

Let's Get Physical:

Vanessa Conte

BY
Moritz Scheper

VANESSA CONTE's paintings, drawings, and stories are bursting with blows, kicks, and moaning flesh. Acts of humiliation and submission are carried out on young, curvy women, upon whom, almost always, extreme sexual violence rattles down. And yet there is no denying that behind the violence lies a subtle, sometimes dirty irony that completely subverts the reading of the work. The result is a multilayered, shockingly amusing observation of the female body, wrenched between the centrifugal forces of power and sexual yearning.

















- 202 *Kitten*, 2018. © Vanessa Conte.
 Courtesy: the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles.
 Photo: Ruben Diaz
- 205 *Justine*, 2018. © Vanessa Conte.
 Courtesy: the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles.
 Photo: Ruben Diaz
- 206 *Mannequin*, 2018. © Vanessa Conte.
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- 207 *Splat!*, 2016. © Vanessa Conte.
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 Courtesy: the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles.
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 Courtesy: the artist and Ginerva Gambino, Cologne.
 Photo: Roger Müller-Henseler

VANESSA CONTE (b. 1977, Yonkers, New York) lives and works in Glendale, California. She holds an MFA from the University of California, Los Angeles, and an MA in Linguistics from California State University in Long Beach. Conte's work has been shown at JB Jurve, Los Angeles; Hester Gallery, New York; Various Small Fires, Los Angeles; Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York; Night Gallery, Los Angeles; Ginerva Gambino, Cologne; Commonwealth & Council, Los Angeles; and Delmes & Zander, Cologne, among others. Vanessa Conte published several short stories of corporal punishment fiction using pseudonyms, before releasing *Cures for Pouting Girls* (New York: Hester, 2016) under her own name. In 2018 she published *Heavy Penalties* (New York: Random Man, 2018), which consists of a selection of graphite drawings.

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I have a clear memory of the moment I first came into contact with Vanessa Conte's work. Or rather, of how unsettled I was by her drawing *Polished Out* (2017). Here, in a series of cleverly nested cartoon panels, fingers aggressively probed a woman's mouth, and finally a discolored tooth was knocked out. The woman was little more than a figurine, human clay reshaped by the application of force. Moreover, this aspect was excitingly heightened by the graphic style, pushing the images to the brink of the grotesque, though not quite far enough to ignore the violence. It made me want to grin, but I didn't dare. My unease may also be due to my male perspective, to which, in the face of all current debates, Conte offers portrayals of women being given a thorough spanking. Moreover, within the universe of these pictures, everyone seems to agree that they deserve such treatment.

The victims in her works are naive Playmates of the Year, archetypal jerk-off material, or simply the result of perfected self-objectification: Angelina Jolie's lips, breasts like those of John Currin's doll-women, Kardashian booty. The overinflated padding of their buttocks and breasts, in particular, is maltreated, distended, twisted, and cleaved, often defying the laws of physics. Everything flops and wobbles in overdone orgies of beating. In spite of this, Conte's pencil-drawn cartoons, her paintings, and also her stories, which can be understood as a comical variation on corporal punishment literature, manage to layer a good dose of humor over the sheer brutality of their subject matter. This is due primarily to her style, whose *ligne claire* and muted colors recall Hergé's *Tintin*. The bulging, juicy breasts and buttocks, on the other hand, are visual codes from Japanese *hentai* comics, known for their explicit portrayals of violence and sex, often combined. In this way, Conte mobilizes a cartoon aesthetic of overdrawing in which exaggerated portrayals of violence have a long tradition—and a similarly long tradition of sexist stereotyping. Even her stories are littered with onomatopoeia, another typical feature of cartoons, lending them an ironic twist. Irony also occurs in less codified forms, however, as when the women in her drawings are beaten not by men or women but by cactuses or trees. Or when the violence is presented in hilarious ways, as in *Rebellion Fail* (2018), in which a young woman is hung from the ceiling as a human piñata and thrashed with sticks.

The importance of this ironic touch as a form of release when confronted with the work's coarse content becomes especially clear when it is missing. In *To The Torrid Sea I Fall*, her show at Commonwealth & Council, Los Angeles, 2018, Conte used no written sounds and almost no synthetic colors, which made it hard to reconstruct the contextual trail to cartoons and *hentai*. The shrill, exaggerated quality was suddenly removed from the pictures, as if the artist wished to block the easy way out via liberating laughter. This suddenly made any distancing difficult, and instead of a loud laugh, each of the works aimed at a lonely, quiet place in us. One female figure's backbone is bent by strong male hands as if she were a kitten. Another is forced underwater by an oar, causing her body to fold in two like the



Ms. Mycenae, 2016. © Vanessa Conte. Courtesy: the artist and Ginerva Gambino, Cologne. Photo: Mareike Tocha

covers of a book. These large-format works radiate a dark attraction like the one sought by subs in their domms, a world of sexual submissiveness the works also openly address sometimes. In *Redeemer* (2017), for example, a female body is seen from behind with flying hair, its huge buttocks adorned with delicate pink welts. Is she dancing? Does she lean painfully against a wall? Or both? And the mood-laden *Justine* (2018)—the most famous character created by the Marquis de Sade—shows, against a ruby-red background, a monstrous, fleshy ass being kneaded by another woman as if it were dough. The leg of a third woman protrudes into the frame, sticking its toes into one of the meaty buttocks—a small gesture that contains a huge amount of humiliation and power but (as the exhibition title suggests) also produces pleasure at a point where physical pain is getting a sweet taste. At least for some; others only feel the darkness when falling into the sea's depths.

In any case, these works make it clear that Conte's main interest is not in transferring fetish cartoon codes from the field of pop culture into art. No, these fantasies (whomever they belong to) ratchet up the deeply tangled relationship of body,

power, and sex. The fact that her focus is explicitly on the female body is made clear by the slightly older “bike paintings” that do not feature women being given a hiding or any cartoonish conventions. Instead, we see bizarre riderless bicycles in front of enigmatic landscapes. Not for nothing do their composition and palette recall paintings of Magic Realism and early Surrealism, as Conte borrows the method, used in both movements, of animating objects or giving them a sexual charge via an aura. Over time, her bikes changed from mere objects into accumulations of female organs—fallopian tubes, wombs, vulvas—behind which the bicycles increasingly vanished. This is especially well illustrated by *Ms. Mycenae* (2016), in which the handlebars and crossbars of two bicycles consist of fallopian tubes, while the wheels are, well, pussies. Not long after painting *Ms. Mycenae*, Conte traded these intricate body/object combinations for a more explicit, more drastic register in which to portray female objectification, a register of permanent punch-ups. What remained was the malleability of the body, with flesh now wobbling under kicks and blows where previously organs were bent into shape. These unnatural distortions of soft, female tissue (that never tears or bleeds) tell, above all, of extreme imbalances of power: helplessness, submission, possibly both.

Bearing Conte’s excellent, reliably dirty sense of humor in mind, her work can even be classified as an active reclaiming of sexist image conventions, a standard approach since third-wave feminism. *Cures for Pouting Girls*, the title of her short story collection, might suggest this reading, as it embeds her exaggerated corporal-punishment fiction into the inglorious history of female marginalization, which often came in the form of obscure “cures.” For if it is mostly naive playmates, pure male fantasies, who are cured with extreme sexualized violence in her work, then maybe it is also directed against a specific definition of femininity. But only maybe—after all, we are now in the midst of the fourth wave, meaning we cannot ignore the affirmation of kinkiness that shines through, especially in Conte’s larger pictures. And why should we? If one is looking for a feminist critique in these works, then perhaps it lies in their subtle commentary on the male tradition of carnal desire in art, from the odalisques of Ingres to Araki’s bondage pictures. In her works, their sensuous, sexual charge moves in a distinctive direction, appearing in a sometimes disconcerting, almost outrageous setting. The high point in this development to date came with her last show *Up to Your Neck* at Ginerva Gambino, in Cologne, 2019, featuring situations (or thrashings) from the life of the all-American girl Amy. In the show’s small-format paintings, which come without the black outline lines typical of cartoons, *Mother* (2019) stands out. Here, Amy sits on a bed while her mother kneels behind her, combing her hair. But poor Amy is bound with a rope and her mother’s bathrobe is open, revealing bare breasts and leopard-print panties. A roll of gaffer’s tape nearby points to what may be yet to come. This constellation of sexual dominance is disturbing above all because it contains remnants of an everyday, caring mother-daughter routine. With this hint at the

influence of family, the sweetly tinted image offers explanations of where our tendency to submission or dominance comes from—after all, each one of us has a tacit preference, without it necessarily being a fetish.

Nonetheless, works like these are the reason people repeatedly walk out of Conte’s exhibitions in indignation, as if they themselves had just been given a beating for the pleasure of all present. They can hardly be blamed; after all, the assaults on Conte’s female figures are loaded with violent sexual humiliation. Her works flirt too strongly with taboos and misunderstandings for that. Added to which, Amy and the other nameless but always curvaceous women are not Saint Teresa, avid masochists voluntarily seeking sweetness in all manner of pain. Instead, the kicks and punches rain down on them like the last judgment. Perhaps they can be seen instead as a female reboot of the figure of Saint Sebastian, who did not choose to die but died beautifully, and whose body has, for centuries, been a battleground of escalating pain and sexual desire—with the tiny addition that seriousness isn’t sacred at all with Conte.

Elsewhere, I have called her works “Tarantinoesque” as a way of dealing with this combination of ironic exaggeration and fascination. But perhaps this is precisely what distinguishes her approach: it breaks a taboo while fascinating us in a dark, sensual way. We can’t control this response; it makes us feel a peculiar kind of degradation. Not the usual authority of artworks, but a contempt we seem to feel in our own flesh. But that also somehow feels good—at least for some.

Nelly Gawellek: Ausstellungen: Vanessa Conte, Stadtrevue, 03-19:76.

AUSSTELLUNGEN



3 | Installationsansicht aus der Jubiläumsausstellung | © Hammelehle & Ahrens



5 | Vanessa Conte, »Bottomed«, 2019, Acryl auf Holz
© Vanessa Conte, Courtesy Ginerva Gambino/the artist, Foto Mareike Tocher

meinen Berlin-Exodus der Kölner Kunstszene entschieden und ab 2002 in das aus einem einstigen Umspannwerk postmodernisierte Galeriehaus An der Schanz einzogen. In dem nach der Herkunftsdominanz der Gründungsgaleristen benannten »Schwaberbunker« erlebten sie im Laufe der Jahre einen lebhaften Wechsel von Mitbetreiber*innen und Gästen mit Pop-up-Galerien. Ihre Jubiläumsschau mit einem erfrischend frechen Mix von Arbeiten auf Papier – mit dabei etwa Thomas Arnolds, Hans-Jörg Mayer oder Thomas Rentmeister – spiegelt das wie Ahrens es nennt »gegen die Streichelrichtung des Zeitgeistes gebürstete« Programm der Galerie, die auf der ART

Cologne stets durch Qualität sowie eine wohlthuende Distanz zum Mainstream besticht. (Uta M. Reindl)

»#haah25«, Galerie Hammelehle & Ahrens, An der Schanz 1a, Di-Fr 11-18 Uhr, Sa 11-16 Uhr, bis 30.3.

4 | »Köln im Kunstrauch« im ZADIK

»Urlaub vom Markt« wünscht sich 1988 die freie Kölner Kunstszene und ruft ihre gleichnamige alternative Veranstaltungsreihe aus, die parallel zum Messetrubel der Art Cologne als »Kunsterfrischung für Marktskeptiker«, aber auch als Erholungsprogramm für Messen-gäste beworben wird. Ist das jetzt eine Trittbrettfahrt oder ernstgemeinte Kritik? Oder sogar eine Win-Win-Situation für alle Beteiligten? Das ZADIK untersucht in seiner aktuellen Ausstellung in Zusammenarbeit mit dem Kunsthistorischen Institut der Uni Köln die 1980er Jahre, in denen der Kunstmarkt weltweit und auch in Köln mit boomenden Preisen an Einfluss gewinnt und die Aufmerksamkeit des Kunstpublikums zum umkämpften Gut wird. Die Dokumente offenbaren die Strategien der Akteur*in-

nen: Wie man sich hier zusammenschließt, sich gegen die Konkurrenz positioniert, interveniert und intrigiert, ist trotz der eher nüchternen Präsentation ein ebenso lehrreicher wie unterhaltsamer Blick zurück in die 80er Jahre, die sich vielleicht gar nicht so sehr vom Heute unterscheiden. (Nelly Gawellek)

»Köln im Kunstrauch – Zwischen Idealismus und Kommerz in den 80er Jahren«, ZADIK, Im Mediapark 7, Mo-Fr 10-16 Uhr und nach Vereinbarung, bis 31.03.

5 | Vanessa Conte, »Up to your neck«

Achtung, die erste Einzelausstellung von Vanessa Conte bei Ginerva Gambino ist nichts für schwache Nerven! Die Comics und Gemälde erzählen in verschiedenen Episoden aus dem Alltag der Protagonistin Amy, die zwischen Disco und Shopping Mall in die unmöglichsten Situationen gerät: Die Friseurin malträt ihre nackten Brüste mit dem heißen Glätteisen, beim Joggen im Park wird ihr bloßer Hintern von einem Ast gezüchtigt, ständig wird sie misshandelt, erniedrigt und bloßge-

stellt. Die detailreichen, fein mit Bleistift gezeichneten Szenen wecken eine irritierende Mischung aus Entsetzen, Belustigung und Neugier. Was ist bloß los mit Amy? Ist sie Opfer oder Provokateurin? Macht ihr das am Ende vielleicht sogar Spaß? Und wo stehen wir, während wir dabei zusehen? In unübersehbarer Referenz zu den Underground Comics der 70er Jahre von Robert Crump und Co. aktualisiert Vanessa Conte Fragen nach gesellschaftlichen Tabus um die Themen Macht, Abhängigkeit, Gewalt, Fetisch und Sexualität. (Nelly Gawellek)

Ginerva Gambino, Kyffhäuserstr. 31, Mi-Sa 11-18 Uhr, bis 30.3.

Mehr Kunsttermine:

Siehe Rubrik »Kunst« im Tageskalender

Alle städtischen Museen: museenkoeln.de

Aktuelles Programm der Galerien im ausliegenden Galerien-Booklet und auf koelngalerien.de

Website der freien Kunsträume und Initiativen: aic.cologne



Chloe Stead: A review of Frieze Art Fair, KubaParis, October 13, 2018:web

Elsewhere, I liked paintings by [Julie Curtiss](#) and [Robin F. Williams](#) at [Various Small Fires](#), and drawings by [Vanessa Conte](#) at [Ginerva Gambino](#). In what felt like a welcome antidote to the STRONG WOMENTM stereotype that marketers have latched onto in the past few years, the works all depicted women as complex, mercurial beings, with proclivities that go beyond the pale. Conte's titillating comic book style illustrations, for instance, depict girl-on-girl sexual violence; in them, nipples are roughly grabbed and ample behinds are kicked with heavy boots. They're not conventionally empowering, but they do highlight the complexity of navigating between our politics and, to paraphrase queer theorist [Jane Ward](#), the "shape" of our desires, which might not always be as politically correct as we'd like them to be.

Women were also at the forefront of *Social Work*, an invitation-only section dedicated to female artists "who challenged the status quo and explored the possibilities of political activism in their art making during the 1980s and '90s." There were some great works here; I particularly liked [Helen Chadwick](#)'s humorous 'In the Kitchen' series, which depicted her literally standing inside replicas of various kitchen appliances, and the backlit cibachrome photograph *Loop my Loop* (1991) featuring a lock of blonde hair entwined with a pig's intestine. While the former work feels (thankfully) a little dated by now – although I would be remiss if I didn't point out that women are still doing the bulk of domestic chores – it was easy to see how the wit and directness of *Loop...* might inspire a new generation of young women to create their own updated versions of Chadwick's "monstrous feminine".

The initiative was a transparent effort to push the market visibility of the included artists – other booths were by [Berni Searle](#), [Mary Kelly](#) and [Sonia Boyce](#) – and it appeared to be, at least partly, working. Artnet reported that by the end of preview day, 'In the Kitchen' had almost sold out, and Boyce's photo installation *The Audition* (1997) had been acquired by Tate. The section was by no way perfect, though. Elephant Magazine's Holly Black put it best when she posted this pithy review on her Instagram: "One long row, by the toilets, at the back of Focus? Last year *Sex Work* and *The Nineties* formed a dynamic hub in the middle of the action. This year the action had be[en] pushed to the edge – Literally marginalized. Wtf?" It was a good reminder that visibility doesn't automatically amount to structural change.

The Yellow Wallpaper

Ginerva Gambino, Cologne 10 November – 16 December

These days there is no shortage of exhibitions focusing on the body in general and the female body in particular. Yet this is to be expected, since the exploration of this issue is as urgent and topical as ever. Even so, this group show offers a different approach, connecting the works through references (some obvious, some not) to the eponymous 1892 short story by feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman – a tale that obviously hasn't lost importance for female artists since it was first deployed in Feminist Art Program's *Womanhouse* exhibition in Los Angeles in 1972.

In brief, Gilman's story tells of a female character confined to a room to recover from 'nervous exhaustion'. There she discovers a woman imprisoned inside the pattern of the room's wallpaper, which she begins to rip off, eventually hallucinating that the woman is herself, descending into insanity along the way. If the story is dominated by techniques for the pathologising of womanhood, the works here, by the five female artists, focus instead on the leitmotif of the madness-inducing incompatibility between self-image, the image of women and an actual woman. For example, in her sombre all-over paintings *Tar Baby #7* and *Tar Baby #8* (both 2015), Phoebe Collings-James has applied a wildly patterned black colour using the sole of her foot. The extent to which

she uses this Carolee Schneeman-inspired painting technique to create counterimages of female corporality becomes clear when contrasted with *Cunt* (2014). This insult is repeatedly written, in baby blue, on a dirty cleaning rag, summarising a misogynistic view of women as contemptible domestic workers.

A more humorous path is taken by Ebecho Muslimova, whose satirical ink drawings show her alter ego Fatebe, a naked pop-eyed corpulent, who variously uses her body and its orifices for her entertainment, for example as a human curtain clip in *Fatebe window curtain* (2016), wherein the curtain goes into her mouth and emerges again somewhere below her waistline. The raw activism of this cartoon character almost functions as an antithesis to the woman in Gilman's story, who is compelled to lie still as part of a resting cure, because medical science at the time related physical stimuli to female hysteria.

Movements of female flesh are also central to Vanessa Conte's *Polished Out* (2017). Constructed in panels like pages of a graphic novel, the drawing shows how a woman's dead tooth is violently extracted from her mouth. The flapping of cheeks after a slap to the face or the intrusion of fingers into the oral cavity are all exaggerated in the kind of pro-violence

fashion we associate with, say, Quentin Tarantino's films. This really is an orgy of demeaning brutality. Initially the combination of American pulp and sexualised violence seems highly problematic. Yet this concern largely disappears as soon as one flicks through Conte's short-story collection *Cures for Pouting Girls* (2016), also on display. These tales, inspired by the genre of corporal-punishment fiction (well known via *Fifty Shades of Grey*, 2011), also show female caricatures with enormous breasts and watermelon-size bums being sexually humiliated by angry men, as a punishment for... nothing much really. By means of this unrestrained, ultra-graphic amplification of casual sexism, in stories with titles such as 'Going Down' or 'Pamela's Hard Day', Conte forges a clever connection with Gilman's portrayal of a cure that was aimed at women's minds but intended for their bodies.

The dark, at times cynical humour in most works, especially in those by Conte and Muslimova, manages to remove the sour taste of moralism from this bitter topic. Nonetheless, it's a damning indictment of how women are viewed in our times that Gilman's story continues to be a reference point for young female artists – even if, as here, it's wittily mobilised. *Moritz Scheper*

Translated from the German by Kevin Kennedy



Phoebe Collings-James, *Cunt*, 2014, oil on cloth, 50 x 53 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Ginerva Gambino, Cologne



THE REAL SCANDAL OF THÉRÈSE

Dreaming is not the alleged pedophilia of Balthus but the fact that all of us, like Therese, are split subjects rather than the coherent autonomous moral beings we fantasize ourselves to be. We don't always like to recognize our own curiosity let alone our aggressive desire for knowledge/control. As viewers we want to know what lies under the underwear and, even more invasively, we want to know WHAT she is dreaming about. Balthus' painting captures and eludes in the same way as its ostensive subject **Thérèse**. Mia Merrill's complaint to the Metropolitan Museum about "blatant objectification and sexualization of a child" in the work demonstrates a moralizing conception of power, sexuality and art that seems to be on the rise at the moment. In his defense Balthus might say with Baudrillard "They do not understand that seduction represents mastery over the symbolic universe, while power represents only mastery of the real universe." Seduction plays on the reversibility of signs, on appearance and on ambiguity, foiling systems of power and meaning including a phallic economy based on anatomy. We would do well to appreciate it, particularly in the realm of aesthetics where it rules us anyway.

THESE DEBATES ABOUT REPRESENTATION SEEM QUAIN IN THE CONTEXT OF AN OBSCENELY (OR DELIRIOUSLY, DEPENDING ON MOOD) TECH AND MEDIA-SATURATED ANTHROPOCENE WORLD THAT CAN ONLY PRETEND TO BE CLEAR ABOUT MATTERS OF IDENTITY, PRIVACY, AGENCY, AND AUTHENTIC DESIRE.

Two witty, visually rich concurrent shows in Los Angeles, *The Cruelty of Others* at Household, and *Homeward Bound* at Nicodim share a sophisticated interest in sexuality and domesticity. Nicodim gallery becomes a set, painted deep liverish fuschia, furnished with an array of Windsor, brut, nouveau, ad-hoc, kink, African, and designer pieces that has equal importance with the visual art on display and contributes to the foregrounding of a body that sleeps, sits, writes, eats, gets cold, and gets off while looking at images of itself. The cavernous industrial space of the gallery gives more of a bunker or club rather than a domestic feel, adding an additional layer of decadence so that the entire show becomes a work of installation art playing macabre and sensual qualities against cerebral, grit against luxury, decoration against endlessly receding notion of function.

visitors to Nicodim are greeted by a Kris Lemsalu sculpture with two pairs of tawdry leather ants suspended on a pelvis formed by apparent jawbones, tapering into delicate rococo ceramic loafers performing a danse macabre around an eternal electric flame, expressing desperate, defiant energy in a tattered Beckettian situation. Are we, like twin lizard tails twitching on headlessly, drawn to a vulnerable phony flame without warmth?

Bondage in the Buff on the Couch, and *Ties that Bind in the Breakfast Nook* are photos by Lisa Anne Auerbach depicting herself nearly nude in clean comfy middle class domestic environments, blase, perusing porn magazines. These pieces are structurally, iconographically very similar to the Balthus painting but they feel hygienic and bored, mildly funny in that female artist Auerbach has flattened so many layers of sexual representation into a "who's thinking who" game. There is no real tension or play of seduction here, instead a disenchanted backwards look from the perspective of our cloned, decoded, blended trans days. It's as if Auerbach is beginning to wonder with Zizek: "What if sexual difference is not simply a biological fact, but the Real of an antagonism that defines humanity, so that once sexual difference is abolished, a human being effectively becomes indistinguishable from a machine." And further, might the end of sexuality via self-cloning also suggest the end of spiritual transcendence?

A woman tied up with a profusion of domestic bric-a-brac (dish racks, ironing boards, lamps...) picks up the cell phone and carries on a chat, ranging from very banal reportage to comments about her being shot in two different places on her body, uncertain of whether she is alive or dead, and declaring that she just killed a girl. The crescendo of Bonajo's video work comes when two similarly burdened women encounter each other in the white walled space: one says she feels like Aphrodite; the other says she feels like dancing and they begin an awkward clanky spin. Bonajo gives us an analogue cartoon image of our self-amputated and aggregated selves seeking relief in gadget love a la McLuhan. Reference to Aphrodite is amusing because this figure is, despite the bondage, not erotic, but rather neutral like a DIY proto-cyborg. If she is sexual, it is in having become "the sex organs of the machine world, as the bee of the plant world, enabling it to fecundate and to evolve ever new forms."

(McLuhan) Bonajo suggests that her human body is otherwise obsolete and nonsensical, encountering resistance in the very attempt to protect and empower. In Bonajo's work as in the Homebound show in general, there is a productive confusion about subject and object, living and dead, utility and desire.

At Household, Krysten Cunningham's scaled up dishrack, children's loom and bookend sculptures interpose themselves between the viewer and paintings by Vanessa Conte. The muted line-heavy paintings depict women being slapped, stepped on, punched and kicked.

In one of the four works, the perpetrator is shown full-figure with long blond hair, blouse, shorts and heels. Conte keeps a cool painter's head with this hot subject, demonstrating much painterly invention in the response of flesh to force. Her figures are very carefully related to the frame or edge of the canvas support. They appear to lean against it, step on it as if balancing, and push off against it. Conte also dramatizes the question of what/who is just beyond the frame. In one work a nipple is held a hair's breadth away from a heater. Conte



shows us that the orchestration of tensions, disclosures and secrets in painting itself makes the true sado-masochistic pleasure game. The style and subject of the work evokes the 40's, evincing nostalgia for lost taboos when there were structures to subvert.

This interest in sadomasochism on the part of Auerbach, Conte and Bonajo seems to be a search for resistance in defiance of endlessly malleable cyberspace bodies. As always, the traumatic encounter compels us to symbolize in life and art.

by Hannah Hughes

ARTILLERY

8 / 3 / 2016

“GRIND”

By Eve Wood



Vanessa Conte, My Mycena, 2016

GRIND

Various Small Fires

by Eve Wood ·

The idea of a failed utopia is certainly nothing new as those of us who live in any bustling city like Los Angeles will tell you, but the way in which this failure is understood can, and must be, redefined according to the state of disintegration we have become accustomed to. “Grind,” a group exhibition curated by Joshua Nathanson at Various Small Fires is an energetic, if not somewhat haptic take on the age-old theme of the city as its own crumbling ecosystem of smog and hopelessness amidst stunning skyscraper views. Spanning a variety of materials from Vanessa Conte’s beautiful and elegant acrylic on canvas works to Asha Schechter’s oddly idiosyncratic inkjet prints on adhesive vinyl of everyday objects like light bulbs and rotten persimmons, the works in this exhibition are all of a piece, and leaves one wondering if our all too digital future might very well consume us completely.

ART & DESIGN

Made in Space

Art in Review

By ROBERTA SMITH AUG. 1, 2013



Works by, from left, Marcia Hafif, Rebecca Morris, Hannah Greely and Eric Orr in “Made in Space” at Gavin Brown’s. Courtesy the artists, Gavin Brown’s enterprise, and Venus Over Manhattan

If much of the work in this sprawling, energetic two-gallery group show looks fresh and unfamiliar — and as if it might not come from New York — there’s a reason. Everything on view was made in and around Los Angeles, fairly recently and often by artists who are either young, unknown in these parts or both. The show’s title, “Made in Space,” connotes the City of Angels, where, the thinking goes, studio space is cheaper and more plentiful and the general horizontal openness gives everyone more time and privacy to develop.

Certainly the work there often seems looser, brighter and generally more at ease with itself compared with what is found in New York. There’s a greater tolerance for painting of all kinds, even full-on or diluted, and less of a mania for minimal austerity.

“Made in Space” was first seen in Los Angeles at Night Gallery, which is overseen by Mieke Marple and Davida Nemeroff, a young photographer-dealer formerly of New York whose large color close-ups of horses are represented here. The show is probably less a snapshot of

the Los Angeles scene than of the ecumenical tastes of its organizers: Laura Owens, an established painter who decided against including her own work in the show, and Peter Harkawik, a younger sort-of painter who favors decals on clear vinyl at Gavin Brown (and who has his New York solo debut at Knowmoregames, a gallery in Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn, through Aug. 30).

The younger set gets solid backup at both galleries from older artists like Rebecca Morris and David Korty (both especially impressive), Derek Boshier, Jim Isermann, Jorge Pardo, Allen Ruppersberg and Peter Shire, a well-known ceramist-sculptor and founding member of the design group Memphis, whose Memphis-y bench-sculpture brightens the entrance at Gavin Brown.

But it is mostly works by artists in their 30s with little or no New York exposure that steal the show. These include Laeh Glenn's small, quirky paintings; Patrick Jackson's handsome bucket-size ceramic cups; John Seal's stylistically varied paintings (as well as Aaron Wrinkle's); and a charcoal rubbing on canvas by Joshua Callaghan of a Ford Focus. The efforts of Vanessa Conte, Lucas Blalock, Gabrielle Ferrer, Josh Mannis and Max Maslansky also reward attention. Still, the show's surprises are not all from the young. Marcia Hafif, the New York abstract painter who now divides her time between the coasts, is the oldest artist here, and she weighs in with an anomalous work: a wall-size handwritten text about women, aging and sexuality that makes its presence felt.

Correction: August 3, 2013

An art review on Friday about "Made in Space," at the Venus Over Manhattan gallery and Gavin Brown's Enterprise in Manhattan, misstated the given name of one artist in the show and misspelled the given name of another. They are Josh Mannis, not John, and Laeh Glenn, not Leah. The review also omitted a co-owner of Night Gallery in Los Angeles, where the show was first seen. Besides Davida Nemeroff, the gallery is run by Mieke Marple.

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Magical Thinking

Sat, Jan 14, 2012

Magical Thinking, an ambitious new exhibition features the work of Los Angeles painter Karen Liebowitz, Philadelphia-based Nancy Blum and Los Angeles-based Vanessa Conte. Runs through February 4 at Rosamund Felsen.



These three artists see magical thinking as an acknowledgment and openness to causal connections without a correspondent need for scientific proof. They share in a belief in the interrelationship of those experiences that go beyond conventional observation. When the ineffable and ephemeral engage with the material and tangible, beauty is revealed to be not a supplement to our

experience, but a substantive source of power in its own right.

Karen Liebowitz's single large-scale mural – measuring 16 by 30 feet – on the wall of the main gallery, is a continuation of her ongoing series “Manifesting Prophecy,” which explores apocalyptic stories and animal prophecy as alternate symbolologies. As in past works, Liebowitz starts with an ancient religious literary text and from it invents a new drama; a contemporary, if not futuristic, myth in which women are the main protagonists. Liebowitz frequently paints the absurd alongside the miraculous, traversing the line between skepticism and faith – perhaps as a means of drawing our attention to the division – through female characters. The women in these re-imagined myths depict and enroll the power of earthly human intervention in order to make the magical happen. They demonstrate both overt and covert power, pointing to a new female identity that displays strength through nurturing, and an inherent sexuality that heightens their empowered nature.

Nancy Blum will present a series of very intricate new botanical drawings. These works present unabashed beauty at the same time that they subvert the traditional idea of the decorative. The complex and fantastical flowers appear to be the masters of their own universe, seeming to possess authority and freedom. Blum uses line and form in a subtly mathematical way, so the effect is hallucinatory, yet the nuanced patterns point to a sense that each move has an accompaniment or echo. Nancy Blum has exhibited widely throughout the United States and has created numerous public works including in San Francisco, Charlotte, and Seattle. She holds a BA from the University of Michigan and an MFA from Cranbrook Academy.



Vanessa Conte's paintings tend to describe nature as both recognizable and haphazard. What reads as stylistic significance doubles as a stain, or an incidental gesture. Conte utilizes non-systematic and varied compositional conventions to make paintings that are associative and therefore steeped in memory and reflection. For this exhibition, Conte will show three panoramic landscapes and a cluster of four portraits. Vanessa Conte has had solo exhibitions at JB Jurve in Los Angeles and Daniela Steinfeld/Van Horn in Düsseldorf. She holds a BS from NYU and an MFA from UCLA.

