

Press Release

Leyla Faye
Trema

8 June – 14 September 2024
Opening 7 June, 6 – 8 pm

Karolina Dankow: Your first solo show at Karma International is dedicated to the theme of the circus. Can you explain how the stage influenced you as a young person within your familiar context?

Layla Faye: Growing up, both of my parents were performers and still are to this day. In large part, my work has been influenced by the mime-inspired method acting my mother was trained in by her sister, my aunt Kari, who founded the Margolis Method in 1982. Because it was such a family affair, a lot of my childhood was spent backstage, watching actors apply their makeup, rehearse their scenes, and embody their characters before stepping out on stage. As a child, I was absolutely mesmerized by this collective of people and the shapeshifting power they held to become someone, something new. I have been interested in this "behind the scenes" environment ever since, seeing it as a psychic space, much like the mythic realms inherent to our imaginal worlds as humans.

KD: How would you describe the importance of the stage in your work?

LF: I see the stage as a metamorphic, womb-like environment. Much like I see the canvas or picture plane, I see the stage as a zone of transformation, rebirth, and storytelling. The stage is one of the few modern environments, similar to film, where we suspend (just a bit) our sense of disbelief and skepticism and allow the separation of art and life to blur. It becomes a realm of freedom, where we shed our skins, step into new ones, and allow ourselves and others to take on new forms of being. It is an environment where we can question our inherited scripts, open holes in them, try others on for size, and even become other to ourselves. I've been interested in the perception of the actor as an untrustworthy, Fool or Jester-like entity whose authenticity is questioned on and off stage. I'm interested in how this skepticism applies to our relationship, especially in the West, to monolithic thinking. Regarding the circus and the stage, I'm interested in the big top as one of the earliest places where class, gender, and race were allowed to coincide more openly. It was an almost carnivalesque realm where ideas of "high" and "low" merged, and people communed with the common expectation of being awed.

KD: The main character we recognize throughout the paintings is based on Anna Olga Albertina (1859-1919), a half-Polish, half-African acrobat who performed as Miss LaLa at Cirque Fernando, based in Montmartre. As an aerialist, she became famous for her signature act, which involved being pulled up to the height of the circus tent by biting down on a rope at the height of 60 meters. At 21, she became the subject of Edgar Degas' sketches, leading to his 1879 painting, "Miss La La at the Cirque Fernando." She is the only mixed-race person ever painted by Degas. How did you originally come across her?

LF: Years ago, I was researching early circus performers of African descent, as I was interested in the close ties between the circus, minstrelsy, and spectacle. In many ways, the circus was a space where othering was celebrated and overtly commodified. I quickly found it was difficult to find substantial information about the lives of black performers in the early 18th century when modern circus was thought to be born. Anna Olga Albertina Brown stood out as a figure given slightly more historical substance because of Degas' fascination with her as a muse. Without his painting, Miss La La, far less would be known about this aerialist and strong woman. In many ways, her mixed background and boundary-bending strength made her hard to place and baffling at the time. But it was also her mixed-ness that likely caught Degas' attention over other black performers who were granted less thought in terms of subjectivity. He is believed to have only painted one black figure in his career, whose image was also mostly obscured. I was fascinated with Degas' fraught relationship to painting her and the overwrought process he underwent to present her in an "acceptable" fashion for his audience. Ultimately, he opted for an angle that obscured her face from the viewer, emphasizing her muscular body and, in turn, distancing us from Anna. In Degas' strained attempt to depict her, he, in many ways, laid bare his own fears and anxieties about representation.

KD: On the other hand, you and Anna Olga share a nickname. You told me people called you Lala as a kid. And when we look at the faces in your paintings, we also recognize you, right?

LF: Her stage name was an eerie synchronicity that stood out when I first discovered her story. Because I see the self-portrait as a medium to reassemble my image into something beyond myself, I took on this series as an embodiment. I like to think of Anna Olga as a chosen ancestor and guide through this carnivalesque realm I have found myself so fascinated by. I am interested in her as a role model and role-reversing figure, in her ability to hold contradiction so gracefully and with such strength. I am interested in the discomfort she evoked in people at the time and the anxieties about the imagined fixity of identity she brought to the fore. In many ways, I look up to Anna and have felt it important to call her by her birth name instead of her stage name. I see her as a gentle guide throughout this series.

KD: Can you specify how you perceive the theme of identity within the context of our show?

LF: I like to view the embodiment of persona through painting as a metamorphic tool. I see the work as a celebration of the fragmented nature of self instead of a disavowal. A ritual that dissolves and reassembles, celebrating a more porous and animate relationship to the world. In recent years, I have been inspired by Carnavalesque frameworks around humor, inversion and the grotesque body, and I see this show as an exploration of ambivalent and shapeshifting archetypes such as the Trickster or Fool.

KD: Can you explain the title of the show?

LF: "Trema" is an old theatre colloquialism for stage fright, deriving from the Latin "tremō," meaning "to shake" or "tremble." I'm fascinated with the connotation of the word and the fact that it carries so many interpretations across language and dialect. The term is a bit precarious, even in its interpretation! Because I have been working for a while in this "backstage" realm, I'm interested in evoking moods usually left concealed, like fear and discomfort. I'm also fascinated by the transition art has made from a place of ritual or spiritual value to one of exhibitional value. I like to think that the figures in the work are grappling with this shift and awareness too.