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Celeste Dupuy-Spencer Compares Progressives To Evangelicals In A New Painting



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Arts



Celeste Dupuy-Spencer, "Don't You See That I'm Burning," 2021, oil on canvas, 85 x 85 inches COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND NINO MIER GALLERY

Two years ago, Celeste Dupuy-Spencer walked into an evangelical mega-church, and had a profound experience. A self-professed atheist with progressive politics who doesn't believe in what she refers to as the "sky daddy," Dupuy-Spencer was nevertheless moved by a sense of unconditional love. "Out of a room full of holy people,

Jesus loves the sinner the most,” she says. She continued attending the church until COVID-19 shut it down; to this day, she continues not to believe in God.

Over the past year, Dupuy-Spencer saw strong echoes of the evangelical church in progressive politics. “The more extreme the right went, the more pristine and perfect the left got,” she notes. The fundamental battle between good and evil, with no room for gray areas as played out by, for example, progressive thought leaders on Twitter was, in Dupuy-Spencer’s opinion, “100% evangelical.” Even the idea that the better you were, the more deserving you were of praise and love, very much mirrored the Christian idea of ascending to heaven. “The left is so allergic to evangelicals, they are completely blind to the comparison,” she notes.

When the Capitol Riot occurred on January 6, Dupuy-Spencer was not surprised. “It had been months of torture and hell,” she says. “It was the culmination of something we all knew was going to happen.”



Detail of Celeste Dupuy-Spencer's "Don't You See That I'm Burning," 2021, oil on canvas, 85 x 85 ... [+] IMAGES COURTESY OF NINO MIER GALLERY AND THE ARTIST

Closer inspection reveals some grace in the figuration. In the foreground, a group of men, one of them holding three pipe bombs and bearing the facial hair of St. Francis of Assisi (as he appears in iconography), kneel as if in prayer. Some faces in the crowd are screaming; others appear bewildered, confused. Underneath an arch in the background, above which men scale on yellow ropes, hangs a flag that reads, “Father/Don’t You See/I’m Burning.”



Detail of Celeste Dupuy-Spencer's "Don't You See That I'm Burning," 2021, oil on canvas, 85 x 85 ... [+] IMAGES COURTESY OF NINO MIER GALLERY AND THE ARTIST

It was important to Dupuy-Spencer not to use faces from people who actually attended the Capitol riot, but instead, faces that served as a metaphor for a broad range of psychological conditions. (She made an exception for the guy who wore the Camp Auschwitz sweatshirt. “That motherfucker went in,” she said.) Dupuy-Spencer, who was raised in upstate New York listening to country music and driving trucks, [has often taken on the complicated subject of the working-class white male in her painting](#). In past works, she used faces of people she knew, such as her first love, as subject matter. When the resulting paintings sold to collectors, she felt as though she had betrayed people she loved. “I put them in paintings about class, about rural gentrification, and then rich people were buying them,” she said. “I was so naïve.”



Detail of Celeste Dupuy-Spencer's "Don't You See That I'm Burning," 2021, oil on canvas, 85 x 85 ... [+] IMAGES COURTESY OF NINO MIER GALLERY AND THE ARTIST

In “Don’t You See That I’m Burning,” the painting plane is torn apart in the top right corner by an explosion, out of which emerges a man playing the guitar — perhaps Willie Nelson, whose own love of evangelical Christianity brought Dupuy-Spencer to church in the first place — as well as a purple structure bearing a sign that reads

“DNC.” The purple structure, and the mustachioed figure in front of it, refer to the poem “The Walrus and the Carpenter” by Lewis Carroll, which is referenced in the Disney film *Alice in Wonderland*. In the poem, a walrus and a carpenter convince young oysters to join them for a walk on the beach, and then lead them single file to a hastily erected restaurant, where the oysters are gobbled. As he eats them, the walrus weeps. The metaphor to the DNC is a bit heavy-handed, but also, effective — the DNC is part of the machine that has, arguably, elevated the interests of a few wealthy people at the devastating expense of the working class. In the left corner of the painting, three fighter jets stand in for the planes President Joseph Biden sent to Syria on February 25 to bomb a site believed to be occupied by Iranian-backed militants.

Dupuy-Spencer didn’t want the viewer to look at the painting and just see white supremacist monsters on display. She wanted them to see the perversion in their own — presumably progressive — perspective.

Ultimately, Dupuy-Spencer knows her audience. The sort of person who attends an exhibition at an art gallery in Los Angeles is more likely to have voted for Biden than Trump; more likely to decry mask policies in “red states” while they order their groceries delivered on an app; more likely to think that they are too smart for religion while asking to be rewarded with multiple loves on Facebook for the righteousness of their opinions on immigration. Dupuy-Spencer is trying to make these viewers uncomfortable with themselves.

“I wish I was an essayist and not a painter,” she laughs. In a way, perhaps, painting is a better medium for the moment. An essay is too easily shared on social media. A painting hangs in a liminal “safe” space, with no visible comment box underneath. The only way to respond is to lean in, and look closer.