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Slenske, Michael: How Echo Park's Old Master Is Painting the End of the World

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Photo by Irvin Rivera

How Echo Park's Old Master Is Painting the End of the World

Celeste Dupuy-Spencer is one of LA's most sought after artists, and the art world can't get enough of her work. She may get consumed in the process. Or simply leave it all behind

By **Michael Slenske** - December 22, 2021

ON THE MORNING of January 6, 2021, Celeste Dupuy-Spencer, like most Americans, was going about her business as usual. She'd recently completed an ambitious suite of 15 allegorical paintings for her solo debut at Galerie Max Hetzler, her Berlin dealer, who also represents art stars like Ai Weiwei and Julian Schnabel. One depicted oil rigs burning in the sea; another, a medieval army killing everything in its path; still another, a parade of elephants representing the 3.5 billion-year march of evolution. But the Max Hetzler exhibition was ending in three days, and she was in limbo, relaxing at her one bedroom, cat-filled Elysian Heights bungalow. It was inside this "anti-minimalist, repurposed tool shed" which overflows with Lilliputian mise en scenes comprised of toy train set figurines enacting scenes of hijinx and hysteria along every window sill, bookshelf, and planter, that she considered what her next project

might be. Dupuy-Spencer listened to NPR that morning, smoked one of the day's first Marlboro Reds, and struggled to come up with an idea for a new painting for a February group show in Brussels with her primary dealer, Nino Mier. "I just didn't have an idea," she says. "I was a completely depleted person."

Listening to the radio blare reports of an angry mob of Trump supporters storming the U.S. Capitol, she took to her laptop—she doesn't own a television—and began feverishly scrolling CNN, Democracy Now!, and YouTube for videos of the rioters. She was consumed by the day's events but reluctant to use them as subject matter, even though she's become known for "painting the news"—a label she understands but rejects.

"I feel like I'm sort of tracking an animal," she says of her process which may incorporate a wash from Caravaggio, a background from Thomas Cole's *Course of Empire* countless passages from the Bible to conjure everything from demon-possessed police officers enacting state violence to toppled Confederate monuments to her friends and lovers in the LGBTQ+ scene to the unending carnage of late-stage capitalism. These paintings can take months, if not years, to complete—she might make 50 in a year but only a dozen or so ever make it out of her studio—and she finishes them by working upwards of 50 hours at a time, or until she sees visions and/or physically collapses, hopefully onto one of the dusty shag rugs she has spread around her 400 square foot studio. Despite this glacial process, she felt a certain urgency in the wake of January 6.

"I couldn't stop looking at this blank canvas and going, 'No fucking way am I painting the Capitol,'" she recalls. But she also felt she knew the people she was watching on her computer screen. In them, she saw the working-class folks she'd grown up with in New York's Hudson Valley and those she'd once gotten clean with while in rehab two decades later in New Orleans.



Photo courtesy of Nino Mier Gallery and Celeste Dupuy-Spencer

For a week after the riot, Dupuy-Spencer stewed in her own discomfort and then began dissecting art-historical crowd paintings—Christ’s Entry into Brussels in 1889 (1888) by James Ensor and Tintoretto’s Moses Drawing Water from the Rock (1577)—to find an entry point into a canvas that would become her own totemic summation of the insurrection. After weeks of two-day-on, one-day-off sessions, a sprawling Boschian stew of muddled Fauvist fury had emerged: Proud Boys, QAnoners, and faceless insurrectionists in flak jackets, gas masks, MAGA hats, and T-shirts that read “God Guns & Trump” and “Camp Auschwitz,” swirled together in a miasmatic field of mayhem. She knew the Capitol painting was finished after she painted “DNC” over a restaurant created by the titular characters in the Lewis Carroll poem “The Walrus and The Carpenter” who lead unwitting oysters to their death, a final nod to the “delicious woke shame” of liberals she finds “very self aggrandizing.” As she

later told one reporter, “There are monsters on all sides.”

The resulting painting, *Don't You See That I Am Burning* (2021) —shown this March in a one-work, three-week exhibition at Mier's in West Hollywood gallery—was greeted by the art world as nothing short of a masterpiece. Artnet dubbed the work “epic,” while a Forbes critic said it “recalls Last Judgement paintings from the Renaissance by the likes of Michelangelo and Jan van Eyck.”

To Mier, who is preparing for a solo show with Dupuy-Spencer at his Brussels space this fall, the overwhelming response was simply a product of the artist's tortuous, deep-diving process. “Celeste is the only painter I know who battles to maximum exhaustion with every work. It is absolute war in the studio. She has always had an incredible skill for the narrative and that narrative ability has evolved into more complicated subject matters and a combination of emotions, literature, spirituality, religion, politics, art history, painting in general, music and gender.”

At 42, Dupuy-Spencer is poised to become one of the great American figurative painter—she's already one of the most respected (and collected) ascendant artists in L.A.—who has drawn comparisons to Kerry James Marshall, David Hockney, and one of her mentors, MacArthur genius Nicole Eisenman. Since her 2015 debut at Artist Curated Projects—the project space of her old friend, mentor, and eventual subject, the L.A.-based conceptual artist Eve Fowler—Dupuy-Spencer's paintings have been acquired by the Whitney, the Hammer, LACMA, and SFMOMA. She's also completed the trifecta of top Stateside biennials with large groupings of her ambitious history paintings on display at the Hammer's 2017 Made in L.A. biennial and the 2017 Whitney Biennial for which *The New Yorker* dubbed her “a standout.”

“Celeste doesn't shy away from really tragic, horrifying aspects of our culture,” says Diana Nawi, who is co-curating (with LACMA's Naima Keith) the Prospect.5 biennial in New Orleans, where

Dupuy-Spencer is exhibiting the Capitol painting and a half-dozen others depicting “frenetic catastrophe” through January 23 at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art. “She’s drawing on so many histories and cultural references and bodies of knowledge to create this really incredible document of now.”

Despite the outwardly polemical nature of her oeuvre—a life-size painting on the wall in her studio of a young man donning tactical gear and an AR-15 isn’t exactly welcoming, even if he’s greeting mom and dad for dinner at the plantation house—the collecting class has been lining up behind the critics. Her larger paintings can fetch six-figure sums, and her collectors include MOCA board chair Maria Seferian, art publisher Benedikt Taschen, and gallerist Jeffrey Deitch, who compares the complexity of her paintings to “great novels.” Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman even attempted to buy a painting a few years back, of Dupuy-Spencer performing cunnilingus on an ex-girlfriend, prompting the artist to enact a “no fucking royalty” policy with her dealers. “Can you imagine?” she says with a laugh one late summer night in her studio. “What was he going to do with it?”

“I think she’s almost like a journalist. She’s investigating, probing,” says Anne Ellegood, the former Hammer curator and current ICA LA director, who cocurated the 2017 Made in L.A. biennial. “She doesn’t seem to think that there’s any subject out of her wheelhouse. I just think she keeps getting better and better.”

CELESTE DUPUY-SPENCER was born at Roosevelt Hospital in Midtown Manhattan almost exactly a year before John Lennon died there. Her father is New Yorker scribe and novelist Scott Spencer, acclaimed author of *Endless Love* (which Franco Zeffirelli turned into a 1981 film) who comes from a family of communist steelworkers in Chicago. Her mother, Coco Dupuy, is a descendent of New Orleans aristocracy with some talent of her own for painting (she illustrated Spencer’s 1987 children’s book, *The Magic Room*). A very accomplished self-portrait of Dupuy’s still hangs in Dupuy-Spencer’s home to this day.

Though she was born in the city to an artistic family, Dupuy-Spencer didn't grow up in upper-crust Manhattan; when she was three years-old her parents moved from the city to rural Rhinebeck, New York, once a working-class backwater and now an ultra quaint escape for Wall Street families and celebrities. Hers was not a close-knit clan. "We didn't do family dinners," she says, hinting at a lonely upbringing. She spent most of her days rummaging in the woods. Her parents divorced when she was 13. To escape what she calls the "core pain" of her adolescence, Dupuy-Spencer shaved the sides of her head and started wearing Metallica tees, Daisy Dukes, and a peace-sign necklace she got from her first boyfriend, Ralph DiMeo, a local boy from a working-class family. "We were madly in love," Dupuy-Spencer recalls. "We actually ran away together for a few days." But at around that same time, she began coming to terms with the fact that she was gay. "I had wild crushes on the girl babysitters," she says. As her lifelong pal, the L.A.-based artist and filmmaker Mariah Garnett, observes, "Celeste is a mess of contradictions."



Photo courtesy of Celeste Dupuy-Spencer

By the time she was 14, she'd also started experimenting with alcohol and drugs. It wasn't long before the experimentation careened out of control. "I started going to the bar at 14, maybe 13. I went all the time," she says of the old Rhinecliff Hotel, a landmarked inn and dive bar which Garnett called "an alcoholic cross section of the town."

By 17, she was shooting up heroin and at one point found herself taking a 24-hour bus ride to Cody, Wyoming, hitchhiking to the rodeo, only to detox on a cattle drive through the Colorado Rockies.

"I was doing a lot of drugs in my teens," she adds. "And having a lot of wild adventures. But I wasn't happy. And I wished I had someone looking out for me. I don't want to give the impression that I was a wild party kid. I wished I had that kind of freedom. But there was something self-destructive about how I did it."

After high school, she spent an unhappy year at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, ended up in rehab, then found a job back in Rhinebeck working as a landscaper alongside her old drinking buddies at the Rhinecliff Hotel. She loved working outdoors with the land but says, "I did feel that, if I didn't go to school, I would regret it later."

Another friend from the Rhinecliff was working in the continuing education program at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, so Dupuy-Spencer began studying art there, becoming friends with teachers Amy Sillman and Eisenman. "I wasn't thinking I'm going to be an artist—I was going to be a landscaper," she says.

By this time, though, she was estranged from her parents and was having a difficult time keeping up with her bills. She stopped paying her car insurance, failed to pay the fines on a delinquent traffic ticket, ended up briefly in jail, and ultimately was evicted from her apartment, leaving her sleeping in the boiler room of her studio building with her dogs, Oliver and Freeway.

“Nicole and Amy grabbed me one day in the middle of the hall and brought me into Amy’s office and they were like, ‘What the fuck? You’re a really good painter and you’re queer and you’re a feminist. It’s your responsibility to take this seriously.’ No one had ever spoken to me like I had potential,” says Dupuy-Spencer.



Photo by Irvin Rivera

She never graduated from Bard. She just took art classes until the college asked her to graduate or leave, and after she left she started dating the Bard-trained artist K8 Hardy. “She was really wild and fun and showed me around the swimming holes,” says Hardy. “I see her as a collector of experiences. She sees the beauty in everyone that she paints and she brings out that sensibility and that humanity in her subjects.”

On the heels of that relationship Dupuy-Spencer headed for New York City, joining a group of queer artists including Eisenman, A. L. Steiner, and Leidy Churchman at a time when the identity-politics spotlight was shining directly on them. Dupuy-Spencer’s paintings became documents of this circle, and she was included in various queer-themed group shows but didn’t feel her work was good enough for the exposure it has now.

“She was doing a lot of scenes of lesbians, and people compared her to Nicole Eisenman a lot,” says Garnett. “But there was

always this white, working-class representation she was painting.”

By then, in her mid-twenties, she'd been clean for over five years, but the toll of going out all the time and having to constantly be on during dinner parties with “artists doing weird performance-y drunk things” wore on her. She was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis at age 28, which she was initially treating with heavy injectable medications that made her feel sicker than her flare-ups. The social pressures of her New York life ultimately led her to use heroin again.

Around this time, Dupuy-Spencer was also struggling with her gender identity. In New York, she started injecting hormones, beginning the process of transitioning to male, although she never quite saw herself as either fully male or female.

“I definitely do not identify with being a woman,” she says. “I’m trans, masculine presenting.” She’s not keen on pronouns, but said she/her sufficed for this article. “I don’t consider myself transitioning, but I was starting to do that and found myself reacquainted with something that I really love in myself—the feminine side that was in a constant state of suppression. Being trans allowed me to understand what femininity really was.” But though she came to peace with her identity, her addiction overtook her. At her bottom, Dupuy-Spencer began stealing to feed her heroin habit, including her roommate’s record collection, and when she realized who she’d become and that she couldn’t stop, she attempted suicide. Eisenman drove her Mt. Sinai Hospital and when Dupuy-Spencer woke up her mother was there to drive her to an all-women’s rehab facility in New Orleans. After eight months, she left treatment but stayed on to answer phones at the men’s facility.

“I was really scared of leaving. I wanted to stay as close as possible to the people who helped me get sober,” she says. But, ultimately, in 2014, she made her way to L.A. and reconnected with old friends like Fowler and Garnett. She had no desire to return to New York and hasn’t spoken to many of the people in

that scene since.

“I feel like there’s been this huge liberation. Sort of the worst thing that can happen interpersonally has happened,” says Dupuy-Spencer of her breakup with her old art coterie. “So I don’t have to make work about being a queer person at an art dance party anymore.”

“I believe she was pigeonholed at the beginning,” adds Mier. “A queer painter is not all she is or ever was. The art market wants to pin the tail on one thing when Celeste is just not only one thing. Celeste is a thinker and an intellectual with the ability to retain and delve into subjects so deeply and tell a story that is so complicated it literally takes 100 footnotes per painting to really know every detail.”

Along with the liberation came a revelation: in 2019, she was diagnosed with autism. It helped to explain so much of what had been so difficult about her life. “Nobody ever taught me how to be a person—how to do stuff— but I also felt like there was something really wrong,” she says. “I didn’t know why I didn’t understand how to get my electricity, how to greet somebody the way somebody meets a gallerist. I prided myself on watching everybody else really closely and emulating them. I had all these friends, and I realized that none of them knew me. But I was aware that if they really knew me, they wouldn’t like what they saw. It wasn’t just that I didn’t know how to do stuff; I thought I was deeply flawed as a person, which is the messaging I got as a child as well.”



Photo by Irvin Rivera

Inside her Silver Lake garage, however, the autism fueled her intellectual rigor and marathon studio sessions. She began painting her old friends and haunts like the Rhinecliff and the people she'd met in New Orleans. Fowler, who had sold Dupuy-Spencer's drawings when the painter was still in New York, offered her a solo show once she saw the new work in L.A. Mier represented Fowler at the time and previewed the Artist Curated Projects show before it opened.

“Nino saw her watercolors on the flat file, met her, and just flipped out,” recalls Fowler. Shortly after, Mier offered Dupuy-Spencer a solo show, which led to a waiting list for her work and offers for more shows from New York to Europe. At the opening of Wild and Blue, her New York solo debut at Marlborough Contemporary, which sold out immediately, she got a hard lesson about art-world dynamics. Several paintings in the show dealt with class struggle, including a tender portrait of her ex, Ralph DiMeo in a gray T-shirt, holding a fawn. But at the opening, Dupuy-Spencer overheard a collector comment, “Oh my God, I love white trash.”

From that moment forward, she vowed to never again make paintings about class using images of friends. Instead, she pivoted her work toward grittier paintings with tougher subject matter. “I feel like if I'm going to be a figurative painter who is interested in politics, I can't pretend that I'm not white and I can't pretend that racism isn't my problem or that I'm somehow above it,” she notes. “I'm painting white America, and it's not about forgiving.”

To better understand that America—one diametrically opposed to her lifestyle and her staunch atheist upbringing—she started attending services at the Evangelical Oasis megachurch on

Normandie, the big-box house of worship that famously bought Jesus a star on Wilshire Boulevard. She was baptized inside an elevated glass tank with the ceremony broadcast on closed-circuit jumbotrons. Nobody was more shocked than she was at how it impacted her. Dupuy-Spencer, who still considers herself an atheist, found herself sobbing at the church while singing along with the lyrics to Hillsong Worship’s “New Wine.” “I had this moment where I felt this wave crash over me. I don’t think Christianity would be such a beautiful or transformative experience for me if I had been raised to believe it was true as a young person.”



Photo by Irvin Rivera

Dupuy-Spencer came to the church after listening to Willie Nelson’s “The Maker.” She’s been a die-hard country fan since 1999 when she heard “John Deere Green” by the late mulleted hitmaker Joe Diffie, who is all over the 12-hour “Countrycore” playlist she made for me after our first studio visit in May.

“I was raised to believe that the only rational, smart people are atheists and I’m like, ‘Am I saying that I’m a better, smarter person than Willie Nelson?’” says Dupuy-Spencer. To depict her tear-inducing sing-a-long she listened to Hillsong on repeat, which produced another triumphant painting, *And the Kingdom is Here*. Jeffrey Deitch acquired the work from a 2020 group show at his gallery.

“It reflects the depth of her own experience,” says Deitch, who displays the painting in the dining room of his Hollywood Hills home. “She wanted to understand what is going on with this Evangelical revival taking place right in the middle of Los Angeles. It’s like you were at this worship, and it becomes nightmarish with people turning into animals. But it’s not a negative portrayal, I would say you feel the spiritualism. It’s a masterpiece and it’s very life-enhancing for me. She has that ability to feel what other people are feeling even if it’s something diametrically opposed to her own personal beliefs.”

The reason she wants to go there, to bore down into the psyche of her opposition, is simple. “We’re doing everything humanly possible to not feel what it feels like to actually be alive,” she says. She boldly captures all of these fears and coping mechanisms in the mytho-poetic *When you’ve eaten everything below you, you’ll devour yourself/except in dreams you’re never really free*, which provided the “drum beat” to her 2020 solo with Max Hetzler and is also on display in New Orleans. For Dupuy-Spencer this painting operates like a deeply footnoted essay, which unfolds from a master of the universe penthouse overlooking downtown Manhattan flooded post-climate crisis. To belabor the Logan Roy decadence at play, there are cut-outs from the most horrific sections of Géricault’s *The Raft of the Medusa* and George Bellows’ *Bachannale* on the walls. A group of men have entered the loft to rob the industrialist. His assistant, by his side, sells off his art and properties, and seconds before a gold-plated pistol shoots him in the back of the head, he looks up to see death enter the frame as another man holds his child’s Elmo doll, having just thrown the rich man’s son off the side of the building.

“There’s a point when wealth becomes unreasonable,” says Dupuy-Spencer. “And you can only get there by eating everyone below you.”

IT’S A FEW MINUTES past 10 p.m. on a muggy Friday evening in mid-August, and Dupuy-Spencer is still busy at work. Inside her tiny, skylighted studio, which is tucked into an industrial armpit just south of the Arts District, she’s seated before a red-brick wall on a white Scandinavian-style armchair with streaks of oil paint running down the blond wood frame. Her rough-hewn attire, which might include a duster and ten-gallon hat at an art opening, is paired down to a white T-shirt revealing her tattoos (“Freeway” on her right arm; “O” for Oliver on her left), weathered Wranglers, cowboy boots, and a baseball cap. There’s a surfboard-sized plank, stabbed with a half dozen throwing knives, leaning against a corner beside a tiny macabre oil painting of country music singer Lee Ann Womack. Stress balls and books cover every shelf, desk, and table.

“When I think about who I want to be as an artist, it always goes back to country music,” she says, as country music blares in the background. “I don’t want to make paintings that retain their value by being impenetrable to people like my mom. I want to have all those difficult conversations that are steeped in a historical context, but everybody is invited. Not just people who are \$100,000 in debt from art school.”

As she lights yet another cigarette and sips coffee from a thermos, she walks over to a giant canvas propped up on cinder blocks, the latest of her latest epic religious paintings, *Our Gerasenes*, that would soon ship to New Orleans for Prospect.5. It’s a rendering of the exorcism of the Gerasene demon, set in a firebombed Syria and led by a Black Jesus and a multicultural band of disciples including a female freedom fighter for the YPG, the home-grown People’s Protection Units who enlist men and women volunteers from Syria, Europe, and America to protect Kurdish Syria—whose firebombed infrastructure provides the painting’s hellscape backdrop—against ISIS.

“Even if there is no hope, there is this beautiful glimmer in Northern Syria,” argues Dupuy-Spencer, her head framed by a YPG flag hanging over her studio door. She calls this painting a “response to all those crisis paintings” she’s made of late and explains that Legion “is essentially the occupier. The trauma of one’s own violence, this man who just eats and fucks,” she says, lamenting that Prospect.5 “doesn’t show all the times I paint love and sadness.”

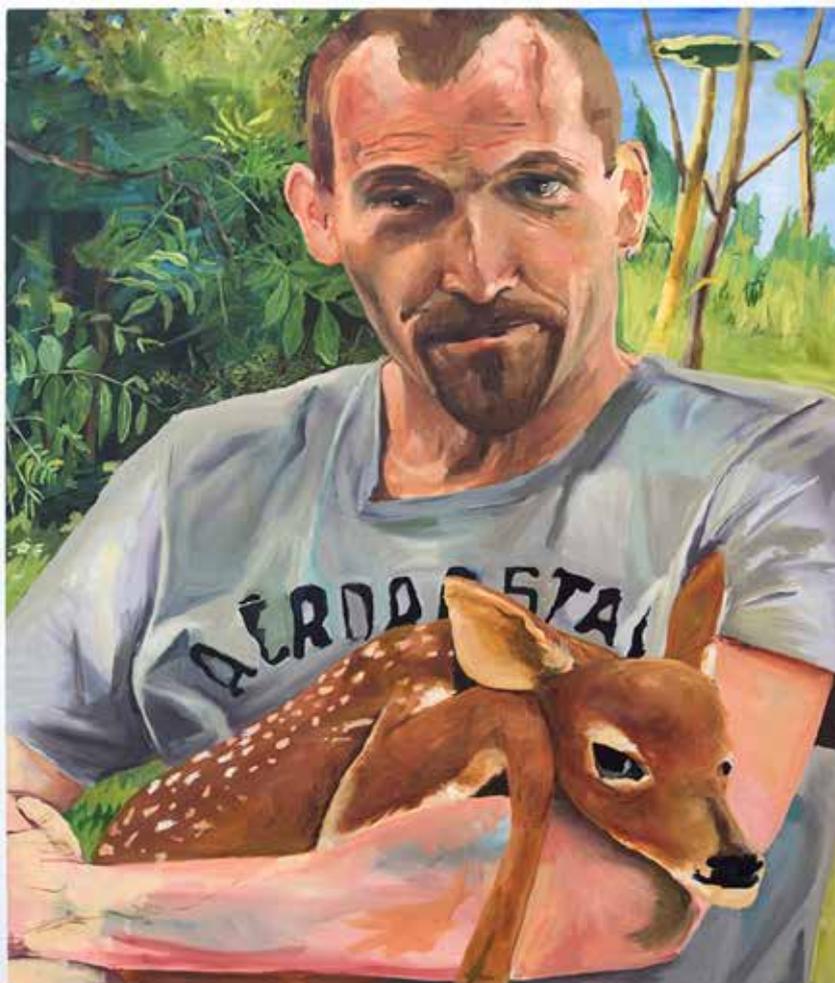


Photo courtesy of Nino Mier Gallery and Celeste Dupuy-Spencer

Tender bedroom paintings with her ex, of her southern matriarchs, and of Fowler (with her dog, Dexter) made for the “Made in L.A.” biennial are prime examples. The latter was

loving and political, says former Hammer curator Ellegood, “It was her way of saying, ‘Eve should be in this show. Where is she?’”

Critics who would mistake this tenderness for pleasure, however, are sorely mistaken. “I’m not trying to give anyone pleasure. The idea that my job would make people feel pleasure, I really do feel like I could throw up,” says Dupuy-Spencer, who is always trying to walk the fine line between making her paintings more accessible, if less sellable. As her old friend Garnett noted, contradictions are at the core of this atheist evangelical trans country music fan who ascended to the art world’s rarified heights by painting white America without appeasing the Fox News or NPR crowds, which is no small feat in the post-Trump era. Perhaps the biggest conundrum is that the more successful Dupuy-Spencer becomes, the more she seems poised to run for the exits. Despite the overwhelmingly positive response to her work, Dupuy-Spencer admits the weight of her subject matter exacts “a big emotional toll”—not to mention wreaking havoc on her legs and potentially her MS, which she’s chosen to ignore until she can’t. One gets the sense that in the near future, out of the blue, she may just up and leave the art world.

“I’m not suicidal,” she says, “but I’m either going to work myself to death or go fight for a revolution . . . or rescue goats in Tennessee.”
