

Kissing Through a Bullet Hole: Alexandra Noel Travis Diehl

You could easily miss them, the flies—or mistake them for *only* flies, sunning on the glass, as flies do. In fact, *Two fly fishing flies cannot consummate through a BB bullet hole* (2019) is a tiny sculpture by Alexandra Noel. The title says it all: two faux, iridescent insects are attached face-to-face through a small round puncture in the front window of Potts gallery in Los Angeles. The flies are doubled, like the two B's in BB—mirrored, but complementary, seemingly attempting to mate. Noel mostly makes paintings—small ones, although not fly-small. The sculpture is an outlier in Noel's work, but also embodies the compressed drama of the rest: inert but tense, jewellike and precise, an erratum that's the rule.

Noel's paintings, too, are built around exceptional details. In *Plug* (2018), a buoy of caution-orange sinks into the dirt-red whorls of an ear, surrounded by meticulous fields of beard, the Army green of a cap and collar. A partisan at the firing range? An aging vet? The plug's orange seems to radiate through the cartilage, like the glow a Light and Space artwork leaves on the wall. Likewise, *Stigmata (Splinter)* (2018), a variation on the theme of penetration, renders the near-perfect puffs and calluses of the bottom of a foot, the exquisite grain of a sliver of wood, and the delicate translucency of its point beneath the skin. The canvas is small (24 × 34 cm) and full, racked in close with an almost psychedelic fixation.

Noel's attention to detail plays out thematically, too—sometimes in a trickling, fluid obsession, as with her recurring images of animals, vehicles, and domestic interiors. An early pair of diptychs feature Rococo bedroom sets (including one belonging to Jeff Koons), and the cascade of framed photos on the bedside tables in *Pull yourself together (New York)* (2015) themselves echo the scale of Noel's canvases. As much as their subject seems arbitrary, the paintings set up the reoccurrence of home decor and domesticity in later pieces. Noel's motifs resonate in other media, too; for example the painting *Riding Dad* (2020), a geometric diagram of a father and son playing horsey, provides the cover image and scenario for a short story published as an artist's book, *Ricky Rides Rick* (2020).¹ The bookmark that comes with it is printed with a pack of flies.

Lately, it's tornadoes. A couple of them appeared in Noel's contribution to *Made in L.A. 2020: a version* (2020–21), calling to each other across the exhibition's two venues, the Huntington Library and the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. In one, *Giddy* (2020), the twister hangs in the jaundiced sky in almost erotic anticipation; the other, *Giddy Touchdown* (2020), depicts a consummation, complete with faint rainbow. Noel's most recent show at Antenna Space, Shanghai (2021), features a rush of storm paintings in increasingly abstract and surreal spaces, from the architectural skyscape braced by storm clouds in *Diaper Rash* (2021) to the barely possible scene in *Sprinkle* (2021), a funnel cloud descending from a clear, starry vault.

The forms and logic of painting also course through Noel's work from start to finish. There are ongoing self-reflexive jokes about her compressed canvases' gemlike appeal, such as a series of Neo-Geo compositions on beveled panels, like *Look at how big you are* (2018) (only 18 × 9 cm),

a magenta field edged in fuchsia and lilac. *Trinkets and Gems* (2016) depicts startlingly crisp necklaces and charms seeming to escape from an inlaid box. There are also several riffs on Peter Halley, ranging from more to less buried, from the plainly Halley-esque olive, orange, and sky-blue striped appliances in *Grease Trap* (2019) to the cell-like grate and tall chimney of *Coal Furnace* (2017). Noel even uses a version of his signature textured effect, for example in *Ice Cream Mountain Cake* (2021), which swaps Halley's municipal black bars for patches the color of tired gelato.

Still other pieces play with the catastrophic tropes of Christian iconography—the title of *Asking for a bug under a crucifix* (2020) turns a trio of outstretched black brush marks on a gauzy blue-gray field into a crucified punch line, while the carried-cross angle of the two mint-green beams in *Selling a home in winter* (2018) become a tale of subprime sacrifice, the realtor's sign lost somewhere between taken and knocked down. One could go on—a horse with a Futurist number of legs, an abstract canvas the size and color of a carton of Neapolitan ice cream—but suffice to say that even Noel's silliest pictures are grounded in a wry art historical fluency.

Above all, perhaps, Noel's many paintings share the underpinnings of visions, light forms in navy skies, and a distorted, mis-scaled anatomical symmetry. Some are more obvious than others. *Finding Armageddon at the Beach, 1998* (2019) evokes Agnes Pelton's theosophical symbology, including a rainbow horizon, a trippy corona, and a uterine, illuminated egg. From these mystic heights, Noel plunges back into the spunk. The punny *Demons Abreast* (2016) imagines the weird, flattened-out upper jaws of a dog, then a child, balanced as a pair of carnivorous chakras and gaping toward the round nipple at the canvas's bottom. In *Circumcision* (2020), the strong vertical symmetry follows a peeping glans in a bell of stretched peach skin, held apart by two looplike forceps into an ontic symbol on a midnight-blue ground—cosmic, mortal, the foreskin as womb.

Yes, paintings—in a way, it's not too much to think of them as little precious mysteries, still smudged with pigmented afterbirth. Indeed, *Baby Me* (2021) and *Y, a self-portrait* (2019) both render the same photo of a minutes-old infant (presumably the artist) with different framings; here, painting allows a sort of out-of-body pilgrimage to the artist's own beginning. It's a wild, splayed composition, the infant's purpled folds rubbed with medical gore, umbilical stub clamped closed. It is the endpoint of copulation, in a sense—certainly the end of gestation—and the beginning of consciousness and meaning making. The finished canvas is fresh, full, an articulated being unto itself, yet unresolved, taut with yearning, like two artificial flies kissing through a bullet hole.

1 Alexandra Noel, *Ricky Rides Rick* (Paris: Holoholo, 2020).

105 Alexandra Noel, *Two fly fishing flies cannot consummate through a BB bullet hole*, 2019.

Courtesy: the artist and Bodega, New York

106 Alexandra Noel, *Funny Looking* installation view at Antenna Space, Shanghai, 2021.

Courtesy: the artist; Antenna Space, Shanghai; Bodega, New York. Photo: Ling Weizheng

108 Alexandra Noel, *Plug*, 2018. Courtesy: the artist and Bodega, New York

109 Alexandra Noel, *Sprinkle*, 2021. Courtesy: the artist; Antenna Space, Shanghai; Bodega, New York. Photo: Paul Salvesson

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