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Cohen, Alina: In Bold Figurative Paintings, Grace Weaver Captures the Mood of Her Generation

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• Alina Cohen Mai 29, 2020 1:23pm   



Grace Weaver, *Confrontation*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan, New York.



Grace Weaver, *Step*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan, New York.

In Grace Weaver's new paintings, apparent accidents abound. *Step* (2020) features a black high heel pressing on the toes of a tan loafer. In the nearly six-by-six-foot *Confrontation* (2020), a man and woman seem to collide at the corner of a brick wall. A woman falls down accordioned steps in another large-scale, not-yet-titled painting, her marigold skirt fanning out in a visual rhyme of the structure beneath her. These compositions elicit cartoon bubble reactions from the viewer: Oof! Ouch! Yikes! Yet for all her subjects' clumsiness, Weaver's hand is assured. Her lines are controlled and precise, with little evidence of spontaneity or chance.

Weaver's interested in this exacting, stylistic approach, she recently told me, "partially because it's so wrong in terms of what good painting is, in terms of ideas of freshness and immediacy." She rebels against the drips, splatters, and fluid gestures that came to define American painting in the mid-20th century. Weaver's references are particular to her generation and New York City milieu: the voluminous sleeves of Simone Rocha dresses, the flatness and artificial "drop shadows" on an iPhone app, takeaway coffees, and plastic black bodega bags, for example. With her characteristic precision and vibrant palette—as well as a new emphasis on street scenes—Weaver's recent canvases are as bold as they are introspective, concerned with contemporary characters as much as art history and personal shame.

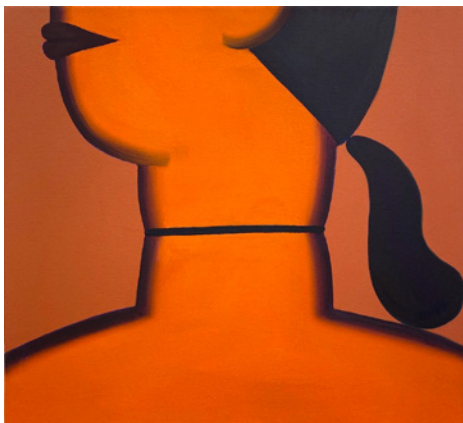


Grace Weaver
Lust for Lite, 2015
Soy Capitán

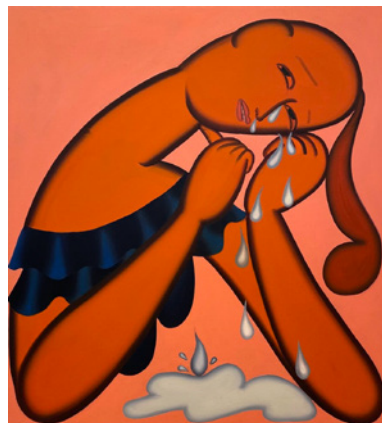
Not all of Weaver's work is so restrained. She described her drawings, which help her solidify her ideas for paintings, as "light and animated," with "more levity." On July 8th, James Cohan will open a two-venue show of Weaver's newest work: drawings in its Lower East Side space, and 13 new paintings at its Tribeca gallery, all created since January 2020.

For this new body of work, Weaver said she's been thinking about gravity—"gravity as a manifestation of different types of mood." On her canvases, bodies flop down, tears and drips of coffee arc upwards, and ponytails bounce with an uncanny spring.

"Emphasizing and dramatizing the weight and gravity of a figure makes visible the invisible—like anxiety, sadness, or self-consciousness," Weaver said. Oil paint helps her give "real physical presence" to her characters and their outsized emotions.



Grace Weaver, *Choker*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan, New York.



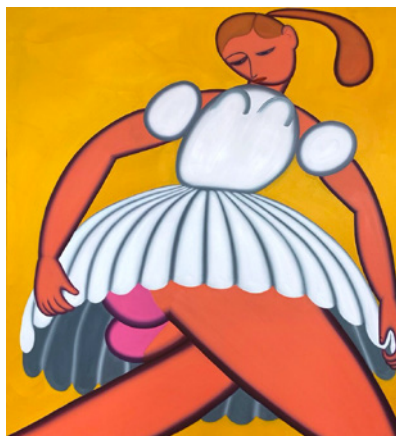
Grace Weaver, *Not yet titled*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan, New York.

A sense of discomfort is particularly present in *Choker* (2020), a spare composition in which a thin black band constricts a woman's neck. Weaver cuts off her face above the lips, so her eyes, expression, and personhood remain hidden. This framing amplifies the sense that this woman isn't simply being constrained by a tight necklace, but silenced or restricted in a larger way. The work resonates with Weaver's own description of her style as "almost perversely controlled."

Weaver's visual iconography, in fact, often suggests some kind of degradation. In another painting, a fallen woman in a neon-pink dress crawls on her hands and knees; her ballooning, almost larger-than-life body nearly presses up against the sides of the canvas. With this piece, Weaver was thinking about women's embarrassment and public performances of failure. She mentioned the feeling of walking across a room, knowing others are watching, and feeling "the performance of self." Weaver added, "I love the metaphor of being on your hands and knees. It can go in a whole bunch of crazy directions." She cited the idiom's sexual connotations, as well its reference to "being a slave to capitalism," or just generally subservient.



Grace Weaver, *Not yet titled*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan, New York.



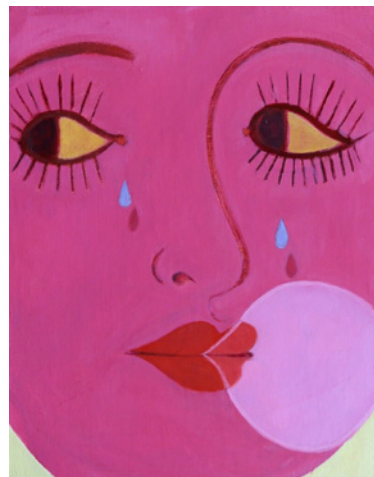
Grace Weaver, *Not yet titled*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan, New York.

Such an emphasis on humiliation is ironic, given Weaver's rapid rise, and celebration, in the public eye. Born in 1989, the artist received her MFA from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2015 and quickly solidified her position on the gallery scene: That year, Berlin's Soy Capitán and New York's Thierry Goldberg Gallery both gave her solo exhibitions. Since her twenties, she's worked in an instantly recognizable, figurative style with a visual vocabulary—bright colors, rounded female forms, millennial habits—that she's been expanding ever since.

Malte Lin-Kröger, the acting director of Kunstpalais & Städtische Sammlung Erlangen in Erlangen, Germany, who organized a solo exhibition of Weaver's work last year, noted the artist's "ability to capture a certain underlying mood or approach to life that is closely linked to her generation." He described her canvases as "genre scenes of a generation that has the freedom and burden to make choices constantly and on every scale, from the milk that goes into your morning latte to the person you want to spend the rest of your life with." Yet it was the "sensitivity" of her protagonists that immediately struck him.



Grace Weaver
long distance, 2016
Soy Capitán



Grace Weaver
super-sad tale of woe, 2015
Thierry Goldberg Gallery

While Weaver's work looks distinctly contemporary, art-historical references abound. Her figures often feature bright pink or squash-colored skin, a palette that recalls the work of 19th- and 20th-century artists like the Fauves or Les Nabis. She traces her voluminous, curving bodies back to Fernand Léger and Neoclassical Picasso. Her work also begs a comparison to that of the modernist Brazilian phenom Tarsila do Amaral, whose ovular forms find a contemporary connection in the egg-shaped clouds that infiltrate Weaver's oeuvre.

Lin-Kröger offered another handful of other comparisons: classic American artist Grant Wood, Pop-adjacent painting guru Alex Katz, Chicago Imagist Christina Ramberg ("considering her interest in clothing and the female body"), and the "twisted and contorted figures" of the Mannerists of the

Late Renaissance.

In her new series of street scenes, Weaver noted that she's diverging from an old emphasis on intimate domestic environments. Past paintings have featured women putting on makeup at a mirror, a crowded indoor party scene, and figures playing on their phones and laptops as they become immersed in their interior and digital worlds. With this shift, Weaver was thinking of Gustave Caillebotte's *Paris Street; Rainy Day* (1877) and WPA murals, including Philip Guston's work for a post office in Commerce, Georgia. The "heaviness and gravity" of the bodies in such large-scale works inspires Weaver. "That's what I'm trying to get at," she said, "these larger-than-life figures that have almost superhuman weight to them." She's also intrigued by the way the WPA muralists represented industry—in one in-progress painting that's nearly eight feet tall, she hopes the smoke, steam, and exhaust suggest "the inhospitality of the city."



Grace Weaver in her studio, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan, New York.

Street scenes, of course, are particularly poignant and fraught in our COVID-19-addled city. Every outside interaction requires six feet of distance, with bodies dancing around each other on the sidewalk. While Weaver started her canvases before social distancing measures swept through New York, the pandemic and its repercussions have only increased her desire to capture strangers' public interactions. "It all feels more poignant and uncertain and fraught right now," she said. "The distances between people on the street, the eye contact you make with a stranger across the street—all

that's heightened but it's not totally changed.”

As Lin-Kröger noted, Weaver's characters “appear to be very self-aware and observing of each other. They don't rush into things but take their time and seem to contemplate on every step and every small movement they make.”



Grace Weaver
Meet-Cute, 2014
Thierry Goldberg Gallery

As she considered a title for the upcoming exhibition, Weaver turned to Frank O'Hara, that poet of exuberant New York streets. “I'm trying to find a title that gets at both a feeling of community but also of danger on the street,” she said.

On her computer, Weaver pulled up O'Hara's poem “A Step Away From Them” (1964), and read: “Then onto the / avenue where skirts are flipping /

above heels and blow up over / grates.”

Weaver said the poet makes her miss “busy, crazy, active New York.” In her studio, on her canvases, through O’Hara’s art and that of others, she can briefly return to the unique vibrancy, indignities, and encounters that, until recently, characterized the world around her. •



Alina Cohen

Correction: A previous version of this article stated that one in-progress painting is nearly six feet tall. The aforementioned painting is nearly eight feet tall.