



PORT, March 2011

Art Forum, Critics' Picks March 23, 2011

Portland

“Between My Head and My Hand There is Always the Face of Death.”

The seven painters in this exhibition pair the erotic beauty of the human form with enclosed or atmospheric spaces that are charged and transformed by the presence of the body—whether depicted wholly or as a collection of fragments. For instance, in *Such certainty is beautiful, but uncertainty is more beautiful still*, 2009, Kaye Donachie depicts a young female nude standing calmly in a pastel interior that looks like both a drawing studio and an opium den. Layers of thin brushwork evoke the caressing of skin and of canvas. With similar liquidity, Norbert Schwontkowski presents the body as an assemblage of soft parts sprouting seedlike within languorous dun-colored landscapes in *Schirm*, 2006. The painting—akin to many of the works in the exhibition—evokes forms of private and clandestine reverie. In *Untitled (Finger)*, 2002, Merlin James takes the premise of the exhibition the furthest, upending the female pelvis until it *becomes* landscape, in a clear reference to, but also departure from, Courbet's *L'Origine du monde*. James reimagines the figure's pubic tuft not as a cave but as a mountaintop or ridge that is being fondled (or perhaps plugged, like the proverbial dike) by a delicate hand that descends, theatrically, from the top of the picture plane.

Other works in the show are even more graphic, crowding their surfaces with hazy, luminescent environments, or placing the figure atop synthetically vibrant fields. An example of the latter, Amy Bessone exhibits a suite of four paintings, and they look good enough to eat. As the title of the show (a quote by Francis Picabia) implies, our awareness of the body, and our ability to represent it, exist somewhere outside of us, in a space that can only be imagined.

-Stephanie Snyder