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RAPTURE -- Melba Price

January 31st – March 21st, 2009

Midway Contemporary Art is pleased to announce the opening of Rapture, an exhibition of new works on paper by Melba Price. This will be Price's first solo exhibition in Minneapolis since Yuanfei Hotel, which appeared at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts in 1999.

Last year, Price began a series of fifty portraits of individuals all in their teens and twenties. While her earlier work was characterized by solitary figures surrounded by lush and highly developed landscapes, this series places increasing emphasis on the painted surface and a significant paring down of the principal elements contained within the work. Primarily frontal bust portraits and utilizing a medium sized format of 13 x 19 inches, the cropping of the figure becomes suggestive of industry headshots. Just as her previous work contained ostensibly uninterested figures within a particular landscape, this new work focuses on individuals who, at best, appear outwardly indifferent to their surroundings. Though figuration remains a central concern, the gestural application of gouache and the subtly shifting stylistic approaches employed by Price allow for greater narrative ambiguity, placing increased emphasis on a subject isolated from an identifiable environment.

While the specific number of works is somewhat arbitrary, the development of these works in a serial format begins to suggest a taxonomy linking Price's work with other artists such as Warhol, August Sander, or Thomas Ruff, whose serial approaches to the genre of portraiture came about at times following periods of neglect. Rapture's formal groupings also further one's impression that there is no attached identity to these individuals: that they exist as pure surface. This sense is only heightened when one learns that these portraits are based on anonymous digital images that the artist has selected from online photo stock websites such as gettyimages.com. While it is difficult to discern any overarching criteria in Price's selection process, there does appear to be a certain voyeuristic affection for these banal subjects. Without any intimate knowledge of the individuals, it is remarkable that Price is able to generate such admiration for her subjects in her approximation of the portraiture process. In spite of the laconic title of the exhibition, these quasi-portraits do illustrate hints of expression, which is no small feat, given the fact that the original source material has the sterility of a passport photo. Through this, Price reserves for her paintings a level of dignity and self-awareness.

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Melba Price has exhibited most recently at the Kiehle Gallery, St. Cloud State University in St. Cloud, Minnesota; Central Lakes Community College in Brainerd, Minnesota; and at Soo Visual Arts, Minnesota, and with the Hill Gallery, Birmingham, Michigan. She has twice been the recipient of the Bush Foundation Fellowship and the McKnight Foundation Fellowship. Price lives and works in the Twin Cities.

Regular gallery hours: Tuesday through Saturday, 11am to 5pm