

Em Kettner

The Understudies

April 2 - May 7, 2022



Francois Ghebaly is proud to present Em Kettner's *The Understudies*, the artist's second solo exhibition with the gallery. This exhibition showcases a selection of glazed porcelain tiles that together, in thin, wiry line-work, compose a world of stage lights, insects, bedrooms, and a sprinkle of gymnastics. Alluding to the performance of living, Kettner's works depict stage fright, excitement, improvisation, jest, and scrutiny. Mischievously reconfiguring the viewer-audience-performer dynamic, Kettner presents performance as not only a problematic part of disability history but also a relatable, quotidian, and joyful part of living with one another. Each tile becomes a playful and fantastical depiction of daily interconnectedness.

This exhibition features Kettner's tiles in distinctive wood frames. Carved so that the tile sinks into the wood like a body atop a mattress, each frame softens and reshapes to the contours of their porcelain square. Providing both support and relief to the porcelain, a material often associated with fragility, the frame appears to adapt to the weight of the tile. A collaboration between image and woodgrain, each work represents the circuitous relationship between our bodies and the support systems—both tangible and intangible—on which we depend.

Here, miniature objects hold a hidden power. Considering her own fear of bugs and introducing them as subject material, Kettner asks "why does something so small have a pervasive effect on my own entire being?" Across her practice, Kettner commits to the small but powerful, repeating characters to create a wider narrative world unbound by the two inch square limits of the tile. A snail, two lovers, doctors with inescapable headlamps—Kettner's characters center a narrative of public performance and voyeurism. Medical examination room and theatrical stage converge. A moment in front of a mirror transforms into a costume change. Referencing the original peep show, where traveling showmen concealed themselves or their wares in boxes, the works are arranged in the gallery like private little booths, each providing a window into a shared stage.

Inside the work, Kettner receives us as fellow performers or silent onlookers. Considering how a spotlight figuratively "casts light" upon a performer's body, we see variations of extreme light in each tile's environments. Bright lights on stage and in bedrooms make Kettner's settings not only theatrical but also recognizable, sometimes even cozy and whimsical. Kettner spotlights moments

of quiet significance—dreaming, reading a book in bed, enjoying the breeze. Alongside Kettner’s figures, we become objects of curiosity: viewed, celebrated, questioned, poked, prodded, and misunderstood.

Outside of the work, a viewer is made aware of their bodily relationship to their viewing experience. For this exhibition, Kettner privileges the seated height, instead of the standing, so those who are shorter, children, or wheel-chair bound can view the work with ease. Such a height is not usually considered by museums, but in subverting conventionally used sight-lines for the installation, Kettner makes able-bodied viewers aware of their physique, asking them to contort, squat, or bend in order to view each work. She focuses on the lives of the disability community and extends her work as an entry point, inviting a viewer to feel a kinship with her fantastic subjects.

Em Kettner (b. 1988, Philadelphia, PA) is an artist and writer based in Richmond, CA. Recent solo exhibitions include *Slow Poke* at François Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles; *Play the Fool* at Goldfinch, Chicago; and *The Eternal Worm* at Harpy, Rutherford. Kettner’s work has been reviewed and published in ArtForum, Art in America, Contemporary Art Review LA (CARLA), HyperAllergic, and Sixty Inches From Center. She is the recipient of the Wynn Newhouse Award, the MIUSA Women’s Institute on Leadership and Disability, an SAIC Teaching Fellowship, and the 2019-2020 AAC Diversity + Leadership Fellowship. Kettner earned her BFA from the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, and an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. This is her second exhibition with François Ghebaly.