

# BERNHEIM

**MICHELLE UCKOTTER**  
*Big Time Shopping Is Here*

Bernheim, Zurich  
March 21 – May 17, 2024

Shelley Uckotter is holed up in a cheap motel room somewhere upstate. It is a strip-backed pine box with all the grim personality of an amateur porn set. She is sprawled across a queen-size mattress, trying to relax on a surface as sturdy and comfortable as an operating table. The sheets are threadbare and ratty but allegedly “100% Egyptian cotton.” They are the kind of one-size-fits-all covers meant for draping over unidentified vagrants and runaway Jane Doe’s in a mortuary. Her feet still manage to stick out from the far end of the shrunken fabric and when she wiggles her toes she can feel the wind whistling in through the paneling.

These kinds of places weren’t designed to hold up under an art critic’s scrutiny, but these walls barely seem like they will hold up at all. Everything is the color and texture of cardboard. The forest outside is too dark to navigate even with your high-beams on and to complain to the manager would mean losing your way ten times over in the trees. There’s no point mentioning, for instance, that the water runs brown or that the towels are damp with mildew or that there are German cockroaches breeding in the shower. The artist remembers to count her blessings, and in this case, not being ravaged by bed bugs happens to be one of them.

Shelley is used to painting voids and has found herself trapped inside another, this one just happens to have much worse art on the walls. She is taking stock of everything and dissociating over all the small details. Time does not pass moment to moment in a place like this, it folds over and doubles back on itself. Shadows recede and lengthen and move independently of their source. The light is somehow so drab it’s dramatic, marking everything it touches with a vague but unmistakable sense of tension. Every loose thread is a form of evidence, every blunt object looms like a murder weapon. The only flourish she’s really added to personally \*zhoosh\* up this dump has been to scatter her belongings everywhere around into a sort of installation art nest. If they find her body, there will at least be some clues about the feral girl who had checked in for the night.

There’s no escaping how utterly transient a place like this is, how jarringly obvious that no one belongs here. Why on Earth does Shelley always seem to find her way back? The painter usually situates her work in dusty attics and foreclosed buildings, conjuring the most subterranean and godforsaken zones out of sight and out of mind. These are thresholds that one only ever comes across intermittently and most of the time by accident; in the slippage between one station and another or down the rabbit hole of bleary-eyed, 4am doom scrolling. Voids can be as clarifying as they are obscure and looking long and hard for a glimpse of something half imagined, half understood, on the knife’s edge of intelligibility is an exercise that yields a strange kind of recognition or insight. It’s Shelley’s uncanny gift that she can access them so easily.

Shelley’s never alone when she unravels that thread. Eyes stare back from the darkness and glower meanly and lustily. When they don’t, there’s no mistaking the body language of her subjects: “follow me, bitch.” She’s not alone right now either. In an instant there’s a woman lying across from her on the mattress dressed like a business casual, charm school slut. She has not introduced herself but without saying a word it’s obvious that her name is “CD.” CD has the kind of hallucinatory beauty that plays well online, equal parts real world and anime. She’s writhing around like a sex idiot, flashing her thong as though this were a music video and not a waking nightmare. Neither speaks to the other, Shelley senses that it’s pointless to attempt the first word with an astral projection. CD smiles unblinking. Shelley gets the sudden horrible feeling

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that this is a trap. CD scrunches up her face into an unreadable leer before pushing back a lock of Shelley's hair to whisper a garbled secret directly into her ear: ".hctib uoy dekcloc l. teab si ecaf ruoY. oiB ni yssuP"

With that she jumps up and throws open the door. Shelley follows after her but stops herself in the doorframe, gazing out at the gnarly black woods where she disappeared. The wind shakes the pines and the cabin strains and groans in response. Shelley won't go back inside. She stands there in a kind of fascinated horror, staring into the darkness to see what else will emerge.

\*I clocked you bitch. Your face is beat. Pussy in bio.

Harry Tafoya

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