

Jenny Gagalka

Pop Secret

June 3 – July 22, 2023

Los Angeles

A hole...is made for seeing, not for being seen. For looking through, that's what a hole is. An opening, and perspicacity. So what did you see? Something to see with.

—Francois Lyotard, *TRANS/formers*

A hole is a space, usually between other spaces. It can be a void but it can also be a connection between two places. Welcoming or foreboding, a hole offers an opening into a new world and in doing so illuminates your own world. It is a window, a threshold, a mirror.

Each painting in this exhibition depicts a hole or series of holes that reveal the insides of the boxes of the popular popcorn brand Pop Secret. The flashy blue boxes, stripped of their branding, hang open, some empty, others full. Their lids sag and their toothy joints shine. Each painting stares back like a face, with shocks of blue framing two ocular lamps, a gaping mouth, a teasing uvula. They are closely-observed still life paintings of light and shadow, clumsy cardboard and crisp plastic, and spaces within spaces.

On its surface, Pop doesn't seem to hold many secrets. As Andy Warhol explained regarding his work, "just look at the surface... There's nothing behind it." In *Pop Secret 3*, for example, two stacked boxes blare with raffish colors. Horizontal bolts of cobalt frame a crooked ochre mouth. Nothing to see here, just the banality of industrial consumption. But when viewed side by side with the other paintings in the series, you feel the religious ecstasy in the everyday. And if you look closer at *Pop Secret 3*, with its washy blues and delicate sepia-toned edges, you sense the devotional aspect to Jenny's close looking. Inside these boxes there is mystery. Every painting suggests the sublime zip of Barnett Newman, the infinite suspended spaces of Deborah Remington, and the intimate observational lines of Alice Neel. We strain to see behind the boxes' tabs, each glimpse enticing new cravings. There are erotic possibilities in the restraints of this daily painting practice, with its resolute palette and focused subjects.

Voyeuristic pleasure is key. Working with fast-drying Flashe, Jenny creates pulsating layers of space, making us feel at once inside and outside the paintings. The boxes are crammed in to fill every inch of the frame but because they sit in undefined spaces they expand and contract in scale. In *Pop Secret 12*, two ultramarine vertical rectangles partially open their doors, revealing the moss green tones of the ribbed walls within. Dark lines between each ridge suggest even deeper space below. Each entryway invites us into what lies beyond but also shows us how far we still have to go. The diagonal shadow in *Pop Secret 12* that cuts across the interior of the two boxes reinforces a claustrophobic noir and we remain outside in the gray ambient space between the forms. We are cradled in a safe amniotic haze but also exposed to the world as an interloper.

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Two artworks come to mind with Pop Secret. The first is Andrea Mantegna's late 15th century *The Lamentation of Christ*, whose formal composition is difficult not to transpose onto nearly every painting here. *The Lamentation*, with its central waxen figure and draped sex organ, its four puncture wounds staring back at us, suggests with its extreme foreshortening that the illusion of perspective is indeed an illusion. The second is Marcel Duchamp's *Etant Donnés*, with its erotic spectacle and near-infinite spatial recession. As we gaze at the naked headless figure and its exposed vagina, we are left flat footed, leering through two small peepholes in the heavy wooden door, hoping to glimpse more. Two moments in the history of western looking. What we are left with is hole after hole and the pleasure and pain, the two-way mirror of desire in the act of looking itself. That is the secret to Pop Secret.

—Ezra Tessler

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