

RHONA HOFFMAN GALLERY

Women



on the Verge

**CURATED BY
LISA WAINWRIGHT**

OCTOBER 27–DECEMBER 15, 2023

Rina Banerjee

Aviv Benn

Louise Bonnet

Louise Bourgeois

Caitlin Cherry

Emma Cousin

Elizabeth Glaessner

Katya Grokhovsky

Payton Harris-Woodard

Maryam Hoseini

Hayv Kahraman

Barbara Kendrick

Maria Lassnig

MJ Lounsberry

Wangechi Mutu

Gladys Nilsson

Christina Quarles

Christina Ramberg

Celeste Rapone

Karen Seapker

Tschabalala Self

Cindy Sherman

Nancy Spero

Nicola Tyson

Robin F. Williams

Caleb Yono

Mary Lou Zelazny

Wild Things

Lisa Wainwright

Phantasmagorical images of women populate figurative painting these days. There are bizarrely contorted, beautifully grotesque forms everywhere one looks, and they emerge from the hands of those who identify as women: queer, trans, cis, BIPOC, you name it. Against the current climate of judiciary conservatism (the recent dismantling of *Roe vs. Wade* was just the tip of an iceberg of longstanding subjugation, oppression and inequality), wild images of women in painting constitute apotropaic devices set to deflect the evils of the patriarchy. These painted ladies are out flaunting their bodily powers, their cunning strangeness, their defiance of any kind of normative convention of womanhood. While politicians try to define the legal boundaries of the female body, artists are pushing its configuration to extremes as a form of symbolic resistance. Don't fuck with us is the rallying cry of these women issuing transgressive representations, for we are on the verge of making a really big ruckus.

The 27 artists in this exhibition conjure diverse means of wrestling with the female form but none submit to picturing demure babes—a hallmark of centuries of representing women. Instead, they traffic in the deliciously carnal, where lush paint stands in for flesh and color is riotously keyed up (Jenny Saville and Lisa Yuskavage set the stage). Most significantly, all play with body distortion as the key gambit in this game of creative rebellion. Here are images of women with tentacular limbs flexing this way and that, stretched and elongated to extend their reach, to increase their might. Torsos are fulsome, often torqued and pushing up against the edges of frames that barely contain them. Who can resist these beguiling, evocative creatures, tumbling across canvases and adorned with such splendid accoutrements as furry pets, bright pansies, high heels, baubles, bangles, and sheaths of lamé—*Le goût féminine*. With their dazzling and destabilizing representations of bodies, these artists' creations prove a compelling type of noncompliance to the patriarchal playbook. The depictions of

women here are weirdly wonderful, in the best sense of idiosyncratic fictions that call into question so-called reality. And it's all delivered through artful fabrications and exquisite surfaces that delight and enchant.

Feminist art history identifies several flashpoints germane to these artists who knowingly riff off that narrative. Second wave feminism of the 70s haunts the field with its commitment to the distinctiveness of the female body as a standard bearer of feminist revolt. With slits against a hairy field, the Louise Bourgeois drawing here represents what has carried over from the 70s idea of woman's body as a sign of empowerment. Bourgeois' sexual allusions read like a sly wink, for she is having the last laugh along with a number of other artists in the show who boldly perform their versions of womanhood. Now, acknowledging that women's bodies may not always be endowed with "slits" or Judith Butler's opposition to the binary frame of female and male, or the recognition of the intersectionality of sex, race and class, there is still room for an aspect of second wave's reliance on the body as a powerful symbol of woman's might.

Third generation feminist work from the 80s is exemplified by the inclusion of a Cindy Sherman photograph. This is the only photograph in the exhibition but Sherman's paradigmatic take on the social construction of gender (a hallmark of third generation thinking) has been so influential as to warrant inclusion. The photograph belongs to her more grotesque imagery and its reference to Goya's *Saturn Devouring his Children*, now made even stranger as if that were even possible, resonates with some of the other more lurid pictures in the show. Many of the artists here carry on Sherman's parodic tactics with their collaged bits of material mined from our oversaturated media culture.

Maria Lassnig also appears in this examination of women's purposefully perverse bodies. Lassnig's provocative drawing of a woman by the sea whose head morphs into a boat anchor, and whose one arm painfully grips a bulbous knee is a sharp depiction of what it feels like to be in a body. Expressionism certainly showed a plethora of twisted bodies as a measure of pervasive angst, but few women artists were supported in that movement, and Lassnig was no exception. She is now heralded as a major historical figure and it is long overdue. A number of artists in *Women on the Verge* acknowledge Lassnig's precedence and show similarly misshapen women rendered in boldly arbitrary colors as a psychic tear in the social fabric.

Finally, the inclusion of Christina Ramberg and Nancy Spero in this pantheon of historical women acknowledges our site of Chicago as a significant place of feminist

art and action. Ramberg represents Chicago's historically unabashed independence from the coastal canons in pursuit of one's own funky queerness, a quality that dominates the exhibition as a whole. And a show of women artists in Chicago today stands on the shoulders of Artemisia gallery, one of the first all women galleries in the country founded in 1973 in Chicago. Nancy Spero, a force in the feminist story and part of the Chicago scene for a time, helped start A.I.R., the first women's gallery in New York City in 1972. Some fifty years later, a new army of women practitioners under the banner of Rhona Hoffman gallery—run for decades by another formidable woman whose disdain for convention has yielded some of the greatest shows in this city, continues the collective struggle for our equality, our agency, our power.

The works in *Women on the Verge* range from oddly suggestive narratives (Zelazny, Rapone, Hosseini, Seapker, Bonnet, and Glaessner), to staged monumental icons (Nilsson, Lounsbury, Williams, Yono, Self, and Kahraman), to pushing around colorfully schmeared paint as an expressive signifier (Tyson, Grokhovsky, Harris-Woodard, and Cousin, with Quarles' marvelous linework in the same vein), and then an abundance of crossovers to these divides. But in all, it is the depiction of monsters—young and old, from across the world, and diversely disfigured—that lay claim to our principal theme of vital rebellion. Aviv Benn's languid being gesturing at the moon with magical four fingered hands, Wangechi Mutu's more horrific, overtly sexed composite of a Siamese twin with eyes attached to a dog's head on the one side and a claw on the other, and Emma Cousin's flayed, freakish figures stretched in a tangle of parts, are all disorienting images of women types, monsters of varying kinds. Like the Medusa, or the Hopi's Ogre, Soyok Wuhti, monstrous elaborations of the female form have forever served to underscore the danger of social ills.

What drives many of these artists' projects is an engagement with the grotesque as a means of agitating notions of the docile and compliant woman. Marcia Tucker was already hip to the idea in the 90s with her *Bad Girls* exhibition, and *Women on the Verge* is a kind of *Bad Girls* redux but in paint. There is, for instance, an outrageous dressing up of the female form here that splits the difference between amusement and horror. Barbara Kendrick's digitally collaged bodies are conceived from distorted photographs of street detritus uncannily mixed with appropriations of more high-falutin museum objects—plastic bags meet golden vases, Caitlin Cherry's figure wears a bikini whose shimmering patterns spill onto her thighs, arms, hand, and face like the markings of a femme warrior going into battle, and Mary Lou Zelazny's creatures constructed from and adorned with a mélange of food, fabrics, and industrial parts (move over Arcimboldo) are both comical and terrifying. The show is full of such

masquerading women, such expressionist elaborations of bodies, caricatures of expected types, and monsters who break the masculine, colonizing gaze by presenting that which is disturbingly unnatural.

“Monster” comes from the Latin, *monstrum*, meaning an omen or a portent, like a message or a sign. And indeed, these paintings augur trouble for the patriarchy, a concept currently occupying the cultural discourse. From Hollywood’s *Barbie* to the production of *The Writer* on the London and Chicago stage, the horrible underbelly of the patriarchy has been revealed again. *Women on the Verge* belongs to a fury of feminist response. It was not long ago that Christine Blasey Ford called out Judge Kavanaugh’s attempted sexual assault, essentially a more violent version of Anita Hill’s experience three decades earlier with Judge Clarence Thomas. Harvey Weinstein, Jeffrey Epstein, and a host of other bad male actors have seen their comeuppance in the face of the #MeToo movement, but this remains a battle women face daily. Donald Trump infamously acknowledged such patriarchal prowess in his *Hollywood Access* tape boasting: “I just start kissing them. ...I don’t even wait. And when you’re a star, they let you do it. You can do anything,...Grab ‘em by the pussy. You can do anything.” But the former president’s awful buffoonery pales in comparison to such global incidents as international femicide, or simply the poverty and lack of education that denies women their basic human rights. It was just a year ago that 22-year-old Iranian, Mahsa Amini brutally died while in the custody of the so-called morality police for allegedly not wearing a hijab. Men dominate the highest legal and government offices with only a quarter of world parliamentarians as women. Despite episodic advances in gender equality, we are still dealing with deep systemic sexism.

Women on the Verge encourages us to radically rethink the possibility of women’s conditions today. These images upset the established order of things. They productively disorient historically “normative” representations of femaleness, such that we imagine other possibilities for manifesting our power, our agency, our voice, our creative imprint on the world. I trust these women seeing women. I empathize with their alternative bodily shapes, their vertiginous placements within a confining and confusing world, and the allure of the seductive trappings that surround them. I find their talismanic power fiercely effective and imagine our liberation as a result. Let’s terrify the patriarchy again, and do it through wondrous color, form, shape, and line, through the inventiveness of women on the verge.

Works in the Exhibition



Rina Banerjee

Mother gathered Three or no more dirty black stonestossed them to sky that could break what had hardened her ground and without frown or flirt of flower father like grease or butter slipped aside to free her from forty and some more grown men who held her as housewife like plant life with three or no more daughters, 2017

Acrylic on two wood panels with sequin fabric collage
80 x 40 in.

Courtesy of the artist and Hosfelt Gallery
Photo by Miles Petersen



Aviv Benn

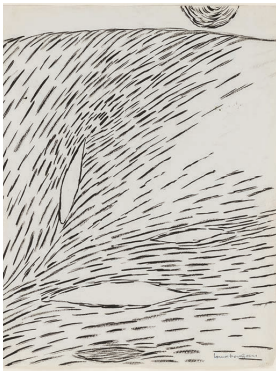
Stream of Your Tears Ends in My Anxious Heart, 2023
Oil and spray paint on canvas
50 x 50 in.

Courtesy of the artist

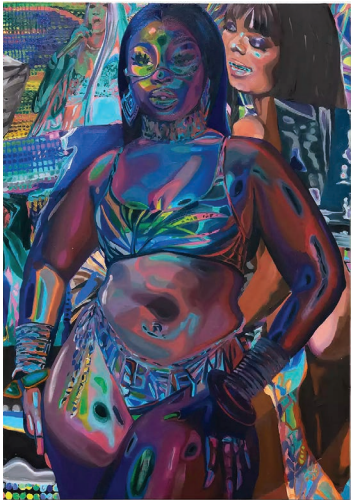


Louise Bonnet

Untitled, 2020
Colored pencil on paper
14 x 17 in.
Courtesy private collection



Louise Bourgeois
Untitled, 1950
Ink on paper
14 x 11 in.
Courtesy private collection



Caitlin Cherry
Immolation, 2022
Oil on canvas
36 x 24 in.
Courtesy of the artist and
The Hole
Photo by Arturo Sanchez



Emma Cousin
Sole Charge, 2023
Oil on canvas
67 x 47 1/4 in.
Courtesy of the artist and
Niru Ratnam Gallery, London
Photo by Tim Bowditch



Elizabeth Glaessner
Medusa, 2023
Oil on linen
36 x 24 in.
Courtesy of Elizabeth Glaessner
and P•P•O•W, New York
Photo by JSP Art Photography



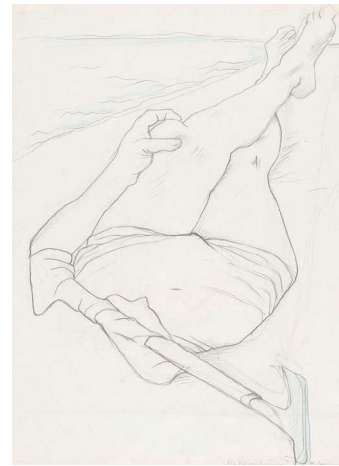
Katya Grokhovskiy
Un-intended, 2017
Marker, ink, coffee, and
oil pastel on braille paper
11 x 11 in.
Courtesy of the artist



Payton Harris-Woodard
Night Crawl, 2022
Acrylic on canvas
48 x 48 in.
Courtesy of the artist



Maryam Hoseini
Of Flesh and Three Hearts (No. II), 2023
Acrylic, oil, pencil and ink
on panel
78 x 44 in.
Courtesy the artist and Hales,
London and New York
Photo by JSP Art Photography



Maria Lassnig
Die Verankerung, 1972
Color pen and pencil drawing
24 x 17 3/8 in.
Private collection, courtesy of
Petzel Gallery, New York



Hayv Kahraman
Eight Bends, 2020
Oil, dried pigment on panel
80 x 80 in.
Courtesy of the artist and
Jack Shainman Gallery,
New York



MJ Lounsberry
Between Two Campfires, 2023
Oil on canvas
46 x 42 in.
Courtesy of the artist



Barbara Kendrick
Offering, 2020
Digital collage, archival giclee
print
22 x 15 in.
Courtesy of the artist



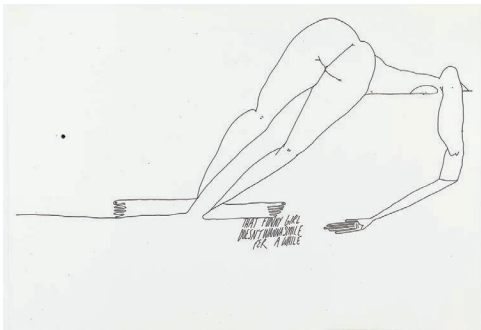
Wangechi Mutu
Twin Rivalry, 2011
Collage and mixed media on
found medical illustration
11 3/4 x 8 in.
Collection of Dr. Daniel S.
Berger



Gladys Nilsson
Balanced, 2021
Watercolor, gouache, and ink
on paper
30 x 22¾ in.
Courtesy of the artist and
Garth Greenan Gallery,
New York Gallery



Celeste Rapone
Girl's Girl, 2018
Oil on canvas
34 x 30 in.
Courtesy Corbett vs. Dempsey,
Chicago, IL



Christina Quarles
Fer Awhile, 2019
Ink on paper
13 x 19 in.
Collection of Marilyn and
Larry Fields



Karen Seapker
The Sower, 2020
Oil on canvas
72 x 60 in.
Courtesy of the artist



Christina Ramberg
Head Vase, 1970
Acrylic on masonite
11½ x 8½ in.
Courtesy of Karen Lennox
Gallery, Chicago



Tschabalala Self
*Black Face with Streaked Wig
(Red and Black)*, 2020
Colored pencil, acrylic paint,
gouache, charcoal, graphite on
archival inkjet print
36 x 28 in.
Collection of Marilyn and
Larry Fields



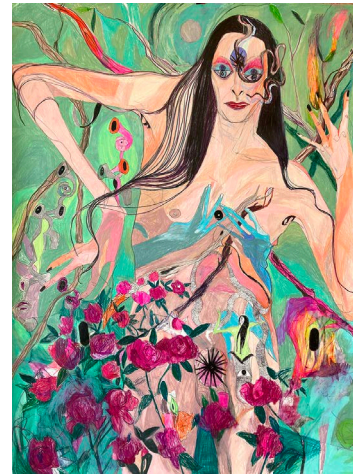
Cindy Sherman
Untitled, 1987
Chromogenic color print
45 x 30 in. (image),
edition 2 of 6, 1 AP
Courtesy the artist and
Hauser & Wirth
© Cindy Sherman



Robin F. Williams
Abject Terror (Ripley), 2023
Oil and acrylic on canvas
26 x 20 in.
Courtesy of Robin F. Williams
and P•P•O•W, New York



Nancy Spero
Normal Love, 1974
Handprinting and collage
on paper
8¾ x 9½ in.
Collection of Rhona Hoffman



Caleb Yono
*Interdimensional femmes /
rescue of the Vivian girls/
finger fire*, 2023
Lightfast color pencil on
cotton rag paper
51 x 38 in.
Courtesy of the artist



Nicola Tyson
The Disconnect, 2020
Acrylic on canvas
72 x 100½ in.
Courtesy of the artist and
Petzel, New York
Photo by Jason Mandella



Mary Lou Zelazny
*The Cake Lady and
Mrs. Columbus Welcome
Candy*, 2023
Acrylic, collage, oil on canvas
54 x 60 in.
Courtesy of the artist and
Carl Hammer Gallery, Chicago

RHONA HOFFMAN GALLERY

1711 WEST CHICAGO AVENUE CHICAGO ILLINOIS 60622