

Playing Innocent—Curatorial Statement

By Elizabeth Wolfson (PhD Candidate, American Studies)

Playing Innocent brings together several strands of artist Sarah Paulsen's two year long exploration, through her artwork, of the social construction and experience of whiteness, and the historical roots of Paulsen's own white racial identity. References to such macro forces as capitalism, American settler colonialism, mass culture, and consumerism make appearances in works such as ***The Myth of Self-Reliance and Individualism* (10)** and ***Capitalism, Patriotism* (11)**, as well as in pieces that deal more specifically with whiteness and femininity, such as ***Cultural Losses* (15)** and ***Alice's Search for Homelands* (16)**. In these latter two works, as well as others in this grouping, Paulsen explores the process through which white American women construct their sense of self through images and socially received ideas about women of color located both inside and outside of the United States. Though the domestic spaces these women inhabit conform to middle class standards of taste and comfort, the women in them appear depressed and alone, rendered rigid and immobile by the expectations imposed on them by society. Their physical isolation, facial expressions and bodily postures all contrast strongly with the physical closeness and vibrant colors worn by the women that occupy the space of their imaginations. Paulsen's use of reflective surfaces such as mirrors and windows (which double as barriers) emphasizes that the scenes of community are the projected fantasies of the white female protagonists depicted in these works, a product of their social and spiritual longing.

For Paulsen, these experiences are not abstractions or sociological observations, but rather reflections on her own lived experience. In an unpublished essay discussing these works, Paulsen describes how growing up, she was taught that her curly hair was "a professional business woman no-no, it was too unruly, sexy, and people didn't take it seriously." In addition, her family's inability to keep up with the consumer-driven values of her white, suburban peers gave her a sense of alienation, driving her to seek out alternative communities and sources of personal value, which she eventually located in Hispanic and Latino culture as a result of an early childhood experience with the 1945 animated Disney film, *Three Caballeros* (a film that, as Paulsen points out, traffics in racist stereotypes). This early attraction proved a powerful force throughout her childhood, college years, and early adulthood, prompting her to pursue Spanish language study, opportunities to live and travel in Spanish-speaking countries, and to volunteer with undocumented workers in Missouri.

Realizing in retrospect the social and psychological origins of her desire to assimilate to a culture that was not her own, the works on canvas included in *Playing Innocent* document Paulsen's visual exploration of the material and cultural roots of her family's whiteness, which so powerfully shaped her experiences growing up. The imagery in **Maternal- what was Czech and Irish? (2)**, **Grandfather's Cornucopia (4)**, and **Paternal- what was Danish and German (7)**, are all taken from her memories and understandings of her family's Northern European immigrant past. These paintings trace the parallel processes by which her ancestors economically and socially established themselves in their new homeland, while also conforming to the norms and practices of American culture. Visual references to needlework and images of community formed through shared labor represent an effort to locate a "useable past" that might provide the self-affirmation and community she yearned for as a child. In exploring her family's past, Paulsen is careful not to craft an idealized historical narrative. Mental illness and addiction, economic failure and precarity, and personal tragedy are equally embedded in her family's experience, even if, as per the "immigrant's refrain" depicted in the painting by that title (3), they go undiscussed or acknowledged. In a similar vein, **Man Conquers Nature—Extinction Kingdom (5)** comments on the social and environmental consequences in the 21st century of many of the agricultural and industrial practices that prompted the migration and enabled the economic advancement of her own family, and millions of immigrants like them, at the turn of the 20th century.

The series of mini-paintings titled **Family Traditions, Rituals, and Culture (8 & 17)** extends Paulsen's observations regarding her personal and family history outward to her community beyond her biological family. In an effort to better understand her family's past, Paulsen spent time looking at her family photos, "to see what I knew in my family." Meant to evoke the aesthetic of Polaroid instant film, the constraints of these paintings' small size prevents Paulsen from reproducing the photograph's images wholesale, forcing her instead to pick and choose elements from the images and render some of their details abstract. In doing so, some of the specificity of their context—whether that of Paulsen's family or another—is lost, muddying and eroding the boundary between Paulsen's memories and experiences, and those of the viewer. It is Paulsen's skillful navigation of this fine line between specificity and generality, didacticism and abstraction, that makes this intellectually complex and visually compelling body of work so powerful.