

ARTFORUM

REVIEW NEW YORK

HANNAH WHITAKER

Marinaro

By Gabriel H. Sanchez



Hannah Whitaker, Red Vase, 2024, UV print on painted birch panel, 50 x 37".

A silhouetted figure named Ursula was the central protagonist of Hannah Whitaker's "Stranger," the artist's third solo exhibition at Marinaro. This fictional character appeared across six UV prints mounted to painted birch, two mixed-media collages on birch, and a twenty-two-minute film. While the wood-panel pieces seemed digitally made, they were anything but. The artist created the images with analog photography and executed the resulting works in her studio, where elaborate arrangements of laser-cut mirrors, projections, selfie lights, and printed backdrops coalesced into Ursula's reality. The works are a hypnotic amalgamation of light and form, buzzing with a haze of technological anxiety and dystopian undertones.

Ursula is depicted as slender and androgynous, an ad-ready embodiment of contemporary womanhood typically

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designed and consumed by men. She exists as a convention of normative beauty, but is rendered as a negative space in a kaleidoscopic realm of gelid color and Op art patterns. Because she presents as a kind of absence, she can simultaneously contain and negate people's fantasies of her. In *Red Vase* (all works2024), Ursula slouches, perhaps out of boredom or disillusionment, before a rippling pool of water upon which the titular vessel impossibly sits. The liquid's surface is bathed with a sensuous array of ambient blushes, peaches, and periwinkles. This warmth is undercut, however, by her distorted reflection in the water—a doubling of Ursula's cool blank nothingness.

In *Wet*, Whitaker's dark protagonist struck a pose vaguely reminiscent of Botticelli's *Venus*. She wears a white ski mask that calls attention to her nonexistent black hole of a face. Neon lights in the shapes of rings, bars, and parallelograms levitate around her like an electric flock of birds. But a closer look reveals the items comprising this setup: We can see the faint outlines of power cords, studio C-stands, and chairs strewn throughout the shadows, artifacts of reality utilized in the making of exquisite artifice.

In the collages *Ellipses* and *Heavenly Body*, the escalating conflict between digital perfection and handmade imperfection reaches a tipping point. Both works feature hundreds of cutout photo pieces stitched together among swatches of paint, mirroring the geometric motifs of Whitaker's studio photography. Constellations of irregularities—including clumsy

brushstrokes and bits of ripped paper—reveal yet another concealed layer of humanity behind a mechanistic facade.

Ursula comes to life in the film (and the show's namesake work) *Stranger*, installed in a screening room at the rear of the gallery. She is described in clinical detail by a deadpan voice—backgrounded by a haunting, sci-fi-inspired soundtrack by musician and writer Dan Fox—that calls to mind that of Amazon's Alexa. "Let us look at her. She has limbs, fingers, hairs," the narrator passively recites as our silhouetted subject fiddles with a curated array of Deco-inspired glassware and light fixtures. "One of her best skills is holding things." But this narcotized fantasy abruptly dissolves when a ring light in Ursula's hand comes too close to her face, illuminating the model behind the shadow: Karen Eydie Meléndez, Whitaker's longtime collaborator and a former fashion model. The narrator acknowledges this misstep. "Her features are too bright," she says as Ursula quickly recedes back into darkness.

"Who's this?" asks our pseudo-Alexa with only the smallest trace of concern. "Ursula is no longer alone." Her doppelgänger is introduced in the form of a laser-cut mirror. This triggers a profound existential crisis in Whitaker's character—she is rattled to her very core. Recalling the many versions of ourselves that exist across social media today, Ursula's newfound companion becomes an uncanny duplicate who is barely distinguishable from the original. Like an infinity mirror caving in on itself, Ursula's truth has become a literal void between reality and fiction.