

PORTFOLIO

Melanie Willhide: The Disquieting Muses Again

By Jean Dykstra

"Poets and photographers, we steal from the world," says Melanie Willhide, whose latest body of work is on view at the Elizabeth Houston Gallery through December 9. The title of the series, *The Disquieting Muses Again*, is borrowed from a poem by John Ashbery, who in turn borrowed it from the title of a poem by Sylvia Plath, who in turn drew on imagery from *Macbeth*. The accretion of borrowed allusions is a perfect corollary to Willhide's approach to photography, which aims to interrupt – or disrupt – the straight photograph, working instead with the accumulation of layers and scrims and intentional "errors."

Her photographs tell opaque stories about memory and loss, about women and culture, about representation and the inexorability of deterioration. The eldest sibling in her family, Willhide wound up being the executor of various familial properties, including a silk-ribbon mill turned auto-parts distributor turned furniture distributor, which her eccentric uncle moved into and turned into a de facto gallery for his collection of 700 or so paintings. The building's original chestnut posts, which her uncle didn't touch, had been decorated and collaged, in the 1960s, by the men who worked in the auto parts factory, with pictures and scraps of text from *Life* and *Playboy* and other magazines. "They were certainly contending with the ideas of the time," she says, such as Nixon, feminism, the Vietnam War. Willhide re-interpreted those faded collages, moving a hand-held scanner up and down the poles,



so that the images become compressed and juxtaposed in new ways, creating a stuttering effect that recalls some of the works in her 2011 series *To Adrian Rodriguez with Love*. In one, a repeating image of a voluptuous woman in a bathing suit, her mouth covered in cartoonish lips, is interrupted by a black-and-white photo of the nearly nude

Melanie Willhide, *Kiss and Clobber the Viet Cong*, 2015. All images courtesy the artist and Elizabeth Houston Gallery

model Twiggy, and the equivocal text: Girls Are For Loving.

More disquieting muses were found in her uncle's collection of paintings – many of them portraits of women. Willhide shot the fronts and the backs of paintings and then layered the 4x5-inch negatives together (the negatives may or may not be the front and

back of the same painting). "I love the idea that the intention of a portrait is to hold a person in a particular moment, but we're all subject to things deteriorating," she says. "I love the idea of these women assertively looking at you through this veil of deterioration, through the literal deterioration of their own images."



Melanie Willhide, *Girls Are for Loving*, 2017



Melanie Willhide, *Green Girl*, 2016



Melanie Willhide, *Nymph*, 2016