

REVIEWS PARIS

## Celia Hempton

Galerie Sultana

By Mara Hoberman 

Celia Hempton, *Jakarta, Indonesia, 3rd June 2022*, oil on aluminum, 11 3/8 × 15 3/4".

Known for making up-close and personal paintings of faces and genitalia belonging to (mostly male) live-streamers and life models, Celia Hempton has long been interested in what intimacy looks like in our increasingly hybrid virtual/IRL world. Notably, when painting her most recent small-format works, the artist kept her gaze entirely online. Of the eleven oils on view at Sultana, five are from the series “Chatrandom,” 2013– , and depict men Hempton encountered on the video chat site after which the series is named. Accomplished during the real time of each chat, these portraits have an immediacy and materiality that betray the remove from which they were painted. Hempton painted the other six works—a mix of unpopulated indoor outdoor scenes—from live-streamed CCTV footage. More pristine and

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carefully worked (a result of the artist having more time with her subjects), these paintings constitute a new body of work and provide an interesting foil to the hastily rendered portraits. Tapping into different aspects of the typically odd combination of connection and alienation that comes with having seemingly limitless access to people and places online, the Chatrandom paintings evoke a quick, liberating, and consensual exchange while the CCTV paintings describe a constant state of covert surveillance.

Chatrandom’s website advertises its service as a free way to “talk and have fun, escape the stress of your everyday life, or feel connected after a long day at work,” but most of the app’s (predominantly male) users are looking for anonymous sexual encounters. Because Hempton has different intentions, she often gets very little time with her subjects. If a chat is terminated before she has finished a portrait, the artist will begin a new painting on top of the unfinished one, always respecting the crop created by her current subject’s webcam. Built up and reworked with smooth strokes of thick oils, these layered portraits evoke a dizzying, theoretically endless, rotation. *Guangxi, China, 20th July 2022* (all works cited, 2022) highlights Hempton’s talent for capturing the essence of a fleeting sitter with great economy. Using shades of dusty rose and brickred, she provides a few identifying details—full lips with a deep cupid’s bow and a Nike Swoosh logo tank top—but not enough to spoil the allure of anonymity, exacerbated by the subject’s face being cut off just above his mouth. Expressionistic and haptic, Hempton’s portrayals of people looking for online intimacy appeal mostly to our sense of touch—a sensation the screen does not offer.

Meanwhile, Hempton’s landscapes and interiors depict motifs that have been diffused online. This video footage has inspired Hempton to slow down, experiment with different painterly techniques and styles, and engage with art history. *Jakarta, Indonesia, 3rd June 2022*, whose surface is encrusted with daubs of blue, red, and white, is an impressionistic view of haloed car lights on a two-lane highway at night. The composition, palette, and paint application immediately brought to mind Monet’s *Impression, Sunrise*, 1872. Meanwhile, a simple yellow chair that is the inexplicable focus of *Douglas, Isle of Man, 9th November 2022*, recalled van Gogh’s famous self-portrait as a yellow chair (*Van Gogh’s Chair*, 1888). Courting these and other loaded comparisons (to Edvard Munch and Alex Katz, among others) seems to be the artist’s way of turning her gaze inward. Even more intimate than her portraits, Hempton’s ruminations on surveillance tell us more about her as a painter than ever before.

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