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Koerner Von Gutsorf, Oliver: *REBECCA WARREN*

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*Words*  
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In the 1990s, when **REBECCA WARREN** began making sculptures out of unfired clay that looked like alien clones of Robert Crumb comix and the late sculptures of Willem de Kooning, people thought she'd lost it before she'd

really begun. While her contemporaries were founding factories and turning into entrepreneurs and pop stars, it looked like Warren was going in the opposite direction, back to a more traditional, modernist approach. Now, 30 years later, the clock is starting to tick to her tune. Her latest exhibition, *The Now Voyager*, ventures into time travel, trauma, and utopia. In a rare interview with *Oliver Koerner von Gustorf*, she reflects on wrestling in that weird space since adolescence, why Degas's dancers made her cry, and how attention provides all forms, answers, and meanings

HELMUT CRUMB, 1998, clay on stacked, painted MDF plinths  
Clay: 56 × 51 × 38 cm; stacked plinths: 143 × 36 × 36 cm

*Previous spread:* THE VISITORS, 2020, hand-painted bronze  
on painted MDF plinth  
Bronze 1: 296 × 12 × 14 cm; bronze 2: 248 × 10 × 10 cm;  
plinth 44 × 146 × 50 cm



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Rebecca Warren hasn't really done much to describe or categorize her art. Although eloquent, she is wary of discussing it. She is considered one of the most important contemporary British sculptors, perhaps even the most important. If you read up on her or ask around, Warren's work is zealously revered, yet it remains an enigma to the general public, just like the person behind it. She doesn't like interviews, nor studio visits, and has surrounded herself with a small, loyal staff for years. Secluded in her London studio, she works on her mind-bending sculptures, reminiscent of corporeal planets; of twisted, knotted limbs; of mother-of-invention Minnie Mouse deities; of dinosaurs; of Giacometti totems parasitically encrusted with breasts, bellies, flags, or mushrooms; of spun-out Degas ballerinas; or lumpy, dysfunctional families.

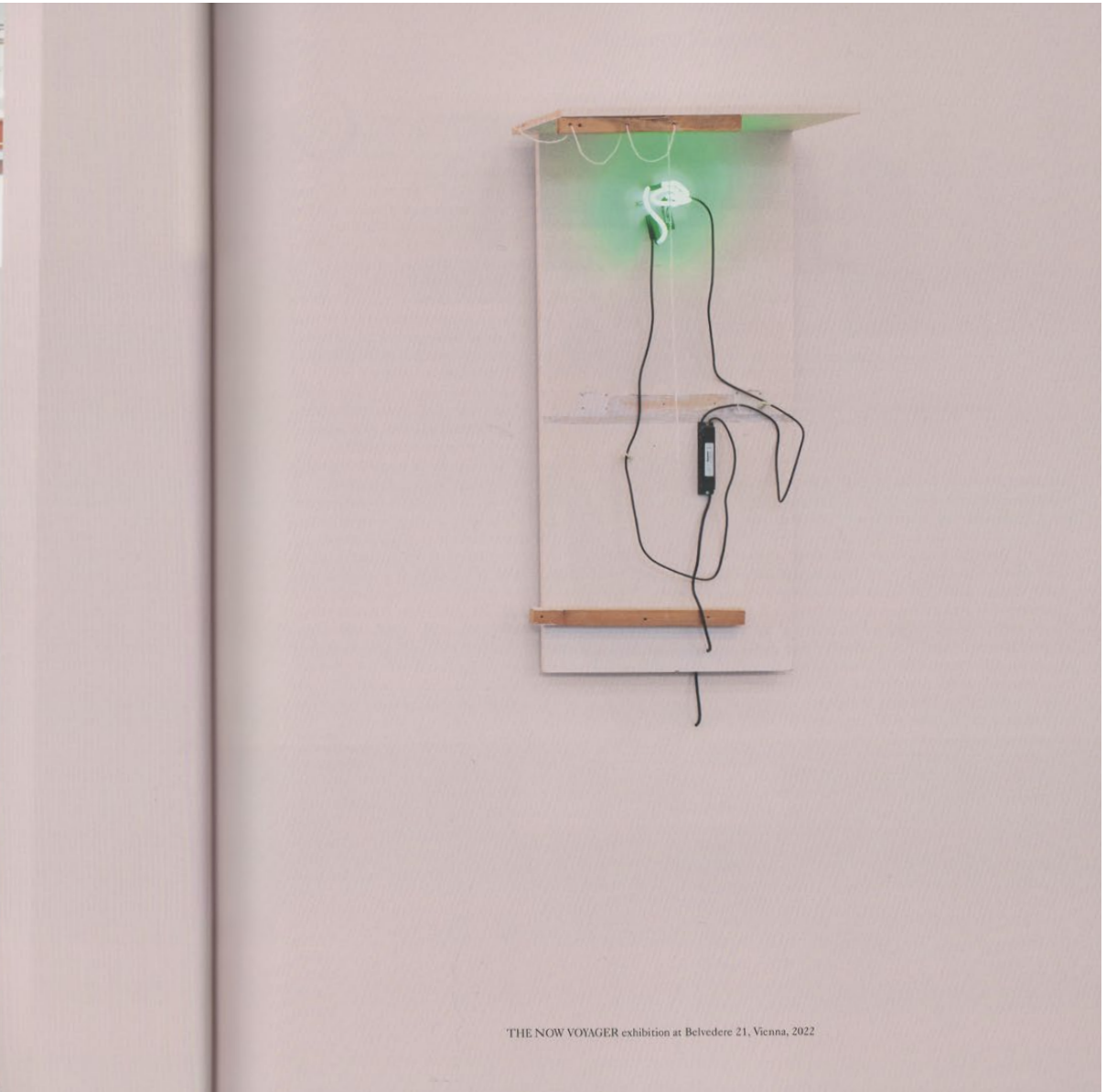
My head was pounding. It hadn't been easy to arrange a phone conversation. About two weeks after I'd visited Vienna to see Warren's exhibition *The Now Voyager* at Belvedere 21, after we'd already had an entire email discussion, I found myself in the grip of Omicron. "How are you doing?" asked Warren in this gentle, unpretentious voice I'd previously only known from online videos. "I'm fine," I lied. She said she could imagine how I felt, because she'd also had Covid, only earlier in the summer.

She'd caught it when she went to see the Abba avatars. "Where did you go?" I asked, my brain still foggy. "Well, to the Abba Arena." Warren is a fan and just had to go see the new show. She is an absolute music and cinema geek, with a correspondingly encyclopedic depth of knowledge. And you can tell that she perceives Abba more as a pop-cultural *Gesamtkunstwerk*, like Kraftwerk, and that she loves them for exactly their camp, polished, industrial, artificial style. Warren said she *should've known*, with all those people coming from the airport, adding, after a short pause, "Now I can't listen to Abba anymore." I almost fell off the couch laughing. Only hours later did I realize that both the concert and Abba's latest album are called *Voyage*, and this isn't the only connection to Warren's *Now Voyager* exhibition in Vienna. The Abba show is so hyperreal that it becomes surreal; their virtual comeback takes you simultaneously into the past and the future, both of which overlap each other like layers. *Voyage* doesn't simply resurrect the young versions of Agnetha, Björn, Benny, and Frida as 3D renderings with the help of Industrial Light & Magic (who also do CGI for Marvel and *Star Wars*). Rather, the company created retro-futuristic "Abbatars."

With the help of motion-capture suits, the over-70-year-old band members recorded every single part of the concert for weeks—but only their movements. The choreography itself is transposed onto younger incarnations to create the final digital band. Something eerily familiar emerges from this mashed-together time soup, as prefabricated expectations are fulfilled in an almost pornographically predictable way. Yet at the same time there's something unexpected about it, a morbid, cloned-together glamour of the third kind.



YES, OLGA, 2007, hand-painted clay on painted MDF plinth  
Clay: 85 x 58 x 72 cm; plinth: 90 x 43 x 43 cm  
Left: EUGENE, 2012, hand-painted bronze on painted MDF plinth



THE NOW VOYAGER exhibition at Belvedere 21, Vienna, 2022





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Rebecca Warren

Of course, this resonates with Warren's *The Now Voyager*. The exhibition pulls out the rug from under you in similarly radical fashion, sending visitors time-traveling with completely different, utterly low-tech means. The title of the show echoes a line from Walt Whitman's "The Untold Want": "The untold want by life and land ne'er granted / Now voyager sail thou forth to seek and find." And classic cinephiles or camp homosexuals will be reminded of the fantastic melodrama *Now, Voyager* (1942), where Bette Davis falls in love on a cruise, has a glow up, and frees herself from her cold, imperious mother—don't we all want that? So this ensemble of sculptures, the heterogeneity of which Warren compares to that of the interstellar alien guests at the famous space bar in the first *Star Wars*, is all about departures and new beginnings. This departure might be in- or external, physical or transcendent, realistic or fantastic. And it is supposed to take place now, of all times, while we are all stuck, in the pandemic, in wars, in natural disasters, while art seems to have little to say or contribute.

I told Warren how impressed I was by Vienna's Belvedere 21. Originally designed by the Viennese architect Karl Schwanzer, the light-flooded space is emblematic of postwar architecture. But somehow it is also a ghost house haunted by our old belief in the inevitable progress of rational modernity.

Between and against massive walls that Warren designed for the exhibition, painted countless shades of pink, that organize, open up, or close off Belvedere 21's originally open space, her sculptures and neon collages look like an alien Abbatar version of a modernist exhibition. It's as though some extraterrestrial force, like in the horror sci-fi flicks *Annihilation* or John Carpenter's *The Thing*, had hijacked the DNA of modern art and sculpture, of postmodernism and pop culture, to combine them into some totally novel hybrid, something non-human and hyper-cultivated, simultaneously archaic and futuristic.

Right at the start, *Transformer* (2022) sticks up in the air, belly- or breast-like. At first it looks to me like a Stone Age fertility goddess with a canine Mickey Mouse head, only to turn, on closer approach, into more of a stretched-out woman's leg wearing high heels, straight out of underground comix. Every single one of Warren's sculptures is a shapeshifter, changing with your every move. You could see something reptilian, bird-like in the spherical eyeball or breast shape of *A Saint* (2022), for instance, a nipple, a pimple, something squeezed out of a hole, but then there's also something hunched or dripping about it, something that has the feel of a body belonging to an old saint simmering in Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (c. 1503–15). *D* (2022), meanwhile, is the abbreviated name of a sculpture frozen in a pirouette like a little ballerina with a long braid. If you keep looking at the bronze, a face might stare back at you that's reminiscent of the *Star Wars* prequels' Jar Jar Binks, only



EVERY ASPECT OF BITCH MAGIC, 1996  
Mixed media, 132 × 30 × 30 cm

Left: THE NOW VOYAGER, 2021–22  
Hand-painted bronze on MDF trolley on painted MDF plinth  
Bronze: 191 × 70 × 70 cm; plinth: 27 × 120 × 120 cm

pancaked like roadkill. Walking around these sculptures, you flash through completely different eras and contexts: childhood cartoon time, hell time, trauma time, cubism, Düsseldorf, 1980s Cologne, dinosaur time, 3,000 years into the future, Robert Crumb's 1960s, the Cold War, the *fin de siècle*, tick, rock, tick, tock.

*The Now Voyager* (2021–22), the eponymous female figure which almost strides out of the exhibition hall, extends a huge, lumpy hand, as if its body is emerging from the primordial soup, still soft and morphing as it steps forward into a new age. Of course, it also recalls *Clamdigger*, de Kooning's original 1972 clay figure that he cast in bronze in 1976, but it's perhaps also an allusion to the feeling of Warren's own hands. Connections to the mainly male sculpture of (postwar) modernism are everywhere. Yet at the same time, these pieces, which were sculpted from unfired clay and then cast in bronze, also repeatedly play through Warren's own repertoire: the Minnie Mouse hair bows, the breasts, and the chunky shoes that have been appearing in her work for decades now. In two pieces—*Stalker* (2010–22) and *And Who Would be My Mother (of Invention)* (2013–22)—Warren even incorporated old clay sculptures into the new ones, so that, like an Abbatar, the interval between two creative moments is fixed in one and the same form.

*The Now Voyager* speaks of Warren's own production as a strange, alien, even magical experience that must constantly be re-reflected from different perspectives. I asked Warren if she'd ever felt alienated or outcast when she was a teenager in the 1980s, before her studies. She did: "I definitely felt adolescent alienation, but ultimately my particular version of that alienation was my wanting to know about art—but I had no means of knowing even what the question was. And I have been wrestling in that weird space ever since."



FEELINGS exhibition at Matthew Marks Gallery, New York, 2009  
 Right: CLOUSEAU (detail), 2014, hand-painted bronze on painted MDF plinth  
 Bronze: 237 × 52 × 48 cm; plinth: 32 × 52 × 47 cm

In fact, when Warren appeared on the London art scene in the late 1990s, she must have seemed like a total outsider. Born in 1965 in Pinhoe, Exeter, she studied at London's Goldsmiths' College, which also played an important role for Young British Artists such as Damien Hirst and Sarah Lucas. But Warren had a fundamentally different relationship to art. In interviews, she has repeatedly emphasized how much she felt blocked by the post-conceptual approach taught at Goldsmiths, and that shaped the art world at the time—the idea that art starts from a concept, a thesis, a theory that is then executed, quasi-illustrated, and implemented in the work. In the middle of Tony Blair's Cool Britannia, in a Western art world where artists were increasingly becoming entrepreneurs and self-promoters, collaborating with companies and founding their own art factories, at a time when studio art, the artist's magical touch, and affect-charged expressiveness were all completely out, when everything had to be smooth, smooth, smooth, Warren made her first big splash with, erm, raw clay.

In 1998, without further ado, she reconstructed a quite funny cartoon from a Robert Crumb comic called *Girls, Girls, Girls* (1972), in which Crumb's lustful gaze reduces one of his

typically busty women with gigantic buttocks to her lower half: high heels, calves, ass, the legs connected at the top by a piece of flesh indicating labia. Warren turned it into a clay figure about 60 centimeters high, placing it on an MDF base. The result resembles an archway, and, in front of it, on the same board, she placed another female lower body, at a smaller scale, consisting only of buttocks and slightly knocked legs on which a pulled-down pair of panties snags. This figure recreates a Helmut Newton photograph. The inspiration for that rough approach toward Newton's high-end pictures was a photographic work by Martin Kippenberger, whom Warren also admires, *Helmut Newton für Arme* (Helmut Newton for the poor, 1985). In it, Kippenberger staged himself wearing a headscarf and hideous folkloric skirt in front of hideous curtains and a flower arrangement in an orange milk jug. That double sculpture, which Warren calls *Helmut Crumb* (1998), was a big hit, but it didn't only provoke enthusiasm: "When I started making things in raw clay, no one else was. People came to my first show and said my work was disgusting—and that I had lost my mind. I was on my own with that, but I was unafraid, as I was used to that feeling."





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The unfired clay stood in stark contrast to the idea of the perfect commodity surface, the finish of high-end artificial products. In addition, Warren showed wall-mounted display cases made of MDF containing small clay figures, *objets trouvés*, painted wood, partial neon signs. Like the raw clay, the cases embodied an unfinished sculptural process, a precarious, improvised visual language that approached things carefully, shakily, uncertainly. These types of wall works were also present in Vienna. They act like archaeological containers, memories of a future when mysterious hieroglyphs relay the legacies of bygone lives, bygone cultures. You can see them as pared-down scores, cryptic alphabets of forms and objects, sentences and arguments that still need to be thought further through. At the same time, Warren's MDF and neon works, and her handling of pedestals and walls, echo the pared-down West German art of Imi Knoebel, Blinky Palermo, Charlotte Posenenske, Isa Genzken, perhaps even something of Sigmar Polke's 1960s paintings: the hardware-store aesthetic, and the way these postwar generations translated the utopian spirit of Bauhaus and the Russian avant-garde into post-minimalism and West German consumer culture with an industrial yet transcendent approach. Warren might play a similar relay role—only for the digitized 21st century.

"I'm trying to find the place where the work itself is guiding me towards it, from its remote and strange place of origin," Warren said. Her practice, which doesn't start from a fixed idea, but from experimentation with materials, experimentation without a fully defined goal, seems completely contemporary today—as does her combining completely divergent strategies and formal approaches. But back then, before the 2008 financial crisis, when art, business, and popular culture partied together as a hedonistic gold rush set in, the raw, unfinished, and sexual aspects of Warren's sculptures were seen as their distinguishing features, and she was quickly seen as a figurative artist, a provocateur who questions the male modernist canon. "I think this generalization, that any woman on the scene is necessarily breaking down gender barriers and clearing men out of the way and establishing women in their place, represents a completely outdated attitude," Warren said. "In any case, it doesn't help me or my art."

How complex her approach to sculpture really is becomes clear looking at *Bunny* (2002) and *Pony* (2003), works alluding to Edgar Degas's almost lifelike *La petite danseuse de quatorze ans*, which the artist made around 1880 after the young Marie van Goethem, a Belgian dancer at the Opéra de Paris. I tell Warren how incredibly wonderful and at the same time disturbing I find Degas's depictions of the Opéra's dancers and procuresses, the men with their top hats lurking backstage for prey. Degas realistically captured the overlap between opera and brothel, but he also created a David Lynch hell for little girls luminously glowing in powder and pastel tones. There's



SHE exhibition at Maureen Paley, London, 2004



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something sadistic in his work, especially in the tutu-clad wax sculpture of the little dancer, which was later recast in bronze almost 50 times, a complete lack of empathy combined with a pursuit of absolute perfection and beauty. In Warren's translation of the dancer, she appears like a raver on Robert Crumb steroids, more proletarian, grown up, and confident, but at the same time petrified, cast in lava, preserved by the hot rays of Degas's infernal psychedelic sun. Over the years, these dancers have appeared in her work again and again. With 2005's *Pas de Deux* at the Matthew Marks Gallery, Warren dedicated an entire exhibition to such performers: in *The Twins* (2004) and *Come, Helga* (2006), she duplicated the dancers into couples, just like avatars shaped after people, dance steps repeated, alternative futures running parallel.

But what captivated her so much about Degas's sculpture? "My initial connection to that sculpture was that I heard that Degas had carried it around like a homunculus talisman. That made me wonder, 'Well, what is that about?' He sort of clung to it—and so my interest was in this weird magnetic relationship that happened between the sculptor and the sculpture. It is like some sort of parable of intense, mad love." How can you deal with such a relationship without automatically becoming a feminist, I asked her. "His work does have that hardcore duality," she replied. "The complex beauty of Degas's dancers made me cry when I saw them at the Met. They make me think deeply about important fantastic sadness."

What a fabulous answer, I thought. Looking at her work over the last 20 years, it's completely ahead of its time in its non-binary, non-dualistic thinking, in its grandiosity and uncertainty, in its humor, utter seriousness, and poetry.

Perhaps Warren's time has really come, now that we're all so thoroughly unsettled. Her work leaves a lot of room for embarrassment and shame, and that's crucial to her, Warren said in an interview about her Turner Prize nomination in 2006. In fact, if you look at the lumpy figures mounted on boards with wheels—with titles such as *And Who Would Be My Mother or Homage to R. Crumb, My Father*—that she showed in 2003's *She* exhibition at Maureen Paley in London, her groupings often resemble the therapeutic practice of family constellations. This approach involves carefully positioning people in a room to stand in for the subject's family members and thus to visualize their relationships and traumas. You might look at the grouping of *The Now Voyager* the same way. I asked her if there was any link to therapy. "Yes, I think that there are some affinities," Warren replied. "Also because these are my beings, and they are therefore to some extent alive. I have been instrumental in making that happen. I find I love these things when I have made them. They have become lovable beings for me." "But what about the masculine, modernist dogma that art must never be therapy, but always needs a superstructure?" I asked rather boldly. "I'm not

convinced that such a dogma fully exists, or that it permeates everything in that way. I think that the important structure for art is the training of attention in a certain way at everything. And that attention provides all the forms, and answers and meanings."

I was reminded of one of Warren's most mysterious and important works, *Every Aspect of Bitch Magic*, in which she summed up her ideas about sculpture back in 1996. On a white MDF base, she placed a shell, a shard of green glass, a pair of underwear, a safety pin, a cardboard box, a jar with a hairband around it and a dead bee in it—she'd received the latter from a friend as a gift. On the base, she installed a wooden frame for a plexiglass case, which was never added, and against the cardboard box she leaned an envelope over which she had stretched a pair of panties, gently padding the crotch with dryer lint. The envelope, in turn, was stuffed with slides of Warren's work. The result looks like a haiku-turned-sculpture, a magic spell, an Emily Dickinson poem—"I heard a Fly buzz—when I died"—a poetic Abbatar somehow embracing the most variegated states and times. Human time and bee time coexisting as one.

Time and again, Warren's art has been described as a linguistic, undecipherable, the antithesis of the postmodernists' toying with literality and meaning. In light of *Every Aspect of Bitch Magic*, I recall a later essay by the British art critic John Berger on translation: "True translation is not a binary affair between two languages but a triangular affair. The third point of the triangle being what lay behind the words of the original text before it was written. True translation demands a return to the pre-verbal. We read and reread the words of the original texts in order to penetrate through them, to reach, to touch the vision or experience which prompted them." That's another way to understand Warren's sculptures, as reverse translations into something pre-verbal. Her otherworldly sculptures take us out of our comfort zone. They trigger us. Perhaps they teleport us back to repressed visions or experiences we have no other means of grasping. Or maybe they take us into the future and anticipate events that are only a millimeter ahead of us. Nothing is too embarrassing or unspeakable for them. Decorated with pompoms, bellies, giant breasts, platform shoes, thin and sacred like totems, they become our companions, turn us into Now Voyagers, travel with us through these difficult, hellish, exposed times toward our own important fantastic sadness.

THIS IS THE DAY, 2017–22, hand-painted bronze on painted MDF plinth  
Bronze: 10 × 63 × 46 cm; plinth: 14 × 120 × 110 cm

