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CRUSH Fanzine

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by William J. Simmons

Flashlight / Narrative Collaborative



Petah Coyne and Kathy Grove, *The Real Guerrillas: The Early Years – AKA Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun*, 2015-16. Archival Pigment Print, 20.25 x 16.1 inches (51.4 x 41 cm) © Petah Coyne and Kathy Grove, Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York

A standout in Galerie Lelong's current group show is the collaborative project by Petah Coyne and Kathy Grove to photograph each of the original Guerrilla Girls – the masked art world activists who, to this day, have never lost their anonymity. Every Guerrilla Girl takes on the name of a dead female artist as an alias and never removes her gorilla mask while in public. Coyne and Grove hope to pair a portrait of each member of the collective as their alias, but also without a mask, but only posthumously. These photographs are then paired with wonderfully witty texts by Ann Wilson Lloyd, who writes in the respective styles one would expect from women of vastly different time periods and nationalities – Chansonetta Stanley Emmons, Lyubov Popova, Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun, and Remedios Varo. This springs from a desire that has driven so many of the world's obsessive adventures – to make contact with the unknown, the supernatural, the inexplicable. Having been a fan of the Guerrilla Girls for years, I still wonder from time to time, as Fox Mulder does, if it's all a ruse – but, considering the fact that these people, whoever they are, remain the most visible activist voice in the art world, I want to believe.

Moreover, I want to know so that I can thank these women. I often wonder what it would be like to have made such a tangible and progressive impact that has rippled beyond art history into culture at large, but have no one know it was me. Maybe I'm a selfish person; I guess that's why I'm a historian and not an activist.

Coyne and Grove approach their subjects with seriousness and humor, core values that have driven the Guerrilla Girls since their inception. Their revision of Vigée Le Brun's Self-Portrait of 1790 is primarily hilarious – a welcome characteristic in the overwhelmingly dour landscape of Chelsea these days. The master painter is looks out beckoningly toward the audience as she paints not a society picture, but rather a furry rascal with a crooked grin. There is something wonderful about the lighthearted homage – the Guerrilla Girl Vigée Le Brun is painted by her namesake that is, of course, impossible, but feels nevertheless like a completely believable family reunion.