

Narumi Nekpenekpen: Angels with Dirty Faces

30 Orchard St, Gallery 1 ▪ Oct 16 - Nov 18, 2021



Narumi Nekpenekpen's practice is fueled by emotion and intuition. With love and loss distilled into serpentine, bottom-loaded forms, defaced, anthropomorphic vehicular beings, and creatures festooned with verbs, the artist offers us every bit of herself. Though innately diaristic, the project is not necessarily cathartic. Each porcelain gesture represents a facet of her private world; tumult and peace operate in tandem, producing implacable situations. These creations oscillate between despair and bliss, longing and reconciliation. The work is raw, like an open wound. There's tenderness in softened eyes, buttressed by subjugation borne of matrices, chains and a signature selective, murky glaze. Her objects become tangible places for sensations to exist outside of the body.

The materiality of slab porcelain clay mirrors the process of layered fabric. In the beginning, Nekpenekpen handbuilds confident figures that sit for months, then are attacked by spontaneous gesture and markage. She relinquishes control of the slabs, engaging in calculated riffing while proposing a kind of vessel that doesn't "need" a thing to hold, but rather exists on the merit of its own substance and instilled sentiment. Foregoing the history of ceramics, she carves out her own process and operates in a zone that eschews a blueprint. She employs three major frameworks in order to communicate this vast landscape of emotions: coupled figures, locked in an embrace that suggests their merging subjectivities might eradicate a sense of self; solo figures engaged in parkour or else soliciting consolation with open arms and doe eyes; an elongated, sagging vehicle, begging the question: how does one contend with movement through urban space?

Nekpenekpen is selective about what she lets into her world. There's room for trip-hop master Tricky's album, "Angels with Dirty Faces," and the filmmaker Peter Greenaway, whose early career as a painter enabled his daydream-like filmic worlds. Each of these referents interlock power, love, loss, capaciousness, and are synthesized deftly to produce with the viewer a joint exploration of affectation and melodrama. Motifs such as constellations and scattered hearts are culled from the rich aesthetic environs of Los Angeles and Kashiwa, Japan. The artist's observations and translations of visual languages thus reinforce her own understanding of lived experience and attempts at communion. She wields titles like a wordsmith bent on defying presumptions. Gesture and implied action are bound up in language. The words are read as slogans or names, but they're not literal.

A childhood spent in Japan and Nekpenekpen's Nigerian roots are two key factors in a formal cosmos that is both wistful and onerous. In their current manifestation, "lifted" and embellished with stacks of commercial insulation foam, the works have graduated to become an external mirror. We get to be with her pieces, for now-to be undone, challenged, reinvented by them. With each act of creation, Nekpenekpen is showing up for herself, expressing vulnerabilities and allowing them to be woven, delicately, into the very nature of the work.