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Lisa Brice
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STEPHEN FRIEDMAN GALLERY

Lisa Brice, *Untitled*,
2019, oil on tracing
paper, 16 1/2 × 11 3/4".



Among my favorite paintings by Marlene Dumas is *The Painter*, 1994, which shows a serious-faced little girl—the artist's daughter, then five or six—whose hands are completely covered in paint: blue for the right hand, red for the left. I'd like to think that girl could have grown up to be Lisa Brice—like Dumas, a South African by birth, though she now lives in London. True, the age isn't right (Brice was born in 1968, not the late 1980s), but Brice clearly doesn't mind getting her hand dirty with blue, the dominant (and sometimes only) color in most of the twenty works on view in her recent exhibition (all *Untitled*, 2019). And she has a flair for red, too, though what Brice shares most of all with the young protagonist of Dumas's canvas may be a definite association of the act of painting with a state of nudity—an unashamed manifestation of self.

Dumas's influence seems quite direct in ten drawings executed in dark-blue oil paint on tracing paper, each of which depicts a single female figure or sometimes a pair, often from the waist up, mostly clothed but occasionally not. These are portraits, but of

unknown persons: Brice's loose painterly handling deflects attention from identifying details toward the immediate perception of stance and attitude. Whoever these women are, they are self-possessed, resolute. Many of them hold paintbrushes or palettes. One is setting to work on a blank canvas, though she looks away toward the viewer rather than at the surface that her brush is about to the mark. In another drawing, a woman seems to be walking in the background, but I decided—without much evidence from the work itself—that this might well be a figure from a painting by the palette-and-brush-wielding foreground figure. Likewise, the bandannaed woman sitting right up against her mirror image in another of the drawings could just as easily be contemplating her painted portrait as her reflection. One thing about the generalized rendering offered by this kind of rough, sketchy technique is that it blurs the distinction between levels of reality: People, their reflections, and their images all coexist on terms of equality. Brice's women are not only painters; they are equally—and somehow this made me laugh out loud in the gallery—smokers. That's a pretty seditious thing to be in public these days, it seems, so holding your paintbrush in one hand and a cigarette in the other, as does the subject of one drawing, must be a sure sign of intransigence.

The larger works on view here were three paintings on canvas, one on linen, and one on paper mounted on aluminum, all tall and narrow like doorways through which the body can slip in and out (think of Willem de Kooning's paintings on hollow-core doors, such as *Woman, Sag Harbor*, 1964), as well as a couple of freestanding screens, each with five panels. The mostly unclothed women who people them inhabit a world more distinctly (and virtuosically) rendered than the nebulous space around the subjects of Brice's drawings. And the women themselves, while abstracted from identity—described in blue paint, even their race is ambiguous—at least have a time frame: Haircuts and other stylistic cues seem to send us back in time about a century, to the 1920s or '30s. Theirs is a world closed in on itself, and for women only. Although these pictures may bring to mind, say, Brassai's photographs in Paris brothels, Brice specifies in an interview, "None of my compositions are brothel scenes in my mind, but as they are left open to interpretation, it is increasingly interesting to me that a group of scantily clad feminine figures are frequently presumed to be prostitutes." In any case, Brice can surely say, as Dumas once did, "I situate art not in reality but in relation to desire." Behind the red door that cracks open in one of the paintings lies a world of indulgence in the body, in paint—and in tobacco.

—Barry Schwabsky