

INPRINT



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New York Reviews

Carey Young
PAULA COOPER GALLERY



Carey Young, *Palais de Justice*, 2017, HD video, color, sound, 17 minutes 58 seconds.

The quiet of Carey Young's video *Palais de Justice*, 2017—also the title piece of her recent exhibition at Paula Cooper Gallery—is, in fact, an unrelenting roar. Footsteps and murmuring voices bounce off the endless marble surfaces of the eponymous domed, nineteenth-century court building in Brussels, reminding us of its architecture's fearsome grandeur even in her closer shots. With Young, we spy on people, catching unguarded moments in corridors and peering into closed courtrooms to watch female judges at work. Shown as a large projection in a darkened room, the transfixing, dialogueless film is a kind of speculative fiction. Constructed from surreptitiously shot material in lieu of a plot, *Palais* is distilled to a simple, tantalizing premise: Women are in power. Men are small, nervous before them, awaiting their direction and judgment.

The artist's novel mock-up of a postpatriarchal legal system is revealed gradually. It opens with a sweeping view of the building's immense, tiered lobby, flanked with pillars. From above we see the tiny figure of a young man descending a central staircase. He wears sweats and a maroon Adidas track jacket. The first woman we see is, in contrast, a professional. Dressed in all black, with wedge heels and a shoulder bag, she walks briskly through the halls. Then there's a younger woman, barefoot with a sketchbook, using the ornate courthouse for a dizzying exercise in three-point perspective: an artist. The black-robed judges, though, glimpsed through cracked doors and porthole windows, are the mysterious heroes. They listen, read, and speak with unsmiling authority. Lawyers vie for their attention, approach them deferentially, and we, flies on the wall, are satisfied to watch the unsuspecting, unselfconscious women simply concentrate.

In reality, of course, women make up a minority of high court judges. It's easy to depict them dominating it, though, just by omitting any footage of men, and letting the tokens represent the whole. But Young's neat turning of the tables is hardly the stuff of feminist-utopian fantasies. Hierarchy lives on; the corridors of power are literally unchanged; everything, structurally, appears exactly the same—as far as we can tell. But we don't know what these middle-aged women are saying. They're inaudible behind closed doors and over the ambient din. Young invites us to imagine their pointed remarks and erudite opinions, perhaps their wisdom and empathy, as well as, more important, the hypothetical society that has chosen women exclusively, for better or worse (how could it possibly be worse?) to rule on matters of the law.

A series of eight related photographs, also shot inside the Palais de Justice, is named for Franz Kafka's grim 1915 parable "Before the Law," in which a man seeking "the law" is thwarted until his death by a gatekeeper. Young captures lush, foreboding images of the building's myriad interior thresholds—dark wood doors, luminous glass panels, and an opening framed by plush, *Handmaid*-red curtains. Here, it seems, no gatekeeper is needed. His presence can be summoned in an instant, the threat of his arrival implicit in every detail of the courthouse's architecture and decor. In these photos, empty of both women and men, the suffocating patriarchal rule is most palpable. You feel the tremendous resources—wealth and tradition—accumulated by those in power to stage the illusion of their reign's inevitability.

In this light, the stern, engaged matriarchs of Young's video amount to little, but the artist allows us a modest flight of fancy. In several separate, breathtaking shots, a judge, distracted or deep in thought, seems to meet our gaze and linger there, though surely each woman is just resting her eyes for a moment on the small window opposite the bench, behind which the camera hides. In these thrilling moments, the pleasure of voyeurism tips into the fantasy of being seen. That could be a metaphor for a bigger longing, perhaps—for social visibility, political representation. If there is an ambivalent, even pessimistic, limit to Young's elegantly edited reverie, her investigation is still refreshing, thankfully unresolved, and devoid of cloying false hope.

—Johanna Fateman

