

ARTFORUM

Devon Dikeou

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Devon Dikeou, *"Pray for Me"—Pope Francis I, 2014*, ten friarleros. Installation view, 2017. Photo: Jason Mandella.

Before David H. Koch affixed his name to the Metropolitan Museum of Art's exterior plaza; before the Rockefellers funded the Museum of Modern Art's international program during the Cold War; before Solomon R. Guggenheim, J. P. Morgan, and Andrew Carnegie marshaled their fortunes toward "refining" American culture; before several centuries' worth of upstanding burghers, upstart aristocrats, and absolutist royals who amassed collections and awarded commissions, there were popes. How different the history of Western art would be without Julius II, who commissioned Raphael's Stanza della Segnatura frescos and Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling between orchestrating military campaigns against Venice and France.

Raphael's *Portrait of Pope Julius II*, 1511–12, belongs to a veritable subgenre of painting: the seated pope. In the 1950s, Francis Bacon resuscitated this motif with his haunting studies of Velázquez's *Pope Innocent X*, 1650 (memorably described by Gilles Deleuze as “the insistence of a scream that survives the mouth, the insistence of a body that survives the organism”). More recently, Devon Dikeou has identified ten different seated-pope portraits, painted over some three hundred years, and has restaged them as photographs featuring only the chairs. For each, she has sourced separate *friarleros*, seventeenth-century “monk chairs” made of orange upholstery set over a carved-wood frame. In the project's previous iteration, Dikeou provided the *friarleros* as seating for art fairs—a wink at how fatigued fair visitors often find themselves anxiously determining whether a booth's chairs are welcome rest stops or off-limits antiques.

Grouped together in this gallery exhibition, “Pray for Me’—Pope Francis I,” the *friarleros* appeared largely identical, save for various rips, scratches, and other traces of extended use. (Anticipating further deterioration, Dikeou included a cabinet as a “reliquary” for storing torn-off bits of cloth.) Visitors were welcome to sit as they viewed the photographs that hung on the surrounding walls and considered the effects of their minute variations. How did the chairs' rotations force their occupants to position their bodies in relation to the picture plane? What crop most engendered a sense of intimacy? Such comparisons are far different from those prompted by the original paintings (reproduced in the exhibition's supplementary pamphlet). To arrange side by side a common motif painted by Raphael, Caravaggio, David, and so on is to present a sequence of styles. Rehearsing the progression from Renaissance to Baroque, Rococo to Neoclassical, is an outmoded art-historical method, yet the key question raised by Dikeou's project is best formulated in its terms: Has institutional critique entered a Mannerist phase?

In a handful of remarkable, posthumously published essays, Robert Smithson attempted to distill the essence of Mannerism—the principles underlying works such as El Greco's *Pope Pius V*, 1605, with its elongated features and unearthly palette. For Smithson, Mannerist painters rejected “Renaissance naturalism” and displayed “an exquisite but noxious sense of decorum.” That is, Mannerism (i.e., the style) both intensified mannerisms (i.e., idiosyncratic behaviors) and tested manners (i.e., the rules of the game). “Here is a world of countless plots and counterplots, all combining to make up a delicate structure, that evades simplism.” Dikeou's play on gallery-booth seating options lacks the moral authority of, say, Hans Haacke's laying bare of corporate sponsorship or Fred Wilson's excavations of cultural disavowal, but art fairs, like reality shows and the Trump presidency, have long proven impervious to reasoned objections and righteous outrage. A little more Mannerism might be exactly what our era needs—provided that the Mannerist's delight in surface also cuts deep. “Pray for Me” is at its most trenchant when you take a seat. The physical experience is revealing. The backs and armrests of the *friarleros* push up the shoulders and pull out the chest; the chairs are ergonomically engineered to convey monastic rectitude. The power of art's erstwhile patrons inheres in their furniture, however threadbare.

—Colby Chamberlain