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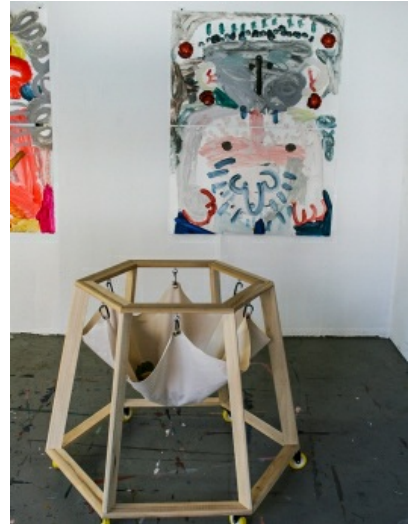


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By KYLE CHAYKA

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ABOVE: TATIANA BERG AND HER STUDIO. PHOTOS BY KYLE CHAYKA; PHOTO EDITING COURTESY OF [MICAHA SCHMIDT](#).

Artist Tatiana Berg's exhibition "Bill Murray" at [Hansel and Gretel Picture Garden](#) in Chelsea, open through November 2, might be her debut solo show, but she's already made a name for herself in New York. At 27, the young painter has already been featured in the Queens Museum biennial and shown at multiple galleries in Chelsea and the Lower East Side. She is becoming known as a leading pioneer of a new wave of painting that blends figuration and abstraction, taking as much from Tumblr and primetime television as it does from art history.

Sweeps of gestural color cover Berg's dramatic and improvisatory canvases. She's restless, creating work quickly and discarding it if it falls short of her expectations. After moving through a phase of pure abstraction, figures are trickling back into her work. Berg's solo show is populated by a cast of characters that bring to mind late Picasso—they are goofy, fallible archetypes that feel both friendly and mythical, human forms coalescing out of a storm of thick, delectable paint.

We met Berg at her light-filled studio in Harlem to discuss the drive behind her recent work, how figuration and abstraction aren't so different after all, and why *Mad Men* is awesome.

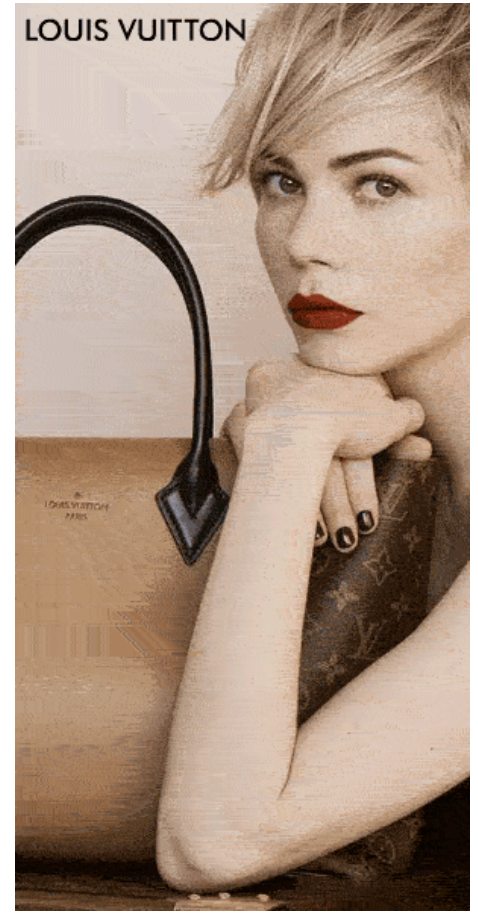
KYLE CHAYKA: Your solo show at Hansel and Gretel gallery, as well as your studio today, is full of super brushy, expressive human figures painted on rectangular paper. What is your relationship to these personalities?

TATIANA BERG: Well, these aren't portraits of real people or anything. I'm not thinking of anyone in particular; I usually start with an abstract gesture and pull out a person as I go, in the way that kids do. I feel like I'm learning about the people as I go. I'm listening, and they tell me things about themselves as I make them.

Most of them feel like little babies to me. Even though they're adult, with adult genitals, they have the naïveté of something freshly born. They don't seem to exist outside of the paper that confines them. They don't seem to have any troubles.

CHAYKA: The atmosphere of the contemporary art world right now—obsessed with installation, digital art, conceptual work—isn't exactly figuration-friendly. But many painters are really embracing depicting figures in their work.

BERG: Those are some of my contemporary painting heroes, Dana Schutz, Nicole Eisenmann, Amy Sillman—there are a lot of body parts in her paintings, in a lively and cartoonish way. There's a lot of beautiful work being made nowadays, but sometimes when I walk around Chelsea all day I feel a little anemic, like there's something missing from the diet. I felt that way when I was painting purely abstractly after a



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while. It's a mode I absolutely still respect and continue to incorporate in my work. But man cannot survive on bread alone. I need some iron in my diet. It's such a gutsy, ballsy, embarrassing thing to commit to picking up a brush, smushing some paint around, and saying, "That's a face."

CHAYKA: In the art world, you always hear the cliché that painting is dead. But it never really goes away; it's more alive than ever.

BERG: It's rare to hear anyone my own age say that anymore, much to my delight. That's a conversation that's stuck in the mud. Maybe some young people who don't have a chip on their shoulders will be able to leave it behind, because it's clearly pointless and not true.

CHAYKA: The Yupo paper you use really emphasizes brush stroke and the speed of gesture. It's clear that you really enjoy paint as a physical medium. What appeals to you about it?

BERG: Why does touching cashmere or silk appeal to you? It's just really sexy, I think. There's something really primitive about it, really direct. I need a one-to-one connection from my body to the thing that I'm making, and a paintbrush is really close. It's an extension of my hand—every decision that I make happens in real time. It's the most mainline avenue to connect brain, eye, and hand.

When I stand in front of a masterful painting, it's like my heart races, like I'm watching a gymnast pull something incredible off. Not just technical skill—agility, mastery, muscle, things that only come through training and discipline. You have to risk failure for the painting to be good, and to be okay with that.

CHAYKA: How does that idea of danger and risk play into your work?

BERG: The title of my current show at Hansel and Gretel Picture Garden, "Bill Murray," is related to this quote he has about dying on stage, as you well know, since you curated me in the "Dying on Stage" painting group show at Garis & Hahn gallery over the summer. Bill Murray said that improv comedy prepared him for *Saturday Night Live* because he was so used to dying on stage that he no longer feared death. It's the same way in painting—you have to accept failure and continually push yourself. I've been carrying that around in my heart as a mantra for a few years.

CHAYKA: In your show, you also have these three-dimensional painted structures made of canvas stretched over wood frameworks that you call "tents." How are those different from the other works?

BERG: The tents are a way to give paintings more of a body, and assert themselves. It allows them to literally take up space in a way that makes them matter differently. There are multiple ways to read them, as shelters or as furniture, but I find that more than ever I just see them as not so dissimilar to the wall paintings I make. I paint them in largely the same way.

CHAYKA: You and I are both obsessed with television. You made this tent called "Megan Draper," which is an abstracted version of a pattern found on Megan's bikini from the first

episode of the most recent season of *Mad Men*. What do you get from TV?

BERG: I was really moved by her as a character—she could have been boring, a shallow construction, but I found myself very attached to her and empathizing with her struggle with seeing herself as an artist, in her case with acting. Her character is so lively and optimistic, trying to reconcile her ambitious idealism with responsibilities of adulthood. I wanted the painting not to illustrate those ideas but to embody them in its making, mirroring her ability to live in the moment.

TV is the great novel of our time, isn't it? Like, Charles Dickens got nothing on *Mad Men*. I could make paintings about *Mad Men* for the rest of my life. I think formally and conceptually about that show a lot, it blows my mind. If I'm a painter part of modern life, as Baudelaire described, that's a pretty important part of it, I guess.

CHAYKA: Over time you've gone through periods where there's less figuration in your work and more non-objective abstraction. Why do you move between the two when painters so often commit themselves to one?

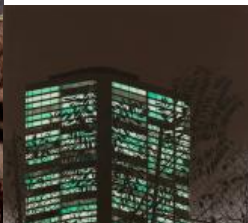
BERG: I increasingly feel like figurative and abstract are meaningless distinctions. The human heart is not abstract.

Whenever people seem perturbed by these transitions, I'm reminded of Philip Guston or Richard Diebenkorn, who famously made a name for himself as an Abstract Expressionism guy and then began doing very sensitive, thoughtful, observed figuration at a time when it was extremely unfashionable to do so. I admire that. He was seamlessly following his work where it needed to go. You can't skip paintings. You have to make all the stuff in between.

TATIANA BERG'S "BILL MURRAY" IS ON VIEW AT HANSEL AND GRETEL PICTURE GARDEN IN CHELSEA THROUGH NOVEMBER 2.



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