

Pia Dehne's Women in Shock  
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*The Woman Was Too Stunned To Speak...*

Or so goes the popular TikTok meme in which a woman grasps her chest while a number of frantic camera angles capture her shocked face from different perspectives. A sinister keyboard plays a single chord in the background. The original video is sourced from an episode of the Singaporean TV show *Crimewatch* featuring a reenactment of a woman having her necklace stolen. As this woman walks through a park by herself, she passes two men walking in the opposite direction. One man reaches out to her and quickly snatches her necklace. Passersby watch but do not act to help her.

TikTok users, mostly young women or non-gender conforming people, have been sharing this meme to react to a number of situations in which they too have been stunned. A majority of these reactions are in response to sexist, homophobic or racist things said to them by family, colleagues or strangers. Users zoom in on their faces, sharing tight expressions of disgust, suspicion, or shock. Nearly a hundred-thousand of these videos exist in multiple languages. A meme of this scale marks a zeitgeist which unfortunately tells us that our supposed feminist progress has too many daily and global setbacks.

These stunned expressions are mirrored in the faces painted by Pia Dehne in her new series *Women in Shock*. Portraits of famous actresses, historical figures and singers such as Tammi Terrell, Jeanne D'Arc, Shelley Duval, Christine Jorgensen, Tippi Hedren, Nobuko Otowa and more are cast in soft hues of blue, green, beige and yellow. Dehne selected recognizable figures who personally experienced—or performed as characters who experienced—gender-based injustices during their lifetime. All of their narratives were individually tragic and what Dehne chose to represent is the fateful moment when they recognize their tragedy. The figures' bodies are delicately stained into stretched linen from dye-like paint diluted with water and coffee. Their clothing often disappears into the edges of the picture plane. Without grounding the figures into a representational background or context, they soak into the canvas appearing like ghostly aberrations haunting us from the ether. Yet their faces are sharply defined and clearly in focus. Dehne uses concentrated pigments to draw out specific details of open mouths, big eyes, and stern eyebrows. This technique amplifies their facial expressions as if they are meant to lock in our gaze, drawing us into their emotional state to garner empathy while their bodies disappear into our cultural memory.

Much has been said over the past 50 years about feminism, essentialism, gender performance, psychoanalysis and visual representation. Thinkers such as Laura Mulvey, Hélène Cixous, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Susan Sontag, Judith Butler, Julia Kristeva, bell hooks, and so many more have radically transformed the ways in which we view gender as an intersectional and social construction. If something is collectively produced, then it can also be collectively dismantled. But how long will this take? To be shocked or stunned by something infers a sense of surprise or unexpectedness. It is dismaying that in 2023 women are literally “taken aback” or blown backwards despite all the brilliant thinking and progress of those who have come before.

Dehne's memorable figures are spectres of famous women whose material, social and psychic worlds re-materialize in order for the viewer to confront traumas of the past. She tells me, “The shocked faces I've portrayed are from fairly well known women of the past, but I feel they are timeless reflections of our society and how we deal with such issues.” Such looks are amplified by the thousands of young people in the “too stunned to speak” memes, too. Rather than take a fatalist position, Dehne's hauntological approach conjures up a new feminist temporality. These paintings offer us an opportunity to remember the past in our present moment in order to imagine a more equitable future. What would really be shocking, would be to look at these paintings and feel neither compassion nor hope for change.