

## Celina Teague. I Think Therefore

### I #


6 Aug — 5 Sep 2015 at Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery in London, United Kingdom



Celina Teague, The tower of fable, 2015, oil and acrylic on canvas, 170 x 150 cm

Our lives now take two forms: one in the physical world and one online. We are virtually connected to our next-door neighbours and entwined with the lives of strangers halfway across the world, just as they are with ours. We feel the pull of each video that goes viral, the utter shock and morbid curiosity at stories that change our perceptions of the world, the polarizing effect that these images, strewn across social media, have on us. Do we dare to react, inserting our authentic opinions into the carefully curated Internet identities we have constructed? Or, with its congregations of tweeters and swarms of image-posters, has social media suppressed our appetite for contemplation and overwhelmed us into complacency? In I Think Therefore I # (4th of August – 5th of September 2015), British artist Celina Teague transforms the gallery, surrounding us with shards of social media, ciphers of our online interactions, fragmented and suspended in the air like the shimmering relics of the present in an anti-gravity chamber – yellow smiley faces, glittering duck lips, and then a cactus, a giraffe, a pair of legs on the beach, a tropical holiday – floating, detached, shorn of context, into a liminal space where we are confronted and challenged by the display of our own consciousness. She invites us to take a closer look at our role as meticulous architects


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and unabashed voyeurs of the cult of social media.

Teague's inspiration for *I Think Therefore I #* began with the sudden, violent spate of news stories that carried 2015 into existence: the massacre of twelve people in the offices of Parisian satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* and the immolation of Jordanian pilot Moaz al-Kasasbeh by Isis militants, along with the now "standard" daily news events of bombs lobbed across fences, cities razed, civilians, journalists and children slaughtered like sacrificial lambs. Teague's work is the product of the realisation that each of these horrific, appalling episodes are exactly that: someone's reality detached and rearranged, slickly packaged into digestible bytes for our consumption, masquerading as unassuming tweets or posts on social media sites, critical political events hidden among the multitudes of selfies, belfies, and dronies. These stories aren't new; rather, the ways that they are disseminated, circulated, and accessed at unprecedented levels are. "They feel different", Teague says, "because they are literally coming into bed with us at night and they wake us up in the morning... we are allowed to indulge 24/7 in this tortuous voyeurism."

And we all indulge in it. We exploit social media to our advantage, whatever the objective may be. Says Teague, "Everyone wants to tell a story – you me, journalists, Isis – we all want to upload our story to an instant audience." We're not content with being part of a collective narrative – we want to stand out, to be seen as relevant within the sheer volume of winking emojis and breezy beach holidays, protest marches and *Je Suis Charlie* signs, so we filter and hashtag, curate our lives and Instagram feeds, present the best and most radical versions of ourselves and our stories. We construct a binary, oscillating between two extremes: scenes of graphic, horrific violence and the trivialities and banalities of our daily lives, each disappearing with a click of a button or flick of a finger.

It is not these extremes, however, that Teague is interested in exploring with these paintings; rather, it is the "in-between" space that she endeavours to reveal, the gap that opens up when images are confronted intentionally and thoughtfully. She seeks that space which is "more complete, one where we are more conscious about the information we share and bring into our lives... one that allows us to properly digest the information before us" – and painting, for Teague, is the perfect medium, a slow, gradual process that allows her to locate it. In *The Last Sharpenings I and II*, the artist analyses the images that initiated the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre and ensuing worldwide protests against the cartoons, polarizing friends, cultures, and nations, "destabilizing the world in a way the graphic photos we see don't." She depicts the cartoons as drawings on pencil shavings, foregrounded alongside bent pencils and scrubbed rubbers, squeezed-out tubes of paint and coffee rings on blank lined paper; these are the objects of an artist, the cartoons very clearly figments of an imagination. Teague began to personalize the images: "The more I painted the more I began to imagine the lives of the people who made them. I looked for clues as to who these men were – the glasses they wore, what they might have eaten, and whether they smoked." Released from the unyielding grip of the media, unfurling in this in-between space, images are distilled, stripped of their power to incite violence, exposed – and this happens every time we take a step back to unpack what we see. As she explains, "We think we see everything – but we are fed information and we should pay attention to who is feeding us."

In each of her vibrant, expressive paintings, Teague explores this in-between space with us, subverting, recontextualizing, and repossessing the power of social media. These paintings, as she explains, are meant to be "the starting point for discussion. We are all story tellers and the one thing we do have is the ability to choose the stories we tell and how we tell them." As French philosopher René Descartes proposed, "I think therefore I am"; the act of thinking proves that we exist. With these paintings, Teague posits an equally pertinent, and

perhaps more urgent, statement: "I think, therefore I #". Our online presence precedes us – unless, as Teague proposes, we explore that in-between space of awareness. If we think consciously, we will hashtag consciously – and in that space, we can then "debate and discuss and, maybe, come together." After all, as Teague explains, "we are all storytellers."

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## Captions

1. Celina Teague, I Think Therefore I Hashtag, 2015, oil and acrylic on canvas, 170 x 150 cm
2. Celina Teague, Last sharpenings 1, 2015, oil and acrylic on canvas, 120 x 150 cm
3. Celina Teague, Last Sharpenings 2, 2015, oil and acrylic on canvas, 120 x 150 cm
4. Celina Teague, I Am No One, 2015, oil and acrylic on canvas, 190 x 170 cm
5. Celina Teague, I Speaki Emoji, 2015, oil and acrylic on canvas, 41 x 41 cm
6. Celina Teague, What Your Language Says About You, 2015, oil and acrylic on canvas, 170 x 150 cm