

JENNIE OTTINGER

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[JOHANSSON PROJECTS](#)by *matt sussman*

OAKLAND Jennie Ottinger's exhibition "Ibid" reminded me of a Gahan Wilson cartoon in which a painter, busy representing two bare trees as if they were crawling with monstrous bugs and snakes, explains with a devilish grin to an onlooking child, "I paint what I see." Using a wide variety of found photographs as source material for her sketchy watercolors on paper and oils on board or canvas, Ottinger paints crude figures that appear to have been captured at the precise instant between their materialization and disappearance.

Frequently, the figures' occupations are what register first; often, that's all the viewer has to go on. Ottinger has a thing for uniforms—the antiseptic white ones of doctors and nurses; the pale pink ones of ballet dancers. There are jockeys in silks, men in gray flannel suits and schoolchildren dressed like penguins. Even Superman's primary-colored suit pops up, albeit forlornly, on a hanger. The nearly 100 rough likenesses filled Johansson Projects' airy space like some massive portrait collection that had just been brought out from the vaults to be deaccessioned. The framed pieces were hung salon style and spilled over onto the floor, where works were stacked in a pile that visitors were welcome to look through, which only added to the impression of an urgent sale.

Ottinger is light on fuss and has a gift for economic gestures: she knows how to work a smudge into something horrifically mouthlike, and that a single streak of blue can be enough to intimate the dimensions of a room. Willem de Kooning's and Francis Bacon's turns at exploding the human form flash by as precedents, as do Richard Prince's palimpsestlike nurse paintings, but Ottinger's work is far more intimate in scale and touch, and far less brutal. Certainly, though, it is no less unsettling.

Take one largish (16-by-24-inch) painting of schoolboys piling into a pool. The children farthest out splash their way past the water toward the empty white space of the rest of the sheet. There is an almost comic existential horror to this image—it evokes the moment when Wile E. Coyote stops running in midair and looks down. As if to underscore this association, the schoolboy painting was hung next to a smaller watercolor of a drained lap pool.

There might be viewers who find Ottinger's fixation on ordinary moments lost in time somehow quaint. Rather, her focus on uniformed professionals and her repeated return to certain scenes (some images are painted multiple times) suggest a morbid view of the quotidian. Her paintings seem to caution that in life as in death, we risk becoming metonymically condensed into the personal effects—the pictures and documents—that offer only limited proof of our existence.

Photo: Jennie Ottinger: Public Pool, 2009, oil on canvas, 16 by 24 inches; at Johansson Projects.

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