

Cate White's Keys to the City →

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It's a rare work of contemporary art that demands of the viewer any knowledge of art history. Much of contemporary art requires only that its viewer utter the shibboleth 'anything can be a work of art', a thought secreted a century ago by the work of someone named something like 'Marcel Duchamp'. Then just walk in and look, armed with nothing but curiosity and a camera for the selfies. It was not always so. At the beginning of the project of modern art in the 1860's Édouard Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* and *Olympia* required the viewer to register the distance between what was before her eyes and the relevant works of the school of Giorgione, while at its end the appreciation of the fecundity and piquancy of Picasso's variations on the works of Delacroix and Velázquez presupposes a steady awareness of the models, indeed the sense that Picasso's virtuosity is partially in the service of re-vivifying the masters. So it's a surprise that one of the Bay Area's possibly greatest and surely most interesting artists, the painter Cate White, has attempted a demonstration piece, one summarizing her artistic practice as a piece of her life, and closely modeled upon Velázquez's *The Surrender of Breda* (1634-45). The resultant *Keys to the City* (2016), currently on display at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, is the most richly engaging work of visual art I've seen from a Bay Area artist in the past decade.



Velázquez's painting is tribute to the sweetness of character, the gentleness and mercy of the Spanish general Ambrogio Spinola. In 1625 the Spanish forces under Spinola forced the surrender of the besieged Dutch town of Breda. The defenders were allowed to leave unmolested and honored. Velázquez depicts the moment when the Dutch commander Justin von Nassau hands Spinola the key to the city. Some Dutch soldiers stand disorganized on the left, while Spanish advisers, mostly older than the Dutch, stand about on the right. Few on either side seem to observe the commanders. The Dutch commander offers the key with his right hand, while slightly bowing and cocking his head to the left. Spinola counters by bending slightly and placing his right hand on Justin's arm. Their eyes meet and form an axle about which their bodies dance courteously. The two commanders' horses stand nearby on either side. On the right a long line of the Spaniards' vertical pikes striate the sky, which mostly is thick with horizontal layers of clouds, themselves crossed by diagonals of smoke. Velázquez spares the viewer a vision of eirenic gods that would infest a similar such painting by his master Rubens.

Keys to the City retains and revises all of Velázquez's major elements and compositional arrangements. The central figures are shifted to the right, with the painter White replacing the loser and offering her key chain to a cartoonish military goon in the winner's position. The rightward shift both de-emphasizes the transfer of the keys and opens up more space on the left for White's 'army', a coterie of White's friends and loves. The winning goon is a hairy-legged mannequin, or perhaps balloon man, whose empty eyes and slight, fixed smile suggest a post-apocalyptic world so emptied that humanity is barely a memory. His protruding penis is a spigot, a Vienna sausage, a hanging thing never touched by eroticism or violence. White stoops and cringes before the man-thing. Behind their leader, the victorious soldiers are likewise balloon heads. Over against them and visually dominating the picture are some five dozen losers, suggestive of a great motley of isolates whose various actions and passions have given them faces freed, if nothing else, from worldly ambitions. At the highest point of the losing army, a naked woman leans back as if supported by the edge of the painting, and displays a banana dick while mumbling into a microphone "sorry 4 not giving a shit." Neither side pays much attention to the central figures, nor to each other. What used to be humanity—spontaneity, unguarded curiosity, eroticism—is preserved in the animals; unlike in Velázquez, the two horses turn towards each other and, uniquely in the painting, their gazes, one coy and the other crazed, meet.



The painting certainly induces an open-ended exploration and interrogation. Questions arise at every level, from the identity of the individual losers to White's overall purposes. Two large questions in particular demand preliminary responses for the issue of White's purposes to gain any determinacy: What city, and what keys? And what meaning arises from her choice and use of this particular Velázquez?

One answer to the first question is perhaps surprising but, it seems to me, irresistible. The small handful of keys, along with the CVS tag on the chain, are those of our dismal everydayness, surely including the house, the studio, and the car. The city, though, can be nothing physical; the members of the losing army do not know each other, have no unifying purpose, and surely live here and there, any place they can afford that allows them to escape the constant attentions of the government, corporations, and the worldly ambitious. All that unites the losers is their varied relationships to White. Those relationships mark out the spectrum of contemporary loves. A 'city' made up of kinds of attention, desires, and loves, and which is not of this world evokes Augustine's account of the two cities, the City of Man and the City of God. Only the former is physical, but both are 'cities' as embodiments of different kinds of love, the one carnal, the other spiritual.

But what could the keys to one of these cities mean to the people of the other? In Velázquez the city remains the same as the keys are transferred; the Breda of the Dutch is the very same as that of the Spanish. But the passage between Augustine's cities is inscrutable: the two cities are unknown to each other, and passage requires spiritual conversion or degradation that God distributes for His own unknowable purposes. What could White's keys mean to the winning goon and his happy minions? Perhaps this is part of the meaning that the use of the Velázquez has for White: entrance into the city of loves requires an abandonment of the sort of moral certainties and gentility to which Velázquez gives a supreme expression. And this would explain another feature not yet discussed: instead of the dense layering of clouds in Breda's sky, White's city re-enchants the inaugural love, as an aerial mother holding her infant bestows a beneficent backwards glance to the losing side as she approaches the winners. Don't follow leaders; watch the horses.