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## Kelli Vance's 'Stop Looking at Me' opens Friday at RMAC

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If it feels like the women in Kelli Vance's paintings are staring at you, it's not an accident.

Her show is titled "Stop Looking At Me," but it's hard to tell if the characters mean it. Most of the works in the show consider the ways that looking at someone or getting someone to look at you represent power.

At times, the pictures seem pornographic, though only by implication. In "Looking At You Looking At Me," both models are fully clothed. One is lying on her back, eyes fixed on the viewer, while the other climbs on top of her, sticking high-heeled shoes in her face.

The model on the floor is Katie Labmeier, a friend associated with the artists in residence program. The model whose face isn't visible, but whose shoes and legs dominate Labmeier, is Vance. Vance staged and photographed the scene, then turned the image into a giant painting.

The work is designed to raise a series of questions in the viewer's mind. Is it sexual? Is Labmeier's character enjoying it? Who has the power here? It seems that this show is put on for the viewer's benefit. Does that put you in control, or does Labmeier have power because she can make you

Roswell Artist-in-Residence Kelli Vance works on a painting in her studio. ([Daily Record/Cid Standifer](#))

watch her?

"It kind of makes you wonder, am I supposed to be enjoying looking at it?" said Vance. "You don't know how you're supposed to respond."

The painting goes back to a question bandied about by feminist theorists for decades: What kind of power do women have as objects?

Some feminists argue that being objectified, especially in a sexual way, is inherently dehumanizing, while others

celebrate displays of sexuality, like stripping, as empowering. Journalist Ariel Levy studied, and ultimately rejected, women's self-objectification in the book *Female Chauvinist Pigs*. Vance said that Levy's book, which includes inquiries into modern phenomena like the *Girls Gone Wild* series, women who frequent strip clubs, and lesbian "bois" who take up mottos like "bros before hos," has served as a jumping-off point for much of her recent work.

Vance applied Levy's theories to celebrities like Britney Spears, Katy Perry and Lindsay Lohan. She had Labmeier imitate a photo of Lohan, taken near the beginning of the actress's slide into the "bad girl" image, stand-offishly looking down on the viewer with an unlit cigarette dangling from her mouth. The product is titled "A Good Girl Goes Bad."

"It was obviously staged because it was (against) a white background," Vance said. "I like looking at images that are obviously being forced. ... The image of her as a bad girl almost seems in a way like it sped up or kept the bad girl growing."

Lohan's mockery in the tabloid press in recent years illustrates, for Vance, the fine line between a bad girl performance that brings power, and the fall from grace that follows when they go too far.

In her most recent painting, "K.O. (self portrait as a boxer)," Vance started to delve into the phenomenon of female boxing. It seemed to Vance like there were two kinds of woman boxers: ones who fell into a masculine image, who wore traditional athletic clothes with no makeup, and were unabashed about their sweat, and others who fought wearing lipstick and mini-skirts.

In the painting, Vance wields a pink boxing glove, while another collides with her cheek. Even though her boyfriend's arm served as the model for Vance's opponent, the pink gloves give the deliberate impression that both fighters are female.

Vance is still conflicted about how she sees female boxers who flaunt their femininity in the ring.

"It almost makes it - not like a joke, but you wonder what their intentions are," she said. "Do they just want attention? ... The girls that are putting on skirts to box in, it's almost like they're reviving the idea of cattiness between women."

After finishing the painting, she decided that it looked serious enough. The blow to her face was real - though her boyfriend refused to punch her full-force - and with her hair soaked and glove up, she looks like she's going down fighting.

But she wonders how viewers will see it. Because the participants are female, some may think it's the gloved equivalent of mud wrestling - a violent female spectacle for male enjoyment.

"I actually think that probably, most men will see it as not serious," she guessed. "It's not 'boxing,' it's 'female boxing.'"

Vance's exhibit will open on Friday at the Roswell Museum and Art Center. At 5:30 p.m., she'll give a lecture about her work, followed by a reception at 6 p.m.