

In *The Steam Bath*, a video installation by Olivia Boudreau, women appear and disappear through dissolving curtains of steam. Old and young, the women lie back, slouch, and sit on sauna benches. Within this life-size frame of blue tiled walls, Boudreau lulls us towards a sentient experience of an intimate interior.

On the screen, the humidity is palpable: hair is wet and skin is slick.

As the hiss of hot air clears for the first time, a lingering veil of performance settles in. In what feels like a carefully calculated moment, a young woman, bare-breasted, turns her head to cast a sidelong, disdainful glance at her known but unseen audience. Another woman, who faces the viewer squarely, wears a bathing suit and a blank stare. Though *The Steam Bath* encloses the viewer in close-fitting boundaries of authority, there is a disarming insolence with which these bathers concede to their private sanctum being made public. If we've been invited to step in, why are we made to feel so unwelcome?

The themes of nakedness and looking, of display and gaze, hang heavy in the moist air of the sauna. It could be true that these are the female nudes of Ingres' *The Turkish Bath* (1862) or Cezanne's *The Bathers* (1906); however, there is no sense of frivolity, female camaraderie, or community here. *The Steam Bath* animates inherited compositions of naked women as pleasing, vapid objects of display.

Our close proximity to and prolonged visit with these present-day bathers gives rise to a sodden line of questioning: to what degree are these women unknowable strangers, revealed here as exasperating and estranged? In *The Steam Bath*, human interactions and forms of communication are cold and clouded, evaporating into raw ambivalence.

Boudreau's soft, rhythmic, and near-Romantic composition is a study of physical nearness punctuated by emotional distance. In the end, *The Steam Bath* leads us to ponder questions as mortal as the flesh: To what degree it is possible to be seen? Or simply, to disappear?

— Penelope Smart, co-curator

