MELBA PRICE:
I WILL TAKE CARE OF YOU
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clough-hanson gallery
rhodes college
memphis, tennessee
Two years ago when Melba Price began working on the portraits in her exhibition I Will Take Care of You, it began simply enough: as a daily painting practice with the goal of making a series of fifty modestly-sized portraits. The parameters of the project were tweaked further by the fact the artist picked the images of people in their teens and twenties from a sea of unknown faces on royalty-free photography websites. In searching through the photos she sought out pictures that sparked a glimmer of possibility. About them, Price comments, “I don’t know these people, but I recognize them.” Despite the initial apparent disconnect between the artist and her subjects, there is an emotional connection that is eventually established during the gradual painting process. The prolonged focus and patient building of these seductive paintings allow Price to establish an intimate connection with her anonymous subjects. She then provides an opportunity for the viewers to do the same.

The images in the paintings are similar to generic passport photos featuring simple head-and-shoulder shots as they stand against a monochromatic background. (They rhyme visually and conceptually with the portraits of contemporary photographers like Rineke Dijkstra, Thomas Ruff, or Julie Moos.) Price’s sensitive paintings show these youths caught in quiet, reflective moments. Some have their eyes closed, as if in meditation or prayer, but most gaze cautiously toward the viewer. Their fresh faces are seen with all the newfound promise, independence, awkwardness, and uncertainties that come with being that age. Their hair and clothes feel hip and current, rooted in this particular point in early years of the twenty-first century. The art critic Ruben Nusz writes, “Price’s subjects strive, in vain, to mask their emotions behind a photographic layer of youthful cool, only to have their vulnerabilities exposed by Price’s brush, their insecurities and passions on view for the entire world to see.” This subtle emotional content varies among the pieces and depends upon Price’s investigation of her subjects. Each piece engages the viewer in different ways as he or she moves slowly from one piece to the next.

Our attraction to the images is also created in part by the artist’s uncanny use of her chosen materials. The final pieces are accumulations of many layers of richly pigmented gouache on primed paper. Worn deckle edges add to the paintings’ perceived vulnerability as they float, unprotected and unframed, on the gallery walls. This patient process provides her subjects with a buttery, transparent quality. In the paintings we see the same rich blue-greens and deep reds beneath the final layers of flesh-colored pigments as we would when looking at our live counterparts. Each painting displays the varied rhythms and speeds of its making, presenting a delicious dichotomy. On one hand, there is illusionistic space, without a trace of brushwork, magically coaxed into being, and on the other, there is the evident materiality of the process. We find roughly sanded passages, embedded brush hairs, and thick dollops of gesso in the paintings’ ridged surfaces. In the subjects’ clothes and jewelry we find the bold marks of Price’s confident brushstrokes providing the graphic foil to the adjacent, delicately nuanced flesh tones. In the backgrounds we also find tell-tale signs of their making: puddles of pigment produced when the watery layers slowly dry. The abundance of painterly delights in Price’s work offers a visual feast for the observant viewer.

While the artist tries to avoid the narratives that inevitably form between the paintings once installed for exhibition, there is another critical dynamic that begins to form. This particular interaction results from the connections formed between the viewers and Price’s exquisite portraits. The paintings relate to the size of our own heads and we can’t help but respond to their gazes and universal cues – just as we would when looking into living faces. These connections provoke empathetic responses. Melba Price creates an inviting space where viewers can find connections, providing room for us to recognize parts of ourselves in these intimate images.

Hamlett Dobbins
Director, Clough-Hanson Gallery

1 In a conversation with the artist, February 1, 2011.