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Laura Jasek: *Have a Heart*

9/22/18 – 10/27/18

Grant Wahlquist Gallery is thrilled to present “Have a Heart,” the first solo exhibition by Laura Jasek. The show will run from September 22 through October 27, 2018. The gallery will host a talk with the artist on Saturday, September 22 at 4 pm, with an opening reception following from 5 – 7 pm.

Jasek’s work analyzes how specific works of art and culture embody social norms. She appropriates, quotes, crops, and re-makes her subjects, juxtaposing them with other images documenting their historical reception and contemporary status in order to expose how her subjects reveal or attempt to conceal their complicity in systems of control and exploitation. Her genealogical approach to the life (and occasional death) of artworks combines deep research, meticulous technique, and moments of humor and tenderness, resulting in exquisite drawings and prints whose critical aims are matched by their aesthetic charge.

Jasek has recently been particularly focused on the life and work of Frederick MacMonnies, the leading American Beaux-Arts sculptor at the turn of the twentieth century. Her interest in MacMonnies stems from an initial encounter with a reproduction of his work *Civic Virtue Triumphant Over Unrighteousness*, a 17-foot tall marble sculpture depicting civic virtue as a serene male nude standing above two thrashing semi-nude sirens representing vice and corruption. Unveiled in front of New York City Hall in 1922—two years after women gained the right to vote—*Civic Virtue*’s apparent misogyny proved immediately controversial, and Fiorello La Guardia had it moved to Queens Borough Hall in 1941. In what would prove to be an ironic turn, then-Congressman Anthony Weiner held the first press conference of his campaign for mayor of New York City in 2011 in front of *Civic Virtue*, calling for its removal and recommending it be sold on Craigslist. *Civic Virtue* was subsequently moved to Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn in 2012.

The drawings and prints in “Have a Heart” include and combine renderings of *Civic Virtue* with images of this history and associated didactic materials: portraits of MacMonnies; labels, plaques, and excerpts from texts about his life; photographs of Weiner’s press conference and counter-protests; MacMonnies in his atelier or teaching at the Académie Vitti (one of the first art schools in Europe to accept female students); and the former site of MacMonnies’ childhood home. “Have a Heart” also includes transfer prints that are part of Jasek’s “MacMonnies SongBook,” which pairs portraits of MacMonnies with the first page of sheet music scores for popular songs of the mid-nineteenth century such as “Smile,” made popular by Nat King Cole, and “The End of the World,” by Skeeter Davis. In these works, Jasek connects the romantic abjection of popular song—which is gendered female more often than not—with the misogyny of *Civic Virtue*. This juxtaposition indicates that it is not sufficient to point to a particular artwork or artist and describe it as “problematic.” Jasek suggests that we instead

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address the broader ideological structures that condition the production, display, and support for artifacts that in many ways are symptoms of deeper structural inequities.

Popular song returns in “Have a Heart” in a number of works that include quotes from Bonnie Raitt’s 1989 album “Nick of Time,” which is riddled with lyrics that could be understood as perpetuating the idea of women as dependent. While these works address misogyny, they also meditate on what it means for an artist or artwork to succeed; “Nick of Time” partly substitutes the accomplished blues of Raitt’s early work for the bland style known as “adult contemporary” and was her most successful album when released by far. Likewise, MacMonnies produced monumental sculptures for the foremost architects and events of his time, taught and mentored other notable artists, and lived for a time at Giverny alongside Claude Monet, yet his academic approach coincided with the birth of modernism and he is no longer a household name. Jasek asks that we consider what we do with artworks when they become at best unfashionable or at worst politically undesirable—that is, when they fail. Moreover, these works, as well as the “MacMonnies Songbook,” examine the gendering of failure. The historical exclusion of women from certain forms of activity—the professions, civic leadership, art—has resulted in stereotypes of what kind of failure matters to whom. By conjoining (male) images relating to artistic failure with lyrics relating to personal (female) failure, Jasek considers the ongoing legacy of these distinctions.

Of course, Jasek’s re-presentation of works like *Civic Virtue* perpetuates their visibility. She is fully aware that doing so in some way both complicates and is complicit with the authorship of the works at issue. Rather than pursue the emancipatory resignification advocated by some, which risks failing to confront lived experiences of domination and their historical roots, she instead intervenes in them from within. The works that result are ambivalent, contradictory, and above all open, asking that we engage with them and the world around us actively and with care.

Laura Jasek received an M.F.A. from the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, and a B.F.A. from the Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore. She lives in Paterson, New Jersey. Her work has been seen at Grant Wahlquist Gallery, 315 Gallery, Brooklyn, and Field Projects, New York.

The gallery is located at 30 City Center, Portland, Maine. Gallery hours are Wednesday through Saturday, 11 am to 6 pm, and by appointment. For more information, visit <http://grantwahlquist.com>, call 207.245.5732, or email info@grantwahlquist.com.