



Andy Campbell, "Kandis Williams", *Artforum*, February 2016.

ARTFORUM

Kandis Williams NIGHT GALLERY

In his signal 1982 study of the Parisian asylum Salpêtrière, where in the late nineteenth century a women's clinic headed by neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot treated female patients thought to be suffering from hysteria, philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman argues that the photographic tableaux authorized by Charcot, in which hysterics enacted their particular ailments, were not just of interest as disturbing curios but in fact helped lay the groundwork for the then nascent field of psychoanalysis.



Kandis Williams,
Esophagus Pin Up
(detail), 2016,
vinyl adhesive on
mirrored Plexiglas,
48 x 86 1/2"

For her recent solo exhibition "Soft Colony" (its title a reference to a conversation between the artist and a white female writer who referred to herself in passing as a "soft colonizer," and to Williams's subsequent investigations into the ways in which women participate in their own subjugation), Kandis Williams showed a series of photomontages that directly compare Charcot's images of feminine "hysterics" with counterparts from the more recent past: Fiona Apple in languid repose in the music video for "Criminal"; Kate Bush leaping into the air like a bat on the back cover of a 1980 LP; a vampiric Sadie Frost hissing in *Bram Stoker's Dracula*—the list goes on. The comparison feels somewhat pat: Not much has changed in the intervening century, Williams seems to suggest—the popular imagination still has an appetite for depictions of women who diverge from, and thus define the limits of, normative femininity. Yet the contemporary subjects Williams reproduces are performers whose agency over their depictions, ostensibly,

is in marked opposition to that of the incarcerated subjects of Salpêtrière. The argument could be made, however, that Charcot's patients were similarly complicit in their predicament and in the subsequent circulation of their likenesses. But even here, history is a marker of difference rather than of easy connection. The Salpêtrière hysterics were coerced to pose for Charcot or face exile to the general asylum, where conditions were significantly harsher, while for performers such as Apple, who are deemed "unstable" by the court of popular opinion (as hostilely misogynist as that is), the conditions under which they acquiesce—or don't—to the use of their likenesses are far more ambiguous. The latter arena is a gilded cage, the former a literal prison.

Of course, one could also contend that Williams's work served not to equate the nineteenth- and late-twentieth-century representations of women on the verge but to highlight their dissonance and their contextual contingency. In Williams's comparisons, differences of historical specificity are elided in favor of superficial morphological similarities: This critical exercise is intended to generate a pertinent commentary on white womanhood (if one that oftentimes seems scattershot in its implication). The paper-thin basis on which Apple, Bush, and Frost are proposed as adjacent to Charcot's hysterics in demonstrating ecstatic and agonistic tropes of the feminine is structurally similar to the non-sensical heterogenous assortment of conditions "collaged" together to formulate hysteria as a diagnosis during the nineteenth century. Perhaps this was Williams's intention.

With a few notable exceptions, almost all the works in "Soft Colony" were made using photographs printed on nearly translucent vinyl adhesive that was then applied to mirrored sheets; the quarter-inch gap between glassy surface and mirror has the effect of doubling each image, making the resulting composition even stranger. The edges and corners of the roughly seven-foot-wide mirrored Plexiglas of *Esophagus Pin Up* (all works 2016) are marked by use and transport, and pieces of its backing have flaked off to reveal the mirror for what it truly is: amended clear acrylic. In this way, Williams unfixes even the most well-known images she deploys. In the three Plexiglas works, the artist oriented her composition around central anatomical units: an esophagus, a cervix, and, in the case of *Pins and Needles*, an eyeball. In this last work, the only one to employ dark-brown Plexiglas lit from its lower edge by an internal fluorescent tube, the vinyl stickers have been placed on the surface's backside, resulting in a collage that hides its making just as readily as it hides its imagery (as parts of the work are literally too dark to see). Passages of this large photomontage are brutally incisive. The central image of a blood-drenched Sissy Spacek in *Carrie* next to the posed body and closed eyes of a "melancholic cataleptic" of Salpêtrière, each framed by a blown-up image of an eye with strained, bloodred optic nerves, is a commentary on looking and to-be-looked-at-ness worth further consideration.

—Andy Campbell