

BAF

Take Care

Katie So

June 13th – August 1st, 2020

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On its surface, self-care is simple: an activity undertaken to improve our physical, mental or emotional health. But self-care's current, unprecedented prominence in popular culture indicates that this concept requires a closer look. While self-care has been positioned as everything from a reaction to the anxiety of our social climate to an individual act of resistance against structural inequality, a determining factor in its rise has been greater public awareness of mental illness. In this context, we understand self-care as an essential survival skill for people

living with depression and anxiety, providing coping strategies needed to get through day-to-day life.

While popular acceptance of self-care is a net positive, the meaning of this term has shifted along with its increased visibility. Self-care has become both simplified and commercialized; portrayed as fun and indulgent when it can also be a matter of discipline and strength.

Through installation and works on canvas, Katie So's new exhibition 'Take Care' highlights this complex reality. So, who has shared her struggles with depression and anxiety extensively within her art practice, invites us into a domestic space inhabited by a figure that engages in self-care as coping mechanism - in ways that could be seen as both healthy and unhealthy.

In the environment So has created, we immediately recognize the trappings of millennial domesticity. Many of them, such as glowing salt lamps, communicate wellness - but the less beautiful objects, like a shopping bag of garbage, are familiar too. The figure within the home is present, but they are difficult to read. Faceless and cocooned in blankets, they seem comfortable and safe, but not necessarily happy.

Clearly, the anonymous figure in So's paintings is taking care - but that doesn't look as fun or frivolous as popular culture would have you believe.

The space depicted in 'Take Care' is deeply ambiguous, straddling the line between safe and stagnant, comforting and suffocating. The only colours used are white, black, and soft pink - a palette that while beautiful, is desaturated and monochromatic. The exhibition's dominant motif is houseplants, which seem to overwhelm every aspect of the space, crowded into a bathtub and trailing down walls. While these plants are well-cared for and thriving, we aren't as sure about their owner, who is binging on junk food and curled up with their laptop. Are they putting their plants' needs before their own?

The conversation prompted here is more complex than simply categorizing forms of self-care as positive or negative. It would be easy to tag eating junk food wrapped in blankets as dysfunctional, but when coping with mental illness, less socially acceptable behaviours such as these may be part of a necessary coping toolkit. Conversely, consumer products such as salt lamps and candles project an aura of wellness and intentionality, but their acquisition

may have been a maladaptive strategy of self-soothing.

The central irony of our contemporary obsession with self-care is that, even as it becomes more openly discussed, self-care is a fundamentally private activity. By exposing self-care within her works on an individual level, Katie So sheds light on its sometimes uncomfortable nature.