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Delia Brown at Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles By Malik Gaines

In the film *Secret Ceremony*, motherless Mia Farrow and daughterless Liz Taylor attempt to ensnare each other in an eerie surrogate relationship based on their hysterical inability to differentiate fact from fiction. Farrow's anti-ingenu moves a well-preserved Taylor into her posh apartment, wherein unfolds a drama so bizarrely untethered as to be almost sinister. This film remains a favorite of mine despite its psychological inscrutability, its genre-twisting excesses, and its complete moral vacuity. It also reminds me of another case of misplaced identification: Delia Brown's new paintings and drawings at Margo Leavin Gallery (November 10 - December 22, 2001).

Brown has covered Margo Leavin's walls with dazzling images of an assumed mother-daughter relationship. Brown and Leavin appear in every work, in which we see them arguing in the kitchen, digging in the garden, lying around in bed, and in various other domestic settings. The venue these figures inhabit is presumably Leavin's home, replete with perfume bottles on the toilet and art on the walls (a large Baldessari looms reconfigured behind one such family portrait).

Brown has chosen four different styles to document this relationship, all done with alluring skill, the most striking being a few large canvases painted in homage to '70s photorealism. In one of them, both women lounge by the pool, Brown in a bikini and Leavin in a charming caftan, cocktail in hand. A number of smaller, messier paintings, several watercolors and even some fragmented sketches on paper, all hung intermittently, fill out the nonlinear narrative. Finally, one of the gallery's rooms is cozily decorated with Leavin's furniture: a comfy beige lounge set and glass coffee table (presumably not Leavin's best pieces) sit comically among the images. A basket nearby contains magazines, with the gallerist's address blacked out on the labels.

In previous work, Brown has scrutinized elite classes by depicting their activities in contrived scenes, into which she then inserts herself. In this, Brown has been criticized for merely celebrating a culture of entitlement that is nowhere near as intriguing as she suggests. This problem presents itself most energetically in the present series. Recalling portraiture of the patronage era, Brown reifies Leavin as an ideal matriarch while clearly



implicating herself in the perpetuation of this ideal. But in her quixotic pursuit of class, Brown sacrifices her own classiness (it's in poor taste for the truly rich to discuss money), while also displaying a shocking irreverence to painting as a lofty pursuit. The works race up and down the art world's psycho-economic spine, at once aesthetic redemption and camp mockery.

So, is it celebration or critique? As someone who often longs to be both a strict Marxist and a dashing aristocrat, I believe this question is most productively left unanswered. As for *Secret Ceremony*, what I love about this movie is that its seductive surface, recognizable in the faces of its leads, conceals a deep though inescapably shallow mystery. This strange quality, intangible as it may be, is also what I love about Delia Brown's show.

Delia Brown, Untitled ('Sunbathing'), 2001, oil on canvas, 78 x 54 in. Courtesy Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles.