

Everyday Looking

Aaron Peck

I was unaware of the tattoo on the underside of her right arm. Our interactions did not and would not permit such observation. Besides, she often sat on the far side of the room. In the gallery where the image was first exhibited, I found myself studying her likeness. In order to approach something like an understanding or appreciation of a picture, a viewer needs scrutiny, time, even impartiality—a forensic ability to notice detail, which everyday looking, at least with people, rarely affords, unless the subject happens to be a friend or a loved one. I consulted the title. Jelena. I wondered why the artist had given her a fictional name. Perhaps it was an allusion I didn't know.

The photograph itself portrays a young woman at her laptop in a café. Based on the angle of light and location—looking westward from Gene Coffee Bar—I assumed that the picture had been taken in early afternoon. In the background, outside through the window, some of the foliage on the tree is turning, which suggests late summer or early autumn; unless the tree is sick. There are three minor figures in the background as well. Across the street, on the west side of Main Street, appears a figurine-like passerby near Goh Ballet, while a subtle affinity exists between the closer passerby on the east side of Main and the central figure inside the café: both have dirty-blond hair. A man in a fedora rests the back of his head against the window of the café; his form is slightly obscured by the reflection in the window of the figure inside.

The interior foreground is a near monochrome. The chairs, countertops, shelves, and walls are all white or grey; the figure wears a taupe blouse, has blonde hair and white skin; the bar has soft wooden accents. Loose-leaf paper, newsprint, magazines, and stickers overwhelm the two electronic devices depicted (iPhone and laptop). The iPhone itself is buried in a pile of paper. The artist has captured a rather unique form of absorption. Instead of being immersed in the picture's central absorptive device, the laptop, the figure looks away and is engaged with a different object: a pile of papers—notes, I assume. It is a portrait of a writer in a moment of pause, concentration, thought, or recollection, but not in the moment of composition itself.

I thought the picture was of a student, because, as I have hinted, I recognized her as one of mine. Was she, at the time of the photograph, preparing a paper for one of my classes? It might be the case that the model is a student, but sometimes what we bring to a picture blinds us to what is depicted, even to what is obvious.

It was, it turned out, not my former student, but her doppelgänger.

An hour later, after the opening, I asked the artist why he chose to photograph Kara, and what the title meant. He said: "That's not Kara; it's Jelena."

"But she looks exactly like Kara."

"No," he said, "that's Jelena."