

# WASHINGTON CITY PAPER

## *Victoria F. Gaitán: Scenes of Mild Peril*

Conner Contemporary Art to Dec. 17

By Kriston Capps • November 11, 2011



Victoria F. Gaitán draws from a seemingly inexhaustible supply of young models from the local arts scene for her portraits, but she strives to depict a single, featureless, archetypal gallerista. The effect is more creepy than corporate, and presented with something like feminist pique. Or it usually is, anyway. In the Arlington photographer's first solo exhibition with Conner Contemporary Art—presented alongside Patricia Piccinini's show "The Welcome Guest"—the narrative fury that marks Gaitán's work is mostly missing, with more formal concerns rising to the surface.

The work itself isn't terribly different than what she's shown elsewhere. For the 10 portraits on display, Gaitán touches up her models' faces until their identifying features are all but obliterated. Using makeup and Photoshop, Gaitán buffers wrinkles, hides shadows, and deletes blemishes, ultimately serializing her subjects. They pout through her portraits like the anonymous lovely objects that once populated Robert Palmer's music videos.

In "Lollipop," two models in raven-colored wigs with tight bangs hold valentine lollipops over their lips. The portrait is a send-up of a century's worth of sexy kitsch, without a specific wink at any particular kitschy source: Gaitán references pin-up sexy, vintage sexy, and goth sexy without prejudice.

"Silhouette No. 3" features two models in elaborate Marie Antoinette 'dos, peering back at the viewer over bare shoulders and dressed in little more than pink chiffon bows. By pairing and mirroring her models, as Gaitán does in several works here, she emphasizes them as objects and anonymizes them as individuals.

Gaitán held more than 30 shoots to produce the series of 10 photographs on display at Conner. So the result is tightly edited, and it reveals some specific interests that didn't surface in Gaitán's previous shows. For one thing, there's a push and pull between texture and detail. While smoothing her model's skin down to the texture of heavy whipping cream in "Smear No. 2," for example, she simultaneously draws out each wiry fiber of haphazard hair. The sitters in "Swoon No. 2" might be identical twins—they might be feature-free mannequins, for all that it matters—but their Marilyn Minter-esque lips are captured as glistening rubies, swollen with detail. Gaitán's affection for velvets and furs contrasts her disdain for freckles and follicles.

A lot of the work Gaitán has shown in D.C. has seen her models covered in syrups, sauces, creams, and other suggestive confectionary materials, much of it spilling from their mouths—as if Will Cotton had brought on Terry Richardson to collaborate on his Katy Perry shoots. At Conner, only "Cherry Whip Part 4" demonstrates any dribble, and in a relatively modest way. Some of the fun and fear to Gaitán's work is missing here: Where her photos often blur the line between fantasy and frenzy, the results reference the commercial construction of allure yet trade in the underlying white-hot feminist fury that these tropes provoke.

In the show at Conner, the models look casually understimulated, none of them all that bothered by their condition. The works don't evoke the hostility that Gaitán sometimes likes to direct at the viewer. There's more to her work than her narrative concerns, though; this focused show finds it in texture. But it misses out on the qualities that make her provocations most provocative.