

DRISCOLL | BABCOCK

# HYPERALLERGIC

Portraits that Attempt to Untangle Power

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Margaret Bowland, "Power" (2014) (all photos by Stan Narten, JSP Photography, courtesy of the artist and Driscoll Babcock gallery)

One intuitively immediately, on walking into the Driscoll Babcock gallery and seeing the large, mythic paintings of Margaret Bowland's Power exhibition, that Bowland is not interested in power in terms of optics, math, or computing. The painter is wrestling with the difficult, unwieldy affairs of human social interaction, both abstract and concrete: economic power, police power, physical power, that ability to influence that is inescapable. Bowland is brave to take this on, because power is a bitch to untangle from other elemental aspects of our existence. How to see it as distinct from need, desire, or fate? In fact, how can we see it at all? Similar to other facets of our being that exist in the ether of potential, like energy or intuition, power itself is difficult to picture; we tend to notice it after it has been enacted, when it is indexically signified. When the rundown property has been purchased and turned into expensive condominiums, only then do we understand what power has left in its wake.

This theme is a good match for Bowland's large-scale portraiture, which veers from realistic figuration toward fantasy. The artist found a clever way to make the workings of monetary power visible: instead of dealing with its effects, she pictorially represents the talismanic objects that are, in reality, charged with the capacity to relay power and thus exert influence on us — that is, cash currency. In her paintings' stylized schemes shaped by a kind of magical realism, the currency that symbolizes power is ubiquitous; it is the glamor adorning several of her portrait subjects. But she seems to know that power also morphs. It is rendered as mutable symbols, lines of force, a flowing pigment that stains wherever it lands. Here, power is simultaneously itself and something else: both/and, instead of either/or.

The preface to the tale lies in her installation piece, "The Watchers" (2015), in which Bowland uses US, Indian, and Chinese currency to create an incongruous briar patch. Some currency is shredded and left on the floor, but most of it is folded into flower forms through which barbed wire is threaded to make garlands that whirl around the gallery's pillars and up to the ceiling. Attached to this unnatural garden are a few synthetic crows in flight that evince an eerie, sinister feel. The money used for this work is real: according to Bowland, about \$2,000. This voiding of financial value feels like both a victory over money's hold on our imaginative faculties and a waste of its potential. It is an absurd gesture that aptly matches the absurdity of money's hold on consciousness. Looking at "The Watchers," I laugh and shake my head at the same time.



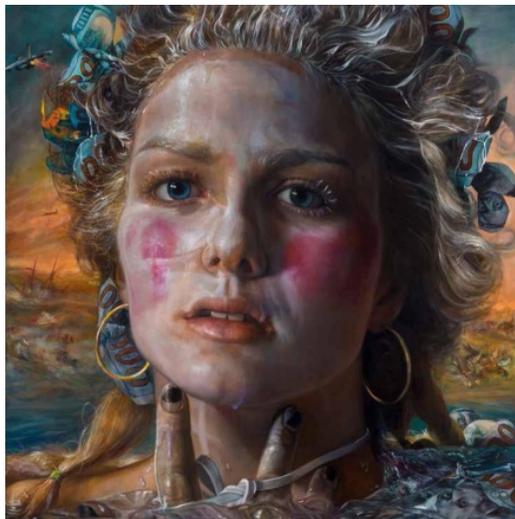
Margaret Bowland, "Tangled up in Blue" (2015), diptych

From that supernatural garden, power moves out to become tchotchkes of decorative adornment that nevertheless denote status. In the painting "15 in 2015" (2015), US \$100 bills are made into hair adornments wrapped up in the blonde locks of an ingénue who, being shipwrecked, is slowly losing these trinkets, along with all her other possessions, to the sea. In "Power" (2014), the money is on fire, raining down around the central figure like a biblical plague. In "One Child" (2015), flowered currency with barbed stems floats around the figure of a young girl as part of the enchantment that makes her hair waft to the sky. In the diptych "Tangled Up in Blue" (2015), Bowland extends the reach of her conceit by using errant stylistic lines of paint — "power marks" or "energy marks," as she calls them. In this work, a father and son occupy different frames of reality (in a Park Avenue apartment, according to the press release). Yet despite inhabiting different physical and generational spaces, they are marked by meandering blue paint, and the boy is mesmerized by it. This image suggests that power can escape its symbolic trappings to mutate and metastasize uncontrollably.



Margaret Bowland, 'Power,' installation view

Bowland has reportedly said that whenever she makes a purchase she feels she is being watched — as if her money carries a spell of surveillance. And she does indeed make the omnipresence of financial power clearly felt throughout this exhibit. Yet though she turns the energy of that surveillance back upon the object, though she destroys it and transforms it into symbols of meaning for the narrative she has devised, money ultimately seems immune to this alchemy. There are other powers Bowland contends with, too: youth, sexuality, femininity, masculinity, even ethnicity. They all ensorcell us, holding us still while a conjurer picks our pockets and makes off with our stern convictions and principles. Some may still imagine that if we only make the regimes of influence visible and palpable, that might inoculate us to their effects. But apprehensible or not, the abstracted power of money seems here to be very much the poison fruit of a poison garden.



Margaret Bowland, "15 in 2015" (2015)