



TEEN PARANORMAL ROMANCE

GROUP EXHIBITION

Renaissance Society

5811 S. Ellis Avenue, 60637 Chicago, IL, US

March 9, 2014 - April 13, 2014

OUR LOVE IS A CAGE MATCH

BY STEPHANIE CRISTELLO

If you walk through the stacks of Barnes & Noble, you might find yourself in the aisles of young adult fiction, which despite its implied age bracket is one of the largest and most profitable sectors in the commercial publishing industry. If you are like Hamza Walker, you may have discovered this aisle through your preteen daughter. But you do not have to know a preteen girl in order to have insight as to what this fiction is about, or to understand its contents. You know the melodrama this genre promotes well – the harrowing and theatrical

stakes within its pages, the stories of the intense forbidden romances it tells, and the effusive affect of devotion it holds in high regard. The phenomenon presents itself with patented aggression and digestibly dark romanticism. The most popular subgenre in this aisle is called *Teen Paranormal Romance*.

If adult fiction is consumed, young adult fiction is devoured. The exhibition, *Teen Paranormal Romance*, curated by Walker at The Renaissance Society, uses the trademarked motifs in YA to point out a cipher of culture at large – its fascination with perpetuating the myth of sentimental intensity within the construction of the teen image. Upon entering the exhibition, the space is largely sanctioned off by a chain-link fence occupying the perimeter of the gallery. All other works in the exhibition are experienced in the periphery of this piece by Kathryn Andrews, entitled *Friends and Lovers* (2010). In the center of the gallery, clearly visible but beyond physical reach, two shallow towers of cinder blocks face each other. The opposing faces of the constructed walls carry the image of a cartooned bear, appearing innocuous enough that it may have been an important symbol in the 90s – cereal box, TV icon? – or it is at least sufficiently familiar that we credit it to have been so. The face-off between these two almost anonymous figures is humorous, without being a joke. In many ways, the structure of the piece parallels the relationship between YA and the exhibition itself – as a spectacle that admits its own artifice, a guarded and protective installation that also takes the position of offense. Like a smile without sentimental intent, the identical characters stare into one another's vacant gaze. The piece suggests the safe sanction of a playground at the same time it suggests a battle, “our love is a cage match.”^[1]



Roe Ethridge, *Louise with Red Bag*, 2011, C-print, 69 1/2 x 52 1/2 in.; Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery.

This sense of vacancy is followed throughout the exhibition. Hanging to the rear of *Friends and Lovers*, visible in the distance through the chain-link, is Roe Ethridge's *Louise with Red Bag* (2011). Undeniably the most iconic image in the show, the large-format chromogenic print is provocative and strange in ways the other works on view are not.

A girl of maybe fifteen or sixteen – pale, barely clothed, with perfectly parted Scandinavian hair – is centrally placed within the frame. Small details of a photo studio are apparent on the edges of the scene: a shadow along the white backdrop, the edge of a spotlight, the carefully exposed wheel of a cart. Though the image depicts the

shallow elements of a studio, and the more superficial and plastic textures of the girl and her surroundings, the printed material of her bathing suit depicts an airplane flying onto the landing strip of a tropical destination, inserting a landscape directly into the center of the piece (the center of the girl). The implications go without saying.



Ed Atkins, *Even Pricks*, 2013, 16:10 HD video with 5.1 surround sound, 7 min 30 seconds; Courtesy of the artist and Isabella Bortolozzi Gallery, Berlin.

In a private screening room down the hall, Ed Atkins' *Even Pricks* (2013) plays through a disjointed and manic narrative, scored to incomplete and halted sound bytes from recognizable advertisements, erratically interjecting language that adopts the form of announcing the main event, as they do during the end of previews at the movies, though the text itself is sampled and nonsensical. Repeated motifs are intersticed throughout: a bed bursting into flames, the avatar of a laughing chimpanzee, a phallic thumb animated to penetrate belly buttons and disproportionately large facial features, grotesquely inflating and deflating. Walker notes, "[The premise of the exhibition] points to adolescence or childhood in somewhat of a surreal fashion – but do we really believe in the unconscious as a source of creativity today? I don't think this is the case; our approach is much more in *affect*, rather than intent." Just as Ethridge's piece approaches the symbol of the teenage girl, the exhibition approaches symbols in general from the other direction. We are given the othered qualities upfront, never directly surreal, but slowly and affectively alien from the outside in.

Walker continues, "The question being raised is about whether surrealism fled popular culture, and left artists instead to create works that could point toward a derelict or empty place." While the works on view give way to a sense of vacancy, they are far from empty. They are emphatic, definite, and coldly expressive. And although *Teenage* is certainly a term that can be applied more broadly, the *Romance* in the title suggests a gender for the

market. There is a sense of reserve in the tone of this exhibition that the popular images of teenage girls are not privileged to have. Ultimately, *Louise* exists as many representations of young girls do within the commercial sector, as a captive two-dimensional character our eyes fixate upon, while hers perpetually faces outward to a vacant audience.

—Stephanie Cristello
