

LALA mag

Rus, Mayer: The Burden of Flesh

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THE BURDEN OF FLESH

Louise Bonnet's lush (and louche) paintings render the human body as a delightfully grotesque agglomeration of swollen extremities.

BY **MAYER RUS** PHOTOGRAPHY BY **STEPHEN KENT JOHNSON**

PRODUCED BY **MICHAEL REYNOLDS**

LOUISE BONNET DOESN'T FIT THE BILL of the fledgling art phenom. The Swiss-born, Los Angeles-based artist has sketched all her life, but she only began painting in earnest a decade ago, well into her thirties. In fact, it wasn't until Bonnet packed her second child, seven-year-old son Cosmo, off to preschool that she had the freedom to work in her studio every day. In the short time since then, she has managed to forge her own path into the art world, with spectacular results.

This month, Bonnet will open her second solo exhibition at LA's Nino Mier Gallery, followed by a show at Berlin's prestigious Galerie Max Hetzler in September. Collectors on both sides of the Atlantic are clamoring for her alluringly cartoonish (and vaguely disturbing) paintings of zaftig figures disposed in exaggerated contortions of butterball flesh and tumescent appendages. They're a sensation.

"I'm happy that it's all happening at this point in my life," Bonnet says of her ascendant career. "I think that if I were 25, I'd be worried about whether I'm cool enough or whether I'm with the right people in the right places. Having a little perspective is one of the compensations of getting older."

Bonnet moved to California in 1994, fresh out of art school in Switzerland. She planned to stay only for a year, but the culture and climate of LA proved irresistible, particularly in contrast to her

upbringing in Geneva, a city she describes as "closed and claustrophobic." In the late 1990s, she worked as a graphic designer at X-Large, the cult streetwear label founded by acclaimed ceramist Adam Silverman and Eli Bonerz. Although she was fired in 1999—"Adam has a nice technique where he makes you think you're quitting," Bonnet recalls—she and Silverman remained friends. They married in 2004, and had their first child, daughter Poppy, the following year.

In 2008, Shepard Fairey, a friend from the street art and skateboard scene, saw one of Bonnet's drawings and gave her a two-person exhibition, with Deedee Cheriell, at his Echo Park gallery, Subliminal Projects. Reflecting her background in graphic design and illustration, Bonnet's acrylic-on-paper drawings depicted famous movie characters—from *The Shining*, *The Graduate*, *Carrie* and other landmark films—staring blankly in a state of colorful Alex Katz-ian ennui. Though premature perhaps, the incipient drawings contained the seeds of recurrent themes that Bonnet would continue to explore in her later work, notably the distended feet and hands that now dominate her paintings.

"Working on that show made me realize that that's what I wanted to do. I wanted to make art. But it took me a few years to get there. When you have little kids, it's almost impossible to concentrate on a single train of thought," Bonnet says.

LALA mag

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This month, Louise Bonnet will have her second solo show at Nino Mier Gallery, including these large-scale paintings.



LALA mag

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LALA mag

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NINO MIER

Those few years were not unproductive, however. As her personal language started to develop, Bonnet began inviting "real artists," as she calls them, for studio visits to discuss the direction of her painting. Those talks led her to abandon acrylics in favor of oil paint, a move that proved transformative. "For years, I tried to make acrylic do what oil does. Working in oil was a revelation," she says.

In 2015, Bonnet was introduced to the enterprising young gallerist Nino Mier by their mutual friend Sarah Watson, the senior director of the Sprüth Magers Gallery in LA. "Louise's personal iconography and style were still evolving. I thought the work had incredible potential. I knew it could be great," Mier says of his initial impressions. The following year, he brought a group of Bonnet's paintings to his booth at Art Los Angeles Contemporary. The response was immediate—Mier sold every piece.

In short order, the dealer gave Bonnet a solo show at his West Hollywood gallery. "She began to distill her vision into something more mature, more confident. Her handling of skin tone acquired a quality of Renaissance portraiture. The characters felt more

visceral and real," Mier observes. At the same time, he also encouraged Bonnet to develop her drawing practice by refining her pen-and-ink sketches of movement and composition into more fully realized drawings executed in color pencil.

The progress of Bonnet's vision is ably demonstrated in the large-scale paintings—the biggest measures ten feet by six feet—and pencil drawings she has assembled for her upcoming exhibition at Mier's gallery. The swollen grotesquerie of her figures echoes the work of Philip Guston, R. Crumb and Gaston Lachaise, with a bit of Popeye thrown in for good measure. "I'm obsessed with the weight of the body, especially as the flesh shifts, and the tension of body parts and the surfaces that cover them, like the feeling of tits beneath a tight sweater," Bonnet explains.

"Louise is not a 20-year-old doing quirky little figures. She's lived and seen things," Mier says of the new work, citing the discomfiture and darkness that peek through the artist's exhilarating compositions. "There's an element of melancholy in her work that I find intriguing. She screams quietly."

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In 2016, when Nino Mier showed Bonnet's work for the first time at Art Los Angeles Contemporary, it sold out almost immediately.



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ANNOTATION

Femme Fatale

Louise Bonnet—whose solo show opens at Nino Mier this month—talks Cindy Sherman and Alfred Hitchcock, and what's behind her drawing that appears on our cover.



Untitled, 2018

“I like making very classical portraits. I only realize later that they often look like penises or vaginas; I don't set out to actually paint or draw them. This particular one is inspired by a Cindy Sherman postcard I have in my studio that I look at every day. I am very influenced by Sherman—whom I think is also dealing with very precise rules and a reverence for art history. She's also really funny.

This portrait is a little like my version of a Hitchcock blonde. I don't like painting eyes, I think they're too distracting and you then try to have a two-way relationship with the person on the canvas, but, I like the one-way where you get to look as long as you want without being challenged by the portrait looking back at you (I have a feeling Hitchcock would appreciate that actually). The breasts aren't really breasts anymore, but rather what nipples do to a sweater—which is a lot more interesting. I mean, what is anything except its consequence over something else?”

—Louise Bonnet