

CRISTIN TIERNEY

ARTFORUM



Melanie Baker, *Pomp and Sycophants* (detail), 2019, charcoal, graphite, and pastel on paper, 72 × 120".

Melanie Baker

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The smoldering, menacing drawings in Melanie Baker's "The Optimates," her first New York solo show in roughly a decade, depicted strategically cropped images of male politicians. The three monumental works on view (the tallest was eight feet high, and the longest was ten feet wide) were rendered with fierce and at times frenzied strokes of charcoal, graphite, and pastel. In *Mouthpiece*, 2018, Baker leaves the bloviating face of her subject (presumably Donald Trump) out of the frame, focusing instead on the grip of his hands on a lectern emblazoned with a partially obliterated POTUS seal.

In *Pomp and Sycophants*, 2019, one man stands in front of another, perhaps deep in conversation. Their faces are obscured—all we can see are the bald spot of one figure, whose back is to the viewer, and his interlocutor’s receding hairline, which is accentuated by a furrowed brow. And the trio of men in *Assembly of Elders*, 2019, are huddled like conspirators at a blackened window beneath opulent curtains, colored a poisonous shade of red.

Baker has been making large-scale drawings of power brokers since the early 2000s. Her subjects are generic, interchangeable “old white men” rather than individuals. She’ll pay meticulous attention to various characteristics—the slope of someone’s shoulders, or the folds of an ear—details that may call to mind particular people. Yet no matter how tempting it may be to try and locate the press photographs that Baker might have used for her source materials—in order to confirm that the weak chin at the top of *Mouthpiece* is President Trump’s, for instance, or that the widow’s peak in *Pomp and Sycophants* is Donald Rumsfeld’s—to do so is to miss the point. Her figures are archetypes of privilege and authority. That they are outside our purview, quite literally, is just another sign of their frightening supremacy.

While the artist’s works are grand demonstrations of her extraordinary technical skill, they also reveal her quietly caustic humor. Baker often lingers on the physical imperfections—or decrepitude—of her subjects. But unlike certain satirists of the past, such as George Cruikshank or Honoré Daumier, she doesn’t resort to caricature. She doesn’t need to: The men in her pictures are already, unbeknownst to themselves, parodies of influence. Take older pieces such as *Senator’s Lap*, 2007, an enormous, shadowy drawing of an unidentified lawmaker’s crotch that is more ridiculous than intimidating; or *Company of Men*, 2001, a thirteen-by-forty-five-foot colossus of brass buttons, signet rings, and bulging stomachs.

The tone of the exhibition at Cristin Tierney was, however, undeniably grave. The crimson drapery that frames the windowpane cross in *Assembly of Elders*—both pictorial devices that would reek of melodrama or camp anywhere else—are foreboding in this instance, even apocalyptic. The exhibition’s title was also loaded: The phrase *the optimates*, as a quick Web search informed me, refers to the “best ones” or “good men,” the dominant group in the senate during the Roman republic. The message was blunt, like the works on view. Baker suggests that in today’s political climate, subtlety is no longer an option.

— Rachel Churner