Laura Ojeda Bär
República

By SONIA BECCE

There was a time, not so long ago, when Laura devoted herself to painting self-portraits: extreme close-ups, vast expanses of her skin in different shades of pink, which served as a roadmap for interrogating her own painting. She may have thought—and rightly so—that sometimes things are best begun simply at the beginning, and the material she had most readily at hand was, of course, herself. In these paintings, which began in 2006 and continued for more than twenty years, nudity is striking in its frankness and withstands the indiscretion and perplexity of both her own gaze and that of others. A hand languishing behind the head, eyes looking into the camera, breasts resting on the worktable, an arm, fragments of the body twisting indolently and merging into a tangled mass to form resolute paintings.

The programmatic exercise she embarked upon during those years, a kind of enthusiastic and concentrated practice, gave her the confidence to step outside herself and venture beyond her own boundaries, toward portraits of others. The paintings exhibited in this show are also close-ups, also physical fragments, shards of the chance companions of her bus journeys, which Laura now, with a certain degree of modesty, captures with her phone camera and subsequently magnifies in her own way. It is not difficult to imagine her drawing close to these images and, alone in her studio, attempting to unravel the person she has before her on the canvas.

The process, a kind of back-and-forth movement of the gaze, consists of approaching the subject until it falls out of focus and becomes an abstract surface, only to immediately step back and recognize what others see and what she paints: the nape of a neck, a hand in foreshortening, the legs of a young woman, a curly-haired head, all adorned with tattoos, piercings, wireless earbuds, and prominent rings.

And there is another back-and-forth movement that the artist emphasizes through the title of the exhibition, República. The word derives from the Latin res publica—the public thing—and within it coexist the idea of what concerns everyone and the notion of what concerns each individual, two inseparable dimensions of these new paintings. The body, which we experience as the most intimate and private of territories, becomes here a public surface, exposed to scrutiny. Part and whole at once, each fragment acquires a presence of its own, a kind of visual sovereignty, at once familiar and stranger than ever.

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