

Butt Can You Feel it?

John Kacere

21 November – 20 December 2024

It's one of the most unforgettable opening shots in 21st century cinema: The first scene in *Lost in Translation*, when the camera rests on our ennui-saddled hero, the recent Yale grad Charlotte, as she lays restlessly in a hotel bed at the Park Hyatt Tokyo. And then the camera lingers on her back, longer than the moviegoer anticipated, making it abundantly clear that Charlotte is staying in bed for a reason, wearing her translucent pink underwear. It's not titillation for titillation's sake, and isn't even particularly male gaze-y—*Lost in Translation* is of course directed by Sofia Coppola, a filmmaker as attuned to the contours of female identity as any director America has produced.

What's gone underappreciated is Coppola's source material for the shot. It is an incredibly faithful filmic recreation of *Jutta*, a painting by the late artist John Kacere of a woman in her underwear. And it's not just faithful to one painting by Kacere—it's faithful to all of them, because all of his paintings are of women in their underwear.

"There's a painter called John Kacere who does paintings of girls in different underwear, so it's taken from one of his paintings," Coppola once said. "When I started the movie, I had a reference book of different images that came to mind with the movie."

A quarter century after the artist's death, Gratin is presenting a show of eight paintings by Kacere. The paintings are vivid, lush, photorealistic depictions of an abstracted part of the body, which the artist made over and over again for years and years, in something of a durational performance. And the undeniable skill on display here—the extreme attention to detail Kacere applied to his renderings of fabric, of shadows, of light, of the body—speaks to some other conceptual underpinning. The longer one looks at these nine paintings, the more they lose their literalness. They could be abstractions, or landscapes, or the broken parts of Roman marbles.

These paintings, no doubt, are conversation starters. Since Kacere's death in 1999, institutions have brought the works back into view. For years, the Speed Art Museum in Louisville treated Kacere's *Light Purple Panties, Zippered Slip* as the iconic work in the collection—the institution sold matchbooks and posters featuring the work. It had been out of view for years when Speed curator Miranda Lash included the work in the 2018 show "*Breaking the Mold: Investigating Gender*." The idea was to start a conversation about Kacere's relationship with feminism—even if that relationship, as the artist himself acknowledged, was complicated. The extended wall text contextualized the work as "controversial," and it was hung in dialogue with works by Barbara Kruger, Louise Nevelson, Gladys Nilsson, Ebony G. Patterson and others.

Take that as the context. Look at the paintings. These are lovingly made, gorgeously rendered artworks of the highest order that arrest the eye—pictures that are unforgettably John Kacere, part of an iconography that Sofia Coppola used to introduce Charlotte to the world.