

The James Gallery

THE
GRADUATE
CENTER
CITY UNIVERSITY
OF NEW YORK

Artforum.com, May 19, 2017

ARTFORUM

“Soft Skills”

THE JAMES GALLERY OF THE CUNY GRADUATE CENTER The Graduate Center,
The City University of New York 365 Fifth Avenue April 14—June 3, 2017



Danielle Dean, *Pleasure to Burn*, 2012, HD video, color, sound, 7 minutes 42 seconds.

Martha Rosler's text and image work *Know Your Servant Series, #1: North American Waitress, Coffee Shop Variety*, 1976, includes a list of remarks concerning the ideal female server, suggesting that she should be forthcoming but in the background, kind but impersonal, and a hard worker who never breaks a sweat. This group exhibition plays up such contradictions of feminized work while emphasizing its performative aspects and the real labor it requires to produce pleasure for others. Here, pieces associated with second-wave feminism such as Rosler's are positioned alongside younger artists' output no doubt informed by that generation. The show thus opens up an art-historical gamut, but it also addresses the socioeconomic shifts within it: the increase of women in the labor market as well as the surge of service-sector, “pink-collar” jobs, not necessarily performed by women.

Productive juxtapositions highlight latencies in older artworks that yield contemporary resonances. Barbara Kruger's *Untitled (I am your reservoir of poses)*, 1982, lays out the title's parenthetical phrase in the artist's signature typeface beneath a large sun hat masking a woman's body. In the context of the exhibition, Kruger's image, once connoting the female body in art history, now provides a reading in which stereotypically

female qualities—empathy, subservience, flexibility—become models for a precarious workforce to follow.

Danielle Dean's *Pleasure to Burn*, 2012, expands upon Kruger. In an office-like setting, four women (two of color, two white) take turns repeating phrases to one another in emotional registers ranging from glee to despair—such as “wipe that smile on your face” and “laundry is the only thing that should be separated by color”—derived from ads targeting female consumers. In this racialized dramatization, the attitudes aren't just imposed by some external patriarchal order; they are also internalized and reproduced in subtle interactions and gritted smiles between women.

— *Sarah Lookofsky*

All rights reserved. artforum.com is a registered trademark of Artforum International Magazine, New York, NY