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Power Dynamics: Celia Hempton Interviewed by Will Fenstermaker

Painting psychological modes of looking.



Installation view of *Celia Hempton* at Southard Reid, London.
Photo by Benjamin Westoby.
Courtesy of the artist and Southard Reid, London.

British painter Celia Hempton came to wider notice for her *Chat Random* series (2014–ongoing), which depicts subjects she met while browsing online webcams. Works from the series have been exhibited in a number of major surveys, including Whitechapel’s *Electronic Superhighway* (2016) and the Institute of Contemporary Art Boston’s *Art in the Age of the Internet* (2018). When I saw five of these paintings at the latter, I was struck by how astutely they grappled with the ways in which images, and especially nudes, circulate online. Her current exhibition at Southard Reid, in London, presents three different bodies of work.

— Will Fenstermaker

Will Fenstermaker

Thematically the three series at Southard Reid relate to ideas that are tied together in *Chat Random*. Your surveillance paintings and paintings of anonymous violence exist within a similar gendered digital landscape, and the self-portraits are part of your larger interest in nude portraits. Did one series lead to another?

Celia Hempton

I’ve been making all of these series concurrently to deal with different psychological modes of looking. The *Chat Random* work embodies the perfect way of painting for me, because when you’re speaking to someone live, the situation takes precedence. No matter which series I’m working on, if the situation enables that performative aspect, then the paintings end up being better paintings.

WF

When I saw the selection from *Chat Random*, I couldn’t help imagining you painting them, which isn’t something I usually do. I tried to picture all of the context around you—literally, how you made the works, but also what nudes mean within this digital economy and the fact that these chat cams are ostensibly safe spaces charged with a dangerous sexual energy. I’m curious if your subjects knew what you were up to.

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CH

Quite often people would say, “What are you doing? Are you cooking? Are you painting?” Generally people were fine with it. Occasionally people clicked to the next webcam. That’s part of the process: if someone clicked “next,” then I’d either leave the painting as it was or paint over it.

It’s so hard to tie those works down. In terms of the power dynamic, the bottom line is that I’m necessarily activating my gaze as a woman, and I can’t switch it off as long as I’m making the painting. But it is complex; there’s something about doing things online where you never fully know what’s happening. I’ve made paintings of people where halfway through I realize I’m painting a pre-recorded video. This is a thing that people do; often it’s a video of a guy with a big dick. The video’s not actually of them, but the person’s behind the feed, watching you watch the penis.

It’s disconcerting because it’s a slightly deceptive and controlling thing to do. I’ve encountered a similar feeling in chats on the dark web—a sense that your privacy is being encroached upon via your computer even though the whole point of these scenarios is anonymity.

WF

One of the most common ways our generation experiences nudes is an unsolicited image sent to your screen.

CH

The other thing I could say is that the area of England where I grew up is famous for some murders that took place when I was a teenager. The pair, a married couple, would drive around the countryside and pick up young girls at bus stops. They would rape and torture their victims. I was right at the age they targeted—like, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen. There was a real fear about sex and the vulnerability of my body. That made some sort of impact on me.

WF

Wow, and not an abstract fear by any means. Do you feel like that entered your work directly, or was it something that colored your experience as a young woman in becoming conscious of an aura of violence around the landscape?

CH

I don’t know, actually. I never really consciously thought about it until recently when I verbalized to friends I had as a youngster that I’d been kind of obsessed with an idea or fear of rape, which perhaps isn’t something all teenage girls think about. Although I think a lot of women are vigilant toward potential sexual violence in certain everyday situations, even if not as conscious thought.

WF

In your surveillance series in which you paint images from CCTV cameras, all these seemingly passive images have an aura of power lurking behind them. What draws you to the images you select?

CH

The main place I look is a website called Insecam that has an index of different countries and places. It’s the opposite of chatrandom.com in a way because there’s mostly nothing happening. It’s a banal, slow thing. In these livestreams, there’s no one looking back, and you get the sense you’re the only one watching in that moment. So it’s an incredibly lonely experience, because you can often see people, but it’s a one-way interaction in that they will never be aware you’re looking at them.

WF

You’re always being looked at. You’re almost never not on camera due to the scale of surveillance in the UK and the US. It’s a particular kind of image—a suspicious image, with a predetermined point of view. Your surveillance works feel less about your experience as a painter within that gendered space and maybe more about the experience of just being a human in 2020 and existing in a world where you’re always being imaged. By whom?

CH

Yes, there’s a sinister hypercapitalist undertone, but also a huge amount of redundant data with so many recorded images that will never be seen. I’ve made a couple of paintings of the same place, so I’ve become the surveyor.



France, 27th May 2020, 2020, oil on linen, 11.75 × 13.75 inches.
Photo by Benjamin Westoby. Courtesy of the artist and Southard Reid, London.



Mut, Turkey, 13th March 2019, 2019, oil on aluminum, 13.75 × 15.75 inches.
Photo by Benjamin Westoby. Courtesy of the artist and Southard Reid, London.

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WF

You're also showing paintings of anonymous images of violence circulating on the internet. You also found those images online?

CH

There are a lot of images on the fringes of the internet that have been recycled such that you don't know the provenance, and you can't trust what's been written around them on the websites where they've been posted. There are quite a lot that look like home-made props and horror movies. You never know exactly what you're looking at, though some likely do depict real events, so there's this constant process of questioning your reaction to that. What are you witnessing? At what point is online space safe or unsafe? It's more important than ever to question who has the right to engage with certain depictions of trauma. That's something I think about in this work and when choosing images to study in this way.

WF

Whoever created those images, the verisimilitude wasn't in question; they knew the violence was real or were happy to present it as such. They didn't question their right to depict violence; the prohibition was probably part of the appeal. And yet these images are out there, so in a way they're all real. What do we do with that? Do we look away? Do we let this dark economy continue to exist in the shadows? That's what I find so compelling about these paintings: they bring all this to light.

Alongside these more ominous works, you're also exhibiting self-portraits. How does that series fit in with the others?

CH

The self-portraits came about from my earlier nude series. I don't know why I didn't make them sooner, because it now seems really obvious. I think it initially seemed clichéd or trite. I probably had to make the nudes first and come around to it from that direction, if you know what I mean. Looking at myself in this way was a bit like a diary. They were like snapshots of how I might feel in any given moment versus what I could see.

Some people have told me that they don't really look at their vaginas. You have to get a mirror to really look at it properly, and it's quite uncomfortable to crouch over a mirror while making a painting. But the paintings have a different kind of power than other paintings of vaginas I've made because I can get as close to myself as I want. Sometimes I think they look like eyes or mouths. When you isolate body parts they almost become autonomous beings.

WF

Another idea I see embedded in your work is the nuance of consent. I'm thinking about unsolicited nudes and people who expose themselves on these sites, but also consent to being imaged, whether photographed or painted. You enter gendered territories to capture these knotty dynamics around what it means to look at something, or to make a picture of something, that isn't supposed to be seen.

CH

An idea that's inherent in all of my paintings is: When does looking become an act of trespass? For what period of time are you allowed to look at something, and how does looking at something for a long time change the experience? The first paintings I made at art school came from trespassing in building sites. There is voyeurism in some of my paintings, but ultimately I'm looking internally. I'm interested in empathizing rather than objectifying; I'm trying to enter and connect.

**Celia Hempton is on view at Southard Reid in London until October 24.
Will Fenstermaker is an art critic based in New York.**



Self Portrait, 7th October 2019, 2019, oil on gesso panel, 15.75 × 13.75 inches.
Photo by Benjamin Westoby.
Courtesy of the artist and Southard Reid, London.