

Vogue

Marius, Marley: The Bold New Mode of Artist Grace Weaver  
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MAGAZINE

## The Bold New Mode of Artist Grace Weaver

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BY MARLEY MARIUS

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The artist, wearing a Brooks Brothers oxford shirt, photographed by Eric Degenhardt.

“A lot has changed in the last year or so, and I think that is definitely owed to the pandemic,” says the artist Grace Weaver. She is walking me through “11 Women”—her recent solo show at the James Cohan gallery in Tribeca—which marked an exciting new turn for her output, until now distinguished by oversized, highly saturated figures engaged in what she has called the “theater of public life.” Exhibited across the U.S. and Germany, Scotland, France, and Denmark, Weaver’s people primped, jogged, ate, smoked, checked their phones, and descended into the subway—sometimes in one big, twisted mass of limbs and gestures—while “kind of awkwardly performing and aware that they’re posing,” she says.

The women of “11 Women” are like that, too, maneuvering streets strewn with empty bottles and traffic cones in sports bras, spandex, and fanny packs. But they appear mostly alone—only barely contained by their massive 95-by-89-inch canvases—and are rendered with bigger, looser brushstrokes in a narrower color palette. “My favorite painters have remained the same for years and years, like Philip Guston, Georg Baselitz, and Amy Sillman,” Weaver says, “yet for whatever reason, their actual approach to brushwork and image-making did not correspond to how I was working.”



### STYLED BODIES

Weaver's *Untitled (Woman)*, 2021, represents a new style for Weaver, with figures rendered in bigger, looser brushstrokes. Phoebe d'Heurle

Where each of those painters walked right up to the line between figuration and abstraction, often combining the two, Weaver's own style was highly mannered. "In her earliest paintings, Grace's figures were defined by contoured edges and flat surfaces, and it was the exacting precision of those surfaces that ultimately became a kind of cul-de-sac for her practice," says David Norr, a co-owner of James Cohan. "I was working in a much more uptight way, painting with a tiny brush," Weaver adds. But being cooped up in her Bushwick, Brooklyn, studio over the last two years triggered a minor breakthrough—or, perhaps, an act of rebellion: "It forced me to confront my work in a new way, and paint the way that I



really want to paint, and have always wanted to.”

Weaver’s bold new mode belies the daintiness of her bearing. Dressed, when I meet her, in a black quarter-zip knit tucked into a black skirt with black tights and boots, she is pin-neat and pin-sharp, firing off references to Proust, Knausgaard, the novelist Kate Zambreno, the French literary and activist collective Tiqqun, and *Sex and the City*. She also talks animatedly about music, which has often influenced the scenes she sets—for better or for worse. “I made this one terrible painting right before this body of work. I was listening to the Smashing Pumpkins,” she remarks. “The painting got very angsty...so sometimes I have to be careful.” (When it came to “11 Women,” her playlist leaned more techno and electronic, à la the German musician Ellen Allien and her 2003 track “Trash Scapes.”)



**SCALE UP**

Weaver’s *Misstep*, 2020, shows the contoured edges and flat surfaces of earlier work.

I’m not surprised to learn that both her parents worked in academia—her father, as editor of the University of Vermont’s

alumni magazine; her mother, as a lecturer in math and statistics there—nor that for a time, Weaver thought she would do the same. (She has discussed, in the past, her attraction to scientific research; to “gathering information from all over the place and synthesizing something, some new theory.”) “I really just assumed I would be a professor,” she tells me. “But I think growing up in the context of the university gave me this maybe naive idea that you could just pursue whatever was intellectually exciting.” Set off by an introductory painting course her sophomore year of college, in 2011 Weaver graduated from UVM with a B.A. in studio art, later earning her MFA from Virginia Commonwealth University. She then decamped to Brooklyn, where she’s been based for six years. (Now 32, Weaver lives and works with her husband, Eric Degenhardt, who builds the stretchers for her canvases with his grandfather.) In a way, that move anticipated the recent retooling of Weaver’s painting practice. Growing up in staid Burlington, Vermont, she longed for the romance—and the chaos—of life in New York. “I think it was a good, safe setup for exploring more adventurous places,” she says of her hometown. “The tidiness of a place like Burlington doesn’t really appeal to me anymore. I want to walk out my door and have a lot to look at.”

The act of making art—especially on Weaver’s demanding scale—has offered another sort of freedom. “I think part of the reason that I got into painting rather than art history or biology was to explore intuition and other kinds of intelligence rather than the superconscious side of my brain,” she says. To find her forms, she practices a kind of automatic drawing, scrawling figures on one page after the other in rapid succession. (In his 2018 book, *Chalk: The Art and Erasure of Cy Twombly*, Joshua Rivkin describes a similar methodology: “Picture the artist pacing, trying to figure out a way out of his own head. Out of his own knowing and certainty. How to escape the mind—and the hand, too—their stubborn insistence on order.”)



The artist in her studio late last year, photographed by Eric Degenhardt.

“The art world more often than not rewards convention, so it is rare to see a painter at Grace’s stage rewrite their own script,” Norr says. “The real shift is philosophical, as she has linked the physicality of her process with the physicality of her subjects.” Weaver might not look much like the characters she paints, but she’s embedded in them nevertheless: The “11 Women” series in particular recalls the seven- or eight-mile runs that Weaver and Degenhardt would take after the city shut down. “During the pandemic especially, the streets in our neighborhood took on such an eerie, postapocalyptic mood,” she explains. “I think that feeling—of being alone on a city street, isolated, and perhaps a bit anxious—permeated all of these paintings.” (Baselitz’s “Heroes” series, which dealt with the bleakness of postwar German life, offered some visual inspiration.) She met that shifty, restless mood with a new creative process. Eschewing much of the planning that undergirded her earlier works, she started painting wet-on-wet with much wider, thicker brushes, letting lighter tones swirl together with darker ones and stray flecks fall where they would. “Having to work in this more fast and decisive way has allowed me to put the work on the surface,” Weaver says. (More from her in this vein will appear in two forthcoming group exhibitions: “They Shut Me Up In Prose” at Nassima Landau in Tel Aviv, opening this month, and “HOW (NOT) TO FIT IN: Adolescence as a Metaphor” at Villa Merkel in Esslingen am Neckar, Germany, opening in May. Her next New York show is slated for 2023.)

She relates the dynamic results of that approach to an idea in Sillman’s *Faux Pas: Selected Writings and Drawings*, released in 2020. “She leaves these breadcrumbs in her paintings, where you can kind of figure out what came first and what came before that and unpack them,” Weaver reflects. There is, she feels, something endearingly “generous”—and liberating—about showing one’s work to the viewer that way. “I don’t want to hide behind a perfect surface anymore,” Weaver says. “I’d like all that to be visible.”