



He Kissed Like a Wolf, Spoke Like a Man, 2007, acrylic, graphite and chalk on canvas, 122 x 122 cm. Courtesy Canada, New York

LILY LUDLOW: EVERY FLINCHING ATOM OF FLESH MUST BE FLAYED

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The title of Lily Ludlow's latest show sounds as if it was penned by the Marquis de Sade. It's a curious phrasing, not least because none of Ludlow's new paintings would appear all that violent, in subject matter at least, which seems, on the face of it, to take the composition of portraiture – more group than single – as its focus. Nevertheless, the eroticism of the Sadean allusion is present in the languid, wispy line with which Ludlow's figures are drawn, as well as in their configurations, which often find some pair of legs in the air (though the scenes are never as overtly sexual as this description might imply).

If there is any violence to these pictures, though, perhaps it comes with the conflict staged between painting and drawing, or more specifically, between surface and contour. The 'flesh' of Ludlow's figures, which pictorial conventions would render through colour and modelling, has been 'flayed' away, leaving

only the most minimal of ghostly contours. *Untitled (a study)* (all works 2007) provides an object lesson in this respect, as the reposing figure pictured there is tripled, with its bottom-most iteration appearing wholly schematic. The standard assumption would be to take this more diagrammatic and loosely sketched-in body as a starting point for the two more detailed members of the group: the painting as a process of a gradual but literal embodiment. But the logic of Ludlow's enterprise takes us in the opposite direction. The schematic figure is not so much a starting point as it is a culmination, a terminus; it is the point at which the surface of the canvas, which is heavily worked in places and nearly bare in others, is no longer in service to the figures pictured there.

We find a similarly ghosted and nearly unfinished figure at the centre of the large group in *Hill of Dreams*, where, in a kind of Arcadian scene, the play of contour against canvas surface receives its most energetic treatment. *Matilda* and *He Kissed Like a Wolf, Spoke Like a Man*, on the other hand, remain frozen at an intermediate stage, in which the surface of the canvas and the contours of the figures appear in a tense equilibrium. Yet it is with these two paintings that we can begin to discern the hints of a conversation with certain proper names that belong to the larger enterprise of painting: *Matilda* opens up a dialogue with that great arbiter of the flesh, Lucian Freud; while *He Kissed Like a Wolf* has a few words to say to Picasso's sketchbooks of the interwar Minotaur years. These are not instances of Ludlow paying debts to earlier practitioners, which would simply stall the work at the level of citation. They are rather moments of what appears to be a project – if it is indeed Ludlow's project – of what we might call conventional reassessment, with the stakes being the conventions of painting itself. *Jonathan T.D. Neil*