

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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Reena Spaulings at Matthew Marks

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For those unfamiliar, Reena Spaulings is a fictional character in the eponymous 2004 novel by artist collective Bernadette Corporation, of which John Kelsey is a co-founding member. Reena Spaulings is also an artist collective and an art gallery in New York City (with an outpost in Los Angeles), both of which were co-founded by Kelsey and Emily Sundblad. In addition to these, Kelsey is also a widely published essayist and artist in his own right. Whether under the guise of a collective or exhibiting solo, Kelsey is represented in eight cities by no less than seven galleries, many of which represent artists also on the Reena Spaulings gallery roster. This shrewdly architected branding of interconnectivity is continually reinforced at museum and gallery openings, editorial meetings, art fairs, dinners, after parties, studio visits, lectures, and conferences. As such, Kelsey has arguably positioned himself as a figure with more channels of agency than any other person in the art world.

In his artistic collaboration with Reena Spaulings—which includes a rotating array of artists—Kelsey frequently foregrounds these mechanisms. Take, for example, their recent portraits of art advisors that were shown at Art Basel (several of which sold to a collector through an advisor represented in one of them),¹

or the older *Enigma* paintings: wine-stained tablecloths snagged from opening night dinners that Reena Spaulings evidently attended (and you did not). At times, it seems this imbrication of social, economic, and cultural capital is the work, and the objects themselves function merely as byproducts of a clout machine operating at full steam. Importantly, though, these and by extension all Reena Spaulings works point out that the terms “artist” and “artwork” are fictions and that their production, display, and exchange are nothing more than suspensions of disbelief. It would be easy to malign Reena Spaulings as mere purveyors of insider trading had their activities never transcended such navel gazing, as their latest exhibition at Matthew Marks’ Los Angeles outpost demonstrates.

Reena Spaulings shows at a number of established galleries, but none sells primary market artworks for upwards of eight figures in the same manner as Matthew Marks. Indeed, *The Male Gates* is the first foray into the mega-gallery realm for Reena Spaulings, which begs the question: will a practice heretofore nurtured by more intimate and interdependent networks thoroughly deflate in such a blue chip context?

Straddling two galleries and comprised of nine canvases, five painted airport security gates, and a single marble sculpture, *The Male Gates* is by and large a show of and about painting. Within it there are repeated allusions not only to the current approaches

toward the medium but historical ones as well. Half of the paintings are executed in an intentionally sloppy pointillist style, at once an allusion to Georges Seurat and a depersonalization of gesture. As their fictional name suggests, the undermining of individual authorship is a Reena Spaulings staple, wherein anyone or indeed *anything* could have been responsible for the work’s execution. An example of such painterly abdication is the gigantic and brushy *Seascape* (2014), which was painted with the assistance of an iRobot Roomba—a knowingly feeble conceit that tests the limits of Reena’s smugness. The work’s size here is rather functional in terms of its relationship to the freestanding *Gate* works (all 2018), installed in a zigzagging fashion in the center of the main gallery. Glossed quasi-seductively in house paint, they act as literal and metaphorical portals through which the viewer experiences *Seascape* and its attendant paintings. More compelling, however, are the *Gate*’s biopolitical associations. Security gates like these are typically installed at institutional thresholds such as airports and prisons where the body is either denied or granted entry, where dominant/submissive power dynamics are innately understood. Their appearance here reminds us that “the individual never ceases passing from one closed environment to another, each having its own laws.”²

The notions of power and control raised by these works are echoed in the smaller-scale paintings, each

bearing the title *Medusa* (all 2018) and taking the compositional form of pointillistic female visages or loosely brushed Gorgonian coral. Medusa, as we all know, is a female monster, a gorgon, with snakes in place of hair, whose gaze turned men to stone. Reena’s repeated allusion to a figure of table-turning male domination is particularly trenchant, considering the exhibition’s proximity to the Hollywood film industry, where the #MeToo movement began. Against this backdrop, Reena’s Medusas transform themselves into vessels of feminine fortitude.

On the whole, there is a sense that the show’s location informed certain subjects explored in the work, but not any of its lo-fi production value—a crafty balance of contextual transcendence and brand maintenance. The show’s title, *The Male Gates* at once nods to the painterly notion of the male gaze and the male-dominated gatekeeping inherent to all aspects of life, including the art world. With this, the exhibition succeeds most when it calls into question our conceptions of artistic authorship, institutional control, and gender-based power. It’s interesting to note that this particular Reena Spaulings exhibition was not only executed by Kelsey and Sundblad, but also included Jutta Koether, tipping the gender balance of the collective. Still, ask yourself: Would Reena Spaulings (or indeed John Kelsey himself) have reached their current level of visibility were she not a fe/male fiction, but a female-only entity?

1. Melanie Gerlis, “Collectors Take A Long Hard Look at Themselves,” *The Art Newspaper*, June 15, 2016, 4.

2. Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* 59 (Winter 1992), 3.