

Triple Threat
curated by Hilton Als

Somaya Critchlow

21 November 2024 – 8 February 2025

Maximillian William is delighted to present *Triple Threat*, an exhibition of drawings by British artist Somaya Critchlow curated by Hilton Als.

Comprising a selection of over 40 new works on paper (2023-2024), *Triple Threat* is the artist's first exhibition to focus solely on drawing. Working in graphite pencil, ink with a brush, or traditional Japanese glass dip pen, images are composed and repeated with the delicate immediacy of memoranda, yet retain their own unique sense of place and narrative. The result is a wide-ranging series of drawings that serve as both ends in themselves and living dialogues.

Critchlow's subjects often reside in worlds where contextual signs are subverted and undermined. Some figures emerge from an almost entropic barrenness, as in *Tiny figure, replete* or *Surprised*, while others are adorned with uncanny surroundings and familiar symbols. In *Study for The Bride*, a bride holds up her veil, not quite lying nor kneeling, but arched backwards; there's a tenderness in her face undermined by doubt. While in *Study of a Bride*, the veil billows around a triumphant and defiant figure as she removes a stocking. Critchlow's use of the bridal veil, whose pre-Christian roots were intended to protect the wearer from malevolent spirits, emphasises how hope is displaced onto the body's embellishment; and, consequently, how the myth of nudity as a space devoid of meaning can never be realised.

Evident throughout *Triple Threat* is the artist's preoccupation with the sketches and prints of Francesco Goya (*The Sketchbooks*; *The Caprices*; *The Disasters of War*). Critchlow has returned to these series again and again over the past year, at times making daily copies. Alongside two studies of *Wicked Woman* and *Woman with a little black boy*, Goya's motifs creep into Critchlow's own imaginings, such as in *Owls, Bats and Cats* and *In Darkness II*; while a general sense of Goya's influence can be seen in a propensity towards the cruelty and folly that often underlies beauty and power, as well as in the hallucinatory synthesis of psychic and mythic worlds.

When discussing the drawings in *Triple Threat*, Critchlow has referred to Hogarth as exemplifying the blurred line between portraiture and caricature. *If I loved you less* shows two figures in an almost Hogarthian melodrama; however, it's as though the moral of its story has been lost to time. While *Bonnet*, perhaps a play on Hogarth's self-portrait *The Painter and his Pug*, seems to contemplate notions of gravity and self-reflection. These themes are often intermingled with a haunting mood of intimacy, as found in figures inspired by the private photography of architect Carlo Mollino, or with written narratives such as *The Canterbury Tales*: "The more it burns the more is its desire / To burn up everything that burnt can be".

As a collaboration between Critchlow and Als, *Triple Threat* underscores a harmony between these two voices. Als's own portraiture-in-writing in *The Women* is a prime example of employing the personal, historical and poetic in order to complicate reductive approaches to Black femininity. Similarly, Critchlow's subjects refuse to shy away from sensuality as a mode-of-life within which snippets of identity and meaning can be made.

Als reflects on these themes in a new piece of writing for the exhibition, which can be found in an illustrated accompanying publication.

Somaya Critchlow (b. 1993, London, UK) lives and works in London. She obtained her BA in Painting at the University of Brighton before joining The Royal Drawing School, London, where she earned a Postgraduate Diploma in 2017. In April 2023, *Somaya Critchlow: Paintings and Drawings*, the artist's first institutional show in North America, opened at The FLAG Art Foundation in New York, USA. In autumn of 2023, Critchlow was featured in the group show "*Pictures Girls Make*": *Portraits*, curated by Alison M. Gingeras at Blum & Poe, LA. Previous solo exhibitions include *Afternoon's Darkness* at Maximillian William, London (2022); *Blow-Up*, Galerie Gregor Staiger, Zürich (2021), *Underneath a Bebop Moon* at Maximillian William, London (2020) and *Sincere for Synonym* at Fortnight Institute, New York (2019). Recent group exhibitions include *The Soul As Sphere*, curated by Critchlow at The Lightbox Gallery and Museum, Woking (2022);

Women Painting Women, the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas (2022); *The Soul as Sphere*, Maximillian William, London (2022); *Drawing Attention: Emerging British Artists*, British Museum, London (2022); *Sweet Lust*, White Cube, Paris (2022); *Get Lifted!*, curated by Hilton Als, Karma, New York (2021) and *Mixing it Up: Painting Today*, Hayward Gallery, London (2021). Critchlow's work is featured in public collections including the Baltimore Museum of Art; LACMA, Los Angeles; Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; Columbus Museum of Art; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; RISD Museum, Providence; ICA Miami; Pallant House Gallery, Chichester; The Box, Plymouth; Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, Norwich; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; and the Arts Council Collection, London.

Hilton Als is an award-winning journalist, critic and curator. He has been a staff writer at the *New Yorker* since 1994. Prior to the *New Yorker*, Als was a staff writer for the *Village Voice* and an editor-at-large at *Vibe*. He has received numerous awards for his work, including the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism (2017), Yale's Windham-Campbell Literature Prize (2016), the George Jean Nathan Award for Dramatic Criticism (2002-03), and a Guggenheim Fellowship (2000). His first book, *The Women*, was published in 1996. His next book, *White Girls*, was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award and the winner of the Lambda Literary Award in 2014. *My Pinup*, an essay on Prince and desire, was published in November 2022. In 2024 he edited *God Made My Face: A Collective Portrait of James Baldwin* for the centenary of Baldwin's birth. In 2017, he curated the critically lauded exhibition *Alice Neel, Uptown*, which traveled from David Zwirner, New York, to Victoria Miro, London and Venice. In 2019, Als presented *God Made My Face: A Collective Portrait of James Baldwin* at David Zwirner, New York, followed by *Frank Moore* at David Zwirner, New York (2021) and *Toni Morrison's Black Book*, at David Zwirner, New York (2022). He curated a series of three successive exhibitions for the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, of the work of Celia Paul (2018), Lynette Yiadom-Boakye (2019), and Njideka Akunyili Crosby (2022). In 2022, he curated *Joan Didion: What She Means* at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, which traveled to the Perez Art Museum in Miami. In 2024 he curated *Jared Buckhiester: No heaven, no how* at David Kordansky, Los Angeles and *At Home: Alice Neel in the Queer World* on view at David Zwirner, Los Angeles. He is currently a teaching professor at the University of California, Berkeley, and has also taught at Columbia University's School of the Arts, Princeton University, Wesleyan University, and the Yale School of Drama.