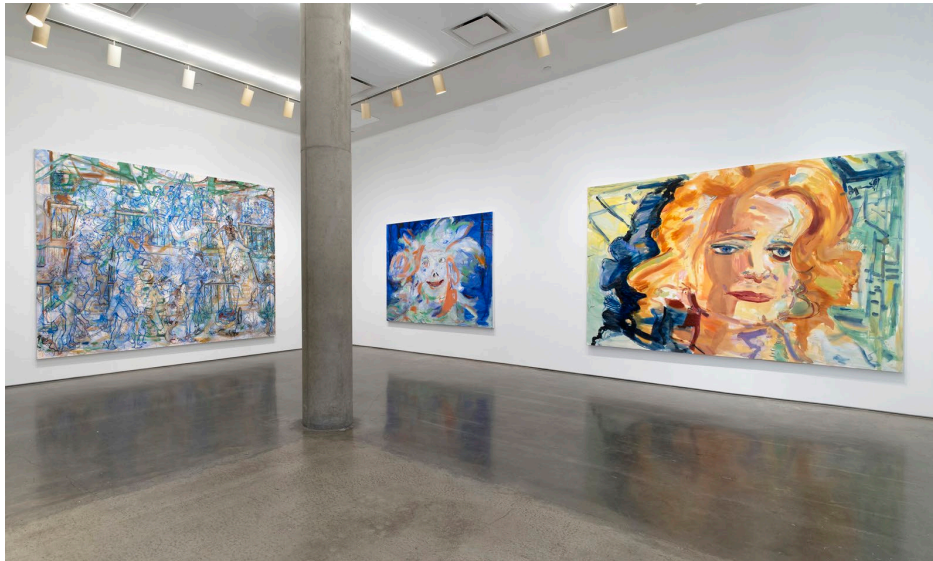


TWO COATS OF PAINT

February 5, 2021 | Andrew Paul Woolbright



Angela Dufresne, installation view at Yossi Milo

Angela Dufresne's dual shows at Yossi Milo Gallery and M+B Los Angeles provide an opportunity to assess the full breadth of this influential figurative painter's practice. The two shows, opened in tandem, nearly emptied her studio. The exhibits pose new paths forward from John Currin and Lisa Yuskavage's discourse on figural strategies, while embodying challenges to normative conventions of authorship and new approaches to the queer and post-humanist philosophies of Jack Halberstam and others, championing difference and community over the canon's tired obsession with the individual.

Many critics have acknowledged that figuration seems stuck while offering little enlightenment as to why. Since Currin and Yuskavage established the body as a site for intervention in discourses of desire, a swarm of painters fresh out of prestigious MFA programs and encouraged by a speculative art market have driven a dizzying rococo of figuration, re-orienting beauty standards and directing the gaze to new objects of desire. But much of it misses the point – namely, that Yuskavage and Currin were dispensing a critical and ironic poison pill, manufactured to ruin the experience of visual pleasure. A shell game of shifting cultural beauty standards has preserved indulgent pleasure but discarded critical engagement. The perpetual redefinition of beauty merely changes who is deemed beautiful while maintaining the cultural bias that beauty confers value. Figuration has yet to be wrested away from the beauty trap.

Enter Angela Dufresne. Her paintings assemble in the eye, emerging out of abstraction and into representation at the optimal moment while triggering the dissolution of the conventional subject. The background competes with the foreground, causing the whole surface to undulate and flutter. She begins a canvas with curtains of electric hues and completes it in a single marathon session – “one shot.” A preliminary drawing establishes line and allows her to paint the image efficiently, coaxing form from the bands of glowing color. The effect is dazzling and spectral, with complexities of human experience floating in and out of the spatial flutter. Dufresne casts the spotlight on people through shocks of radiant color, pulling body parts into the foreground from the neon soup behind. Identity, her method seems to suggest, is as much the crowd you're lost in, the balconies you dance on, the environment you inhabit, as it is just you.

In her earlier work, she repainted scenes from films and replaced actors with friends – artists, writers, colleagues,

even students. The orgy trope has served as a suitable vehicle for exploring her mind's abundant non-linear and rhizomatic connections. She initially rejected the pornographic turn in figuration in the early naughts, then cautiously embraced it, and ultimately tried to find the pure/profane and beautiful/grotesque dichotomies within it to situate the body between abjection and pleasure. The painting *Golden Showers of Love Painting* seems to be the culmination of this evolution: five cherubic figures can be seen peeing over an Italian balcony onto the partying crowd below, recalling Lotto's *Venus and Cupid*.

The strategy and subjects of her newest paintings push her response to the post-humanist challenge farther, returning to a more naturalistic way of addressing figuration and treating bodies as engines of ordinary gestures and postures by focusing on the crowd over the individual. The mob and the party have been strangely absent from contemporary figuration. Although Dufresne is still making portraits, the group scenes map out new space for queer praxis and utopic play, dissolving the liberal subject into a bacchanalian morass.

Examinations offers one such crowd scene. Nine feet tall by twelve feet wide, the painting depicts the building of the Collezione Marimotti that Dufresne visited in Italy – her take on Caravaggio's *Entombment of Christ*. Here, Christ seems adolescent. He is flipped in the opposite direction and handed down to an unaware crowd, which is unwilling or unprepared to catch him. All of the figures are painted calligraphically in rich metallic blue, manganese or cobalt, and together churn like a tornado up and around the sides of the canvas. A reach-around on the left side of the painting is mimicked in the center, where a young boy can be seen delving into a nurse's pocket. To the right, a stunningly painted lawn mower could be interpreted as a ribald euphemism just as easily as a reminder of a domestic chore.



Angela Dufresne, *Examinations*, 2020, oil on canvas, 108 x 144 inches

The show at M+B provides an even more stark challenge to the liberal subject through Dufresne's forthright transgression of authorship. "Angela Dufresne as William E Jones' *Painting Bottom*" features 22 collaborative works between Dufresne and Jones. Jones would send a title or prompt for Dufresne to paint, and the two of them would communicate back and forth during the creative process. Having spoken through films and characters and then through the mob and the crowd, in this series she adopts the even more radical strategy of outsourcing her subject matter and casting the voice of someone else through the work.

Throughout Dufresne's career Gena Rowlands has remained an avatar. But Dufresne has noted a reciprocal relationship. Referring to Rowlands' speech at the Governors Awards, Dufresne noted that "she speaks of living more than one life, enacting other lives through the text of others – other languages... She is my avatar, yes. But I am hers as well. And I'm definitely William's in the show out there. Letting him guide me through his writing." In *Examinations*, a figure that looks like a cross between Rowlands and Dufresne functions as an anchor to the swarming composition, in which children are being examined and led up a staircase in a procession of entombments. She looks straight at us, up from her book, neither aloof nor shocked, challenging us to see as unflinchingly as she can. In *Neon Bible*, Rowlands is about to sing, her neck tilted in anticipation. The musicians behind her are still talking with one another, not yet playing. The American flag or bunting above her suggests that Rowlands intends to induce a repressive Calvinist culture to dance.

With the subject matter outsourced to a collaborative project in the M+B exhibition, the cacophonous and dizzying scenes Dufresne refers to as the “whorish porous” replace the individual, and she eludes the figurative curse of the beauty trap. The two shows give us aesthetic leeway to appreciate Dufresne’s flourish and brushwork through the flouting of traditional conventions. Her oeuvre, taken in as a whole, has confronted the canon and fought for space for historically subaltern viewpoints and queer pleasure. With this latest shifting of authorship itself, we can now see the paintings and appreciate them not as aspirational or utopic, or as polemics for the redistribution of beauty, but as fully articulated works requiring no explanation or intellectual appropriation, to be evaluated in naturalist terms. Like Rowlands introducing dance to a puritanical America, Dufresne is trying to enable us to see bodies so as to actually feel them.



Angela Dufresne, installation at Yossi Milo

“Angela Dufresne: Long and Short Shots,”
Yossi Milo Gallery, 245 Tenth Avenue, New York, NY 10001
Through March 13, 2021.

“Angela Dufresne as William E. Jones’ Painting Bottom,”
M+B Gallery, 612 North Almont Drive, Los Angeles, CA 90069.
Through February 27, 2021.