiences that shape us in ways drawing disparate interactions and realms together through bodily memories of both joys and nightmares, and I think acknowledging the complexities of those experiences helps us to better clarify what kinds of things we want to fill our lives with."²

In addition to meaning, power is also distinguished formally and symbolically. Settles demonstrates her own agency and power by cultivating a variety of worlds within each painting. All of the works in the exhibition contain sections and tiles that read as material and textural studies all on their own. Tiles can easily be interpreted as small gestural studies, different areas of activity read as comic blocks that are divided in order to specify visual priority and narrative.

Most subtle, though, is the implication and involvement of the viewer. All of the figures presented within these paintings are engaged in activity, but several lock and hold eye contact with the viewer. They feel intentional, defiant, and inviting. I can't ignore my art historical training long enough to observe the 'return of gaze' and consider the power dynamics between painted figures and their very real, human viewers. I asked Settles if she was considering a 'give and take' of power and care between the figures depicted and the viewer:

"I think that power relations are sort of inextricable from anything in our lives today, so they are certainly brought to any painting you look at, based on the specifics of who you are and how you live your life. With that said, I do think that direct eye contact with the viewer helps to implicate them and bring them into a scene. Whether that's about producing an oppositional challenge to the viewer, inviting them to take part, or any other affective experience ultimately depends on who is looking at my paintings and what they hope to get out of them."³



It's forbidden to put life on the table and would in no way serve to be enchanted by the scent of a carnation. (2021), acrylic and colored pencil on panel.



Nothing is not borrowed & hunger doesn't compromise together we made this place together we can leave it (2021), acrylic and colored pencil on panel with poplar.



Install at Institute 193.

The posing of the figures feels anarchic in approach, both in how they are collected and composed on the panel. The groupings of figures are placed on the composition with little regard for relative size, lending itself to that formal power and language mentioned earlier. It seems that the artist uses the decision of placement as a metaphor for the myriad ways that institutions, meaning, and language can be transformed by our own choosing. A valuable observation that the world is the world we make.

"A lot of my compositions are combinations of people, objects, and events from disparate moments that I've experienced directly or indirectly, making them function as a kind of collage. The richness of the arrangements depends on the combining and collapsing of moments into themselves and each other. They're collages in that they aren't representational.

Within these paintings, there is absolutely an arbitrariness to the positions of the bodies, but for me there's also an arbitrariness to everything in the painting. I believe that our surroundings and our selves can be remade into any form we like. I'm placing people and things in a specific way, but that's the point of the painting - whether or not these situations actually happened in exactly the way they're depicted, they could have, or they could in the future, or they could be happening right now. In that way, it is up to us to decide whether they should, or what elements of them should be actualized.

Part of the point of the body of work is that every prison could be a sauna and, unfortunately, every sauna could be a prison. I want the paintings to help people, including myself, to consider and choose how the collective circulation of our desires produce our own lives, with regards to the people, places, and things that we love."⁴

Ultimately, in *Olly Olly Oxen Free*, Settles' describes spectral depictions of power and safety (or care) and the ability for those terms to shift in meaning somewhat arbitrarily, depending on the context we have prescribed to them. The artist alters how we experience power exchanges and creates an opportunity for the viewer to ask where they can utilize the power required of care to better themselves first, and then ultimately, their community. I left considering this "power" as hydropower. When the consistent force of streaming water is applied, there is a steady flow of reliable energy. When care is consistent and the labor egalitarian, the outcome is consistently safer, more compassionate environs. Perhaps in our inability to predict the future, we certainly can apply the energy that is required of compassion, care, and affirmation in hopes that it is the invisible tool that decreases carcerality in all its maligned forms.

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Citations:

1. Cassidy, Frederick Gome; and Joan Hall, "Ole Ole Olson All In Free", another way of saying it is oll-e oll-e ox-and-free Dictionary of American Regional English, (1985) Vol III (I-O), p. 874.
2. Dianna Settles (Artist), In email correspondence with the author, June 24th, 2021.
3. Dianna Settles, email. 2021.
4. Dianna Settles, email. 2021.

Notes:

- **Dianna Settles**
- **Institute 193**

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Megan Bickel (MFA 2021) is a multi-disciplinary artist and writer working at the intersections of painting, new media, and data visualization. She is the founder and organizer of houseguest gallery based in Louisville, Kentucky, and is currently pursuing her M.A. in Digital Studies of Language, Culture, and History at the University of Chicago.