Artist Michael Stamm on 'A Few Good Men'

At first glance, the show's title, "A Few Good Men," efficiently encapsulates the appeal of Patty Horing's most recent body of work. On display are straightforward, well-painted portraits of men, with and without children, dignified by the clarity of Horing's touch and activated by intelligent passages of visual play and thoughtful symbolism. At the same time, Horing's sensitivity to expression and posture allow these men to project the empathy and care we now expect from regulated but appropriately complex expressions of contemporary masculinity. Strength and stoicism softened, though not entirely, by a feminine interiority men no longer need to disavow.

In truth, it's not so straightforward. However diverse and inclusive we render the world of post-postmodern man, we cannot ignore its history. The power of representation, here visual, is an ancient technology, and the belief that humans can be "depicted" is historically inextricable from the mystified production of patriarchal norms. That is to say, representation has been hypnotizing the viewer to analogize humanity and "a few good men" for a very long time. Only within the last fifty years has feminism's attempt to deconstruct this tradition become mainstream. While it foregrounds criticism of the male gaze and the violence of objectifying the female/femme body, feminist theory also insists that the hegemonic production of masculinity is intrinsically harmful to many men and more or less coercive towards all men. A painting like 'White Boys Waving' perfectly signals this idea that being a man, among men, is as much to be the product of a violent process of assimilation and repression as it is to be an agent of it. One easily imagines that the uniform gloss of these young men's goofy-smiles and unassuming postures hides an array of contradictory feelings: predatory or anti-social impulses, precarious self-images, secreted feminine desires.

If "A Few Good Men'' reminds us that the "goodness" of men is an unstable property with a questionable relationship to power, Horing's work further suggests that being a decent man, often but not always in the form of being a good father, is not the successful completion of a grand project, but an ongoing and complicated practice of deconstructing stereotypes and refusing the patriarchal tradition of "power over." This practice, she suggests, is found more often in the everyday moments and organic, unmonumental poses she highlights in her paintings, whose straightforwardness and humility more properly reads as an intelligent and confident repudiation of the idea that a good man is a heroic figure deserving a gilded portrait and that the struggle to grapple with complexity of manhood is, however difficult and degrading, a heroic act. Certainly, we have not ever hesitated to ask mothers both to be good and to be good at being good. That so many of the fathers in Horing's paintings avert their gaze toward their children is crucial to what I perceive to be the overall thesis of the show: that being a good man, for most, is not

a self-aggrandizing identity one claims and projects outward but a skeptical redirection of attention and power away from oneself in service of caring for another.

Some men, casually described by Horing as "good dudes," still want our attention. Looking outward to meet the viewer's gaze, they perform what, in portraiture, figuration and cultural politics more generally, can be understood as the act of "taking up space." This term is usually shorthand for a member of a historically oppressed group choosing to insert themselves into the regime of the visible. In a moment when women, queer people, people of color and other conventionally marginalized subjects have demanded the world of contemporary art pay attention, choosing to paint cisgender men, many of whom are white, raises some questions. How do men fashion themselves anew to participate equitably in the world of the seen? Does it entail shrinking a little, in this case subjecting themselves to a "female gaze" which might, in turn, ultimately decide how they are presented? Or does it require absenting themselves altogether? Is submitting one's self to being depicted an act of repentance? Of art-historical reparation?

Thankfully, Horing's paintings are instructive. She resourcefully mines the traditions of figurative painting to visualize a world in which men existing autonomously no longer means having the most power. The everyday spaces, often domestic, that these men respectfully inhabit reimagines the relationship between figure and background. Here, what is outside of the male subject determines rather than illustrates the impress of his subjectivity. No longer do we need the grand scale of monuments and mythology to prescribe ideas about power. Small visual cues will do. One man smiles phlegmatically while his cat stomps on him in search of a snack. Another man defangs the visual contrast of his dark masculine silhouette to the pastel room in which he sits with a peaceful expression. A third man's tattoos, literally marks of self-identification, compete with the pattern on the wallpaper. Or does it harmonize in a newly non-hierarchical formalism? Either way, the capacity to theorize and analogize using only elemental visual properties, here as sameness and difference, is the mark of a thoughtful, controlled painter.

While these paintings visualize new negotiations of power within portraiture, it would be a mistake to say these men themselves are powerless or inauthentic subjects. Certainly, it is powerful to be depicted as exactly who you consent to be. And if someone with less power can responsibly instrumentalize your archetype, maybe you have a moral responsibility to let them. Horing does exactly this, carefully posing the male subject to remind us that, yes, within every man, as in every person, is someone who is capable of being peaceful, domestic, caring, self-reflective, personable. And that to be this way is an act of dignity rather than of concession.

With this in mind, I am particularly interested in the painting "future man," which depicts an otherwise genderless baby swaddled ostensibly in his mother's arms. I hope a proliferation of feminist cultural expressions such as these paintings structure the new world he will occupy. True to dude form, I will ultimately center

my own feelings and personal experience by saying that I also hope that his journey to manhood is not one of being hazed by hegemonic male culture (that is, most culture) . It is less that I want him to escape its various indignities and overall banality, but rather because I believe an equitable future depends on it. We need all children to transcend the morés of a world in which they are encouraged, at all junctures, to be dudes rather than men: ignorant, corny, bossy, hostile, wasteful and violent. Ayn Rand states that “great men can’t be ruled... The great is the rare, the difficult, the exceptional.” But Horing’s work suggests the opposite: that a truly good man is an ordinary man, capable of radical care, of gratefully sharing the spotlight.