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PARADISE LOST: MARIANNA ROTHEN AT THE LITTLE BLACK GALLERY

By Crystal Bennett, January 26, 2018



Having worked as a model in the fashion industry from the age of 15, photographer Marianna Rothen knows only too well the asymmetrical power afforded to women in the realm of objectification. In her first London exhibition, *Shadows in Paradise* at the Little Black Gallery, the omnipresence of the male gaze is unmistakable. Invoking a world of lost souls en masse, the women in Rothen's images are left to their own devices, yet fail to escape the notion that they exist as playthings to be watched, even without the company of men who might watch them.

With a distinctly cinematic influence, specifically Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*, Robert Altman's *Three Women* and David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*, Rothen's collection nonetheless carries an atmosphere all its own. Her subjects are rendered as sweet and hollow as honeycomb, akin to figures in an enchanted yet derelict doll's house who are at a loss as to how to

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play amongst themselves once the man of the house, conspicuously absent, has turned his attention to the world beyond the mansion gates.

Structurally, Rothen favours layering, suggestive of veiled meaning. Mirrored faces stare out at unexpected angles; a screen door dominates the foreground beside a more distant, Monroe-esque figure; a shadow falls sharply on the ground, its empty presence crowned by a wig strewn in the grass near an abandoned pair of heels. Secrets and residues of seduction abound. Rothen's is a world of suggestion and fantasy, its mysteries hiding a darker truth her subjects seem to dance around, yet cannot quite bring themselves to confront. As if forever on the threshold of discovery, they play on in an avoidant game, women beholden unto girlhood, never quite freeing themselves to come of age and re-write the beautiful, broken fairytale.