



DENA YAGO BORING DOWN

BY JOSEPHINE GRAF

In a recent show in New York, Dena Yago presented five large sheets of felt hanging heavy from wall-mounted steel racks, like Robert Morris's skewered on so many Donald Judds. Made of pressed wool tinted with natural dyes to a bruised purple-grey, each felt slab was riven with incisions that, in a slashing of minimalism's masculine legacy, traced depictions of "women at work." Women sift grain and spin wool in two tableaux lifted from Courbet paintings, while three others offer more contemporary *mise-en-scènes*: a desk-bound assistant, an "influencer" on her laptop at a cafe, and (in a spin on Courbet's sifters) women perusing thrift store bins for vintage steals. Translated into cuts, the images are hard to parse.

This abstraction echoes a relay between artisanal and affective labor embedded in Yago's choice of images and production techniques: craft demands visibility, but affective or immaterial labor is, of course, harder to "see." And a concern with the (seemingly paradoxical) emergence of a contemporary craft fetish within an economy increasingly premised on immaterial labor threads throughout Yago's practice. It surfaced in a 2014 exhibition at Eli Ping Frances Perkins, where rugs hand woven in Bulgaria and dyed naturally in New York were slung on rusty metal harnesses, yoking outsourced handwork to conceptual ends. In a series of sculptures from 2015, industrial-seeming chains were adorned with such objects as old medicine bottles, a corroding garden tool, and miniature plastic cakes and buns—conflating relics of labor past with contemporary twee.

If Yago displays an interest in the imaging of labor, her practice—which encompasses

not only sculpture, but also photography and poetry—more broadly engages the labor of the contemporary image and, by extension, artist. What does the "work" of the artist look like, and how does the "look" of the image *work*? There's a contemporary understanding that ours is no longer a society of the spectacle, with its highs and lows, and whose numbness one could presumably wake from. We're stuck, instead, in an image ecology of the average, in the mathematical sense: the dimensionless byproduct of mergers between periphery and center, alternative and mainstream. In light of this leveled topography, what, exactly, is the critical labor of the aesthetic, the poetic? These are not new questions, yet it seems newly pressing to consider the fallout from this categorical breakdown: is it potentially liberating, or the cause of inescapable ennui (an ennui of the average), or both?

Yago works at the seam of these distinctions. She muddies them. But she does make clear the futility of piercing this ennui by recourse to any outside position—a position represented in her work by the crafty, pastoral, vintage, or rustic. In an odd turn, these nostalgic aesthetics have become the bastion of a desire for an authentic outside: the reactionary wish-fulfillment of the yearning for an avant-garde, the frontier fed back as *look*. (And this not only in restaurants and advertisements but also, more insidiously, in conservative US politics). Yago's work doesn't so much call out as resuscitate this aesthetic position, with an eye towards replaying the loss of its alterity.

A 2016 exhibition at Sandy Brown in Berlin, for example, included four photographs of Pioneertown, a town built outside of Los An-



geles in 1946 but modeled on a frontier settlement from 1870. The images show a wagon wheel, windmill, saddle, and bell tower, each rusting and weathered and cropped tight. Pseudo-documentary (like the town itself), they image the staging of authenticity at the heart of the content they depict. And yet they do this without rupturing its façade, that is to say without irony (or even metaphor or metonymy, for that matter). Another recent work consisted of floppy rubber words piled on the floor, like deflated concrete poetry—a mode of spatialized writing typical of her practice. These were jumbled and difficult to read but in fact spelled out the work's title, *Remove the Outside and the Inside Remains*—a reminder that even when Yago appears to have led us to the final frontier of comfortable meaning, she's often rehearsing the disappearance of that far-away edge. It's in this sense that Yago eases into the average, harmonizing with its drone while deftly tweaking the notes.

Critique so often relies on irony—on distance—that the sincerity at the heart of Yago's work can puzzle. That her work is neither sardonic nor appropriated sets it apart, both from a “post-internet” style contemporaneous with her early work and from historical precedents like the Pictures Generation, who otherwise similarly dip into mainstream syntaxes and pull from collective image environments. And an attention to environments—social, urban, natural—and the flow of images, trends, and affects within them, is central to Yago's practice. But in contrast to these other artistic approaches, there is no big reveal here; she never unveils supposed authenticity as fake. So while there can be a sort of “thinness” to her works (often literally drooping, harnessed or hanging), Yago never fully deconstructs her subject (or subjectivity). She just carefully stalks its operation.

There is therefore something trickier and more poetic at play here, and a slightly different legacy comes to mind, one encompassing artists such as Josephine Pryde, Josef Strau

and John Miller, as well as younger practitioners like Calla Henkel & Max Pitegoff, Rose Marcus, Buck Ellison, Anna-Sophie Berger, and Oto Gillen. A common inquiry—into what differentiates artistic labor or subjectivity when individuality is standard and particularity general—seems to unite these artists. And like them, Yago is less interested in mocking the bombast of corporate optics than in finding the oblique within the average, and resistance within the pedestrian or pleasingly poetic—and vice versa. This is maybe a contemporary gloss on “immanent critique,” what the theorist David Harvey once explained as a “boring from within.”¹ Harvey uses “boring” to mean “drilling” or “hollowing,” but its more colloquial usage seems pretty applicable: Yago digs, but she also bores, and with crystalline purpose. Her work holds a mirror to contemporary appeals to individuality, and what we see reflected back is a glazed stare, a low hum—an average ennui, delivered precisely and with poetic potential intact.

It seems somehow fitting, then, that the “women working” in the two Courbet paintings whose imagery appears in Yago's recent felt works are dozing off on the job. It's easily missed in *The Grain Sifters*, but the figure in the background rests with suspicious languor against a sack of grain, and with eyelids half lowered. Less subtly, the slumped protagonist of *The Sleeping Spinner* is totally out, a tuft of raw wool about to drop from her relaxed hands. These moments of ennui are historically specific, more bodily and born from a different kind of overload. For Yago to choose them suggests the obvious point that what today seems delightfully artisanal was once numbingly average; but by doing so she also reveals something about the labor of her own practice, and the resistance to be found in submitting to boredom, or yielding to gravity's pull—a pull that tugs always towards some center.

1. David Harvey, “Introduction,” in *Sociological Perspectives*, vol. 33, no. 1, 1990, p. 5.

About the Eremities Between the Many and the Few, 2014 (opposite page) Pioneertown, 2015 (Wheel), 2016 (p. 212) Remove the Inside and the Soul Remains, 2016 (p. 214) A Chicken Consists of the Outside and the Inside, 2016 (p. 215) All images Courtesy: the artist

