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SOJOURNER TRUTH PARSONS

*Through Aug. 16. Foxy Production;
foxyproduction.com.*

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Let's say you start "Sex and Love With a Psychologist," a tricky new show by Sojourner Truth Parsons, with the painting "Ocean With Piano." There you'll find a paperdoll ballerina on point in front of a matte black background.

Behind the dancer are several views of a full moon, "attached" to the painting's bottomless darkness with trompe l'oeil blue tape,

and beside her is a lavender doppelgänger. If, then, you turn to "Tell Them That It's Human Nature" and find the same ballerina behind a seated, naked young woman, and both of them enclosed together in another painting-within-the-painting under another piece of blue "tape," you may think you've got the point: The show, as billed, is about sex, love and escalating levels of self-consciousness, as well as a steady cultural drumbeat of highly stereotyped images of femininity.

But since you could just as easily find a different progression entirely — crisscross the gallery following the round yellow moon, instead, or simply linger in front of the jagged, fractured face in "My Perfect Look" — it's almost impossible to get your footing. The secret, I finally realized, was in those changeless black backgrounds, which the paintings' reds, yellow, and hot pinks throw into such relief. Though they look thick and velvety online, if you're able to visit in person you'll discover that they're painted quick and thin.

In combination with the sketchy drawing, this makes the whole group of paintings look as much like stage dressings as they do like a gallery show — which adds a final, crucial turn to the work's self-consciousness.

WILL HEINRICH