

BLACK MIRRORS

PAINTER MARY RAMSDEN'S '(IN/IT)' AT THE ASPEN ART MUSEUM

IT'S BEEN IMPOSSIBLE to escape the roiling national debate in the past two months over “fake news,” about how we consume information in the iPhone age, about the cultural silos that social media has placed us in and how that self-segregation led us to a more divided, less just, more unstable society.

All along, an exhibition of new paintings by the young British artist Mary Ramsden has been sitting silently in the smallest gallery in the Aspen Art Museum, speaking precisely and incisively to the subtle ways technology warps information in 21st century.

The show, which opened the weekend before Election Day and runs through Feb. 19, is worth paying attention to right now.

It includes paintings that mimic the face of a smartphone, with the familiar image of a finger smudge across the surface. They offer an opaque reflection of the viewer – the same image that gave the brilliant (also British) TV show “Black Mirror” its name and which may as well be the emblem of our historical moment.

These black mirrors provide a context for the bulk of the works in the show – titled “(In/It)” – which play around with notions of obscured truth, partial information and quite literally not seeing the big picture.

Her paintings on wood panel offer curved lines and gestural marks that poke out from beneath geometric planes of white or sea foam green or salmon that cover dominate the canvases. These swatches of paint obscure whatever image might be beneath, offering only hints and pieces of what they’re covering up. The edges of the paintings’ frames are abrupt, suggesting they’ve been cut from a larger picture. They leave us to guess, to make assumptions, to make up whatever we might want the whole story to be (the titles sometimes nudge us to think of images that the paintings don’t: “Violet sheep,” for example).

“By employing the mechanics of how we experience information as mediated through technology, Ramsden draws on notions of language in its most modern form – increasingly devised to interrupt attention spans, divorced from actual source and context, yet making all of the meaningful or frivolous data available at our fingertips,” Sherry Black writes in her essay in the exhibition catalog.

Black also explains that the title of “(In/It)” is inspired by a line break in the Marianne Moore poem “Poetry.” Black suggests that, like the “in/it” break in Moore’s poem, the off-kilter framing of Ramsden’s paintings and the interplay between her canvases is a riff on the dramatic effect of poetic line breaks and an attempt to do the same with visual art by lending power to of the white spaces of a gallery wall.

If you make the trip to the museum to see Ramsden’s phenomenal show, do pick up the exhibition catalog. Rather than the

usual rundown of titles and dates and the impenetrable gobbledygook of an artist statement, the Aspen Art Museum has put together a fascinating (and free) publication that not only complements the show but functions as a work of an art in itself. The 28-page pamphlet pairs iPhone photos taken by Ramsden with original poems and flash fiction by the Canadian writer Leanne Shapton. They conjure up small moments, like a man leaving a psychiatrist’s office and a child clinging to her father on the way home from a Christmas party that – like Ramsden’s photos in the book and her paintings in this show – offer but a glimpse of something much larger.

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IF YOU GO...

What: Mary Ramsden’s “(In/It)”

Where: Aspen Art Museum

When: Through Feb. 19

More info: www.aspenartmuseum.org



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