

Exhibitions

Melissa Gordon: Liquid Gestures

Towner Eastbourne, 16 October to 30 January

Intestines, rope, empty Anadin Extra packets, wellies, rips, tears, chain-link fencing, an old shirt sleeve, Amber Rudd and Elsa from Disney's *Frozen*. They're all here, squeezed onto a series of large, heavily detailed canvases, each given names that read like very odd lists: *Female Readymade (Rope, paint paddle, intestine cut-out, lungs, digital erasure, scan painting with Anadin)*, for example. This new series of Melissa Gordon's paintings is organised around a gallery complexly populated with the skeletal posts of an installation of unfinished, bare steel stud walls. A back wall of the gallery is then taken up with a complete, full-scale frottage of the stone facade of Gordon's studio in Brussels, while across another is an enormous canvas silkscreen, draped to reveal great whorls of forest-green paint.

Gordon's work has been described as 'investigative' and 'forensic' in its level of complexly assembled detail, and at times 'Liquid Gestures' does begin to feel like a crime scene. Your job is to connect the dots, number the spent shells and work out what the hell happened.

Those long, deadpan titles sometimes offer the best clues. Is that a print of Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, 1917, for example, nestled to the side of a large canvas otherwise populated with black string, a feathered hat and a huge capsule-shaped mark of green paint that has somehow had its insides erased? This collection of images forms the work *Female Readymade (Elsa 1917/2017, 100 miles of string, Hat of Rose Sélavy, large erasure, Duchamp's models of the Fountain (1933), Perseverance makes me sad, sweater, evidence in Duchamp's studio 1917)*. That dense title helps bring the painting into focus - the feathered hat is a nod to Duchamp's female alter ego, the string to his 'mile of string'. But this isn't just about Duchamp - there is a second, companion image next to *Fountain*, placed teasingly and confusingly upside down, of a small grainy photograph of Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, bent double and draped in cloth in what looks like a cramped apartment bedroom.

Recent research has uncovered Von Freytag-Loringhoven's role in creating *Fountain* to the extent that she is now considered, if not a co-creator of the work, then by many the actual originator. That history has hitherto unquestioningly attributed *Fountain* to Duchamp, and attached so much significance to it, is the crime on which Gordon is hanging her picture. Von Freytag-Loringhoven, a woman who has been erased from history; Duchamp, a man who has romped away with all the credit. Other works included in the show investigate the similarly relatively unrecognised contributions of two other female artists, Marlow Moss and Janet Sobel, both of whom were almost entirely overshadowed by their male contemporaries Piet Mondrian and Jackson Pollock.

Women are not just ignored and underrepresented, though, they are also targeted. Another of the 'Female Readymade' paintings on show includes small images of Beatrix Ruf and Amber Rudd next to a dark, prominent roundel. Ruf and Rudd both had to resign from



Melissa Gordon, 'Liquid Gestures', installation view

high-profile public positions, and Gordon's inclusion of the term 'Fall Girls' in this work's title perhaps suggests that their gender contributed to them having to serve as figureheads - innocent or not - for their institutions' respective scandals.

So art history has its gaping holes and injustices, and society loves to publicly punish women. But Gordon's work doesn't simply reveal these wrongs, it also looks more systemically at how they continually happen. Some of this is perhaps relatively clear: the assemblage of domestic-scale stud walls, the swathes of green paint that appear to have been made with a kitchen mop, the inclusion of work by Gordon's children - these seem like references to the claustrophobic household roles historically (and still) foisted on women.

Another painting, which references research on liquid crystals to question how biology influences the way in which we see and read imagery, looks for a more subtle explanation. We tend to think that eyes have the ability to view images in their entirety but, in reality, they flit across images to take a selection of limited snapshots which our brains assemble into something resembling a whole. So, we each have our own huge blind spots, and meaning flows like a liquid into the gaps in between. And when meaning becomes liquid, of course, it has no fixed form. Perhaps too many of us are unaware of the way in which meaning spills somewhat uncontrollably, while on a grander scale, what we take as hard knowledge is in fact surprisingly malleable. If we better analysed and assembled the snapshots on which knowledge is based - in the way that Gordon's huge assemblages do - we might do a better job in patiently constructing a fairer reality, specifically where gender inequality is concerned, rather than merely gesturing towards one.

John Parton is a London-based commissioning editor and writer.