

Charlie Stein: Virtually Yours – Irresistible Digital Gloop

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Dripping, posing, pleading, vacantly staring into and through the viewer, the figures in Charlie Stein's paintings are at once grotesque and hyperreal reflections of our fragile selves, splintered and strewn across the airwaves of social media, and yet all neatly packaged up. Is it metaphor? Is it social commentary? Maybe it's both, or neither, but either way, it's compelling.



This is one of those rare shows where the concept and the execution meld seamlessly, resulting in a mature, measured and well-mannered commentary on our times. A big ask for painting in the digital age, but Stein pulls it off without even seemingly drawing a breath. At first sight, the long-armed black latex gloves, seductive and glossy with their hands grasping, caressing and squeezing inchoate forms intermingled with the figures apparently head to toe in latex give the impression this is going to be about fetish or feminism or something equally well-raked-over by the last decade. But there's something else going on, something infinitely more beguiling.





To be surrounded by these paintings is to have that semi-uncomfortable but ultimately adrenaline-inducing sensation of sinking in the sickly-sweet deliciousness of fantasy. Stein is engaged in a full-scale interrogation of the 'Instagram face', that lurid, omnipresent construct that pulls together the toxic threads of plastic surgery and social norms. that face is

everywhere but we're probably so inured to it that we think that's just has people look. The world of Instagram – at any rate the conceptual scheme upon which its world is predicated – is rendered in blissful detail.





At one extreme, Stein's world is plush and gregarious, replete with bristling pink and deepest black, a world of crystalline roses and pristine eye makeup. But at the other extreme, it is a world of dead eyes, watery and cold as the North Sea, watching the world at a glacial pace, numbed by chemicals, content or conceit. The pleading in the eyes of the girls, from the drowning siren in *Lifeguard* (2023) to the seduction of *Virtually Yours (Anticlimactic Showdown)* (2023), is haunting and sits uneasily alongside the rush of bubble-gum colour that bleeds out from every wall.



Imagine that Richard Philips, Lindsay Lohan and Bret Easton Ellis had a baby – that is the measure of Kristin Hjellegjerde’s epic and delicious final exhibition at its current London Bridge space. It’s not to be missed like Beyonce is not to be missed, and if you do miss it, lament it as you lament never getting to see Michael Jackson at the O2.

Charlie Stein: Virtually Yours, 7th October – 25th November 2023, Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London Bridge