



Celeste Rapone, *Big chess*, exhibition view. Courtesy of Corbett vs. Dempsey

BIG CHESS

BY MEER ART

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It is with great anticipation that Corbett vs. Dempsey presents Celeste Rapone, *Big chess*. This is the artist's third exhibition with the gallery.

In her most recent group of paintings, Celeste Rapone addresses a certain feeling of embarrassment around the public expression of ambition, especially for women. Something like the hollow conceit of public competitiveness.

Rapone divides these eleven canvases into "spectacles" – her large-scale works, which are among the biggest she has yet made (a kind of artistic ambition, certainly an intentional self-reference) – and "spectators" – her small-scale portraits, all of which are dealing with an expression of resignation or regret. In the spectacles, she creates images of women over-performing, reaching extravagantly for the golden ring, with ambivalent or awkward results. Rather than lampoon these figures, they are approached with a kind of oblique empathy, hoisted by their own petards.

These works are composed as stage-like tableaux, with women playing oversized chess in the park, hiking up a public trail, spotlighted on a proscenium, or shark fishing from a canoe. Their smaller counterparts might be their viewers, women with heads hanging, one selling concessions but also having conceded.

As always, Rapone's compositions are spatially complex and require time to unpack – details (often hilarious references to popular or mass cultural objects and their attendant packaging) jostle with general forms (bodies, landscape, architecture) in ways that surprise and delight the careful viewer. Rapone paints *alla prima*, applying her materials directly, with no preparatory sketches, so the metaphor of over-preparedness that permeates these scenes is, for her, in an inverse relationship to her method of image-making, which is highly improvisatory and intuitive, starting with very basic color or shape ideas and building from that. She's thinking about painting strategies, history painting, the big picture in all senses. "What I was interested in with a comparison to chess is how in painting you

make a series of choices and can't be sure how they'll unfold or respond to one another", says Rapone. "You keep going and try to enter from different angles until something opens up. And many times you lose. But then you get to try over and over and over again". Virtuositically painted, deploying a dizzying array of techniques in each composition, the scenarios of *Big chess* chart a line between pathos and the pathetic, between aspiration and cringiness, all by means of a perspicacious visual imagination and uproarious sense of humor.