

NEWS RELEASE

Exhibition: Prudence Whittlesey  
Dates: May 20 - June 24, 2023  
Opening: Saturday, May 20, 2023 4pm-6pm  
Address: 16 Main Street, Ground Floor, Brooklyn, NY 11201

Higher Pictures presents early oil paintings by Prudence Whittlesey, selections from series the artist made in the 1990s. This is the artist's first exhibition at the gallery.

Prudence Whittlesey's early oil painting series are painted from life at life-size or larger, an imposing scale chosen "to convey the impact *upon myself* of my perceptions of individuals that I sought to paint who felt overwhelmed and haunted by daily life." These were not artists' models; they had never sat for paintings before. Whittlesey's method for each session was to begin with a conversation during which she would identify a physical position that embodied a prevalent emotional state for that day, a position the subject would be asked to hold for the next 4 to 5 hours and in subsequent sessions. Many watercolor paintings and charcoal drawings were produced for each project, as well as the large paintings, a selection of which are on view here.

The work formed itself into several series of paintings: *Under Neptune* (1990-99), which comprises paintings of two women, Yasue and Lillian; *Games with Women* (1990), a five-painting series where Yasue posed in various "old West" scenarios with a schizophrenic man named Ed; and then *The Book of Ed* (1990-93), where Ed let his personas, as he put it, tell their stories in paintings. In this exhibition, we see several paintings of Yasue from *Under Neptune* and several from *The Book of Ed*.

Drawing and painting are tools in the process of these collaborations, and art certainly resulted from them, but the goal was not only to make paintings. The painting work was a setting and a (mostly) safe space, a framework for a research process made up of repeated interpersonal encounters. "My goal," Whittlesey says, "is to attentively map these active interpersonal processes as they are happening." The fact that paintings were being made gave license for certain postures to be taken and certain conversations to happen, allowing the paintings to become emergent participants in the process, providing places where stories and impulses and whole configurations of self could go to live. These places are real and not real, internal and external, and they no longer belong to anyone.

Scenarios and personas precipitate out of memory or fantasy, even as the bodies and faces have landed in the paintings direct from life. Backgrounds are reduced, at most generic, not quite giving these beings a well-appointed home in a pictorial reality. The most elaborate backings for the figures are screen-like and allegorical, like the curtain adorned with cards, dartboards, and pool balls behind Ed. The figures press forward, even when seated on chairs, even when behind a table, as if leaving the world of the painting, though certainly not to pass into the so-called real world. We don't quite manage to maintain a position as external viewers of people and things, or even of imaginings; we're somehow inside a conversation that involves knowledge we have and don't have. Every attribute is overdetermined, both heavy-handed and uncontainable. Yasue wears handcuffs, or her arm is in a sling, or she holds a purse that is shut like a vault that shall never be opened. Ed brandishes or reveals his Ace of Hearts. Five years after completing *The Book of Ed*, Ed called the artist to say that the paintings were the best and only real accomplishment in his life. "I know they're your paintings Prudence, but I got my message in 'em." Two days later he took his own life.

Prudence Whittlesey is an artist based in New York and Los Angeles. Whittlesey was the recipient of a 2020 Pollock-Krasner Foundation grant and is the inaugural artist-in-residence at the Wu Tsai Institute of Cognition Studies at Yale University.

For more information please contact the gallery at [office@higherpicturesgeneration.com](mailto:office@higherpicturesgeneration.com).