

Art Review:

Jen DeNike

Jen DeNike: *The Star Card*
Anat Ebgi, Los Angeles
10 November – 26 January



Jen DeNike
still from *The Star Card*, 2012,
single-channel video, colour,
sound, 4 min 12 sec, edition of 5
+ 1AP. Courtesy the artist and
Anat Ebgi, Los Angeles

Los Angeles is a deeply religious town. While its various centres anchor the better-known sects, such as Catholicism, Judaism and Mormonism, a vast panoply of small practices may be found just behind the open doors of repurposed storefronts all over town. The colour and vibrancy of the singing, dancing and proclaiming spills from dark industrial streets, and even from famous tourist spots.

It is in this context that one finds Jen DeNike's new work, at Anat Ebgi in LA's Chinatown, which is based entirely on the Star, the seventeenth trump, or Major Arcana card, from the Tarot deck. DeNike's installation, with its ostensibly strange video *The Star Card* (2012), of a voluptuous blonde woman repeatedly filling and emptying pitchers of water, and its meditation area made up of a homemade rug and pillows, doesn't actually seem that strange in LA.

In the video, the woman removes, one by one, a number of white paper cutout stars from her mouth while looking up at the sky. She is in a state in which celestial movements flow through and from her. Taken with the water pitchers, this suggests cycles of renewal, and from the placid nature of her demeanour, calmness in the midst of change. The woman also appears in two photographs – in one, emerging from water, and in the other, submerged beneath it as though to update Sir John Everett Millais's *Ophelia* (1852).

The exhibition's criterion for success seems to be the potential enlightenment of its audience, the willingness of a visitor to use the space for spiritual seeking, which in this case is the recognition of repetition and ritual as an opportunity for rebirth. The cues that lead the viewer to that recognition, while explicit in the video, stumble a bit in the other works, because they are products of DeNike's own ritualistic pursuits, and so necessarily coded and masked by that personal history.

It is a challenge for artists to charge objects with ritual significance, an even greater challenge to move the viewer into their own encounter with the silent side of meaning. To DeNike's credit, she is earnest in her effort, always leading off her shows with a performance to aid a viewer's transition: for this show, an orchestration of yogis, tarot readers and all manner of conjurings. She is intent on dissolving the gallery into a sacred space.

Art history's necessary inclination towards analysis compounds DeNike's challenge, however; and the installation can quickly pivot away from the strange world of LA's home-grown faiths into the mystical side of feminism, whether coming from the work of Kiki Smith, Ann Hamilton or Louise Bourgeois. Sadly, the air of contemporary art, with its checklist of art objects and references, blocks any traffic with the spiritual.

Not all viewers will have such an experience – for them, the show will be moving and necessary – but it raises the question of how the analytical, which can taint the intuitive side of things, overwhelms and drowns DeNike's conjured world.

ED SCHAD