NINO MIER GALLERY

CELESTE DUPUY-SPENCER

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Celeste Dupuy-Spencer moves between styles, gestures and a history of painting to interrogate the American experience as seen in her religious scenes, portraits and landscapes. Through seemingly fast brushwork and a montage of visual language, Dupuy-Spencer imbues each painting with a sense of existential grappling—figures and scenes are at once terror-filled yet full of tenderness. Community and more broadly, society, in all its contradictions, repression, but also hope and love, often plays a central role in Celeste's paintings—figures coalesce in domestic spaces, churches and on neighborhood streets. In an almost therapeutic way, Celeste captures these deeply layered, microcosmic narratives that speak to the ever-evolving nature of America.

Celeste grew up in rural upstate New York and briefly relocated to New Orleans before settling in Los Angeles. These geographic spaces and distances become tantamount to her depiction of friends, family, lovers and colleagues. In the personalized vision of Celeste's paintings, each character is teeming with specificity in personality and so many endearing qualities. While often using photographs as a starting point, her paintings are many times tainted and informed by the fallibility of memory and underlying emotions. Celeste's epic paintings contain enormous depth and life where subtle moments are transformed into compelling statements on race, religion and privilege.

Celeste Dupuy-Spencer (b. 1979 New York, NY, lives and works in Los Angeles) received a BFA from Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York in 2007. Recent solo exhibitions include The Dream of the "Burning Child" at Nino Mier Gallery, Los Angeles, US (2021) and But the Clouds Never Hung So Low Before at Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin, DE (2020). Group exhibitions include Prospect 5: Yesterday we said tomorrow, Ogden Museum of Art, New Orleans, US; All Them Witches at Deitch Projects, Los Angeles (2020); Made in L.A. at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2018); The Whitney Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2017); and Tomorrow Never Happens, The Samek Art Museum at Bucknell University, PA (2016).

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SELECTED WORKS

Celeste Dupuy-Spencer
Don't You See That I Am Burning, 2021
Oil on canvas
85 x 85 in
215.9 x 215.9 cm

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Celeste Dupuy-Spencer
Divine Demons, 2021
Oil on linen
60 x 75 in
152.4 x 190.5 cm

Celeste Dupuy-Spencer
When you've eaten everything below you, you'll devour yourself/except in dreams you're never really free, 2020
Oil on linen
84 x 85 in
213.4 x 215.9 cm

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Celeste Dupuy-Spencer
Ode to Enjoyment, 2022
Oil on linen
70 x 60 in
177.8 x 152.4 cm

Celeste Dupuy-Spencer
There'll be nobody hiding (when that rough god goes riding), 2020
Oil on linen
105 1/2 x 96 in
268 x 243.8 cm

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Celeste Dupuy-Spencer
To the dust of the bones of the once endlessly-resurrecting, 2020
Oil on linen
84 x 85 in
213.4 x 215.9 cm

Celeste Dupuy-Spencer
And the Kingdom is Here, 2020
Oil on canvas
65 x 85 in
165.1 x 215.9 cm

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Celeste Dupuy-Spencer
Through the Laying of the Hands (Positively Demonic Dynamism), 2018
Oil on linen
48 x 40 in
121.9 x 101.6 cm

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Celeste Dupuy-Spencer
Dutchess County Border (Matriarchs of the 90's Line), 2018
Oil on linen
96 x 120 in
243.8 x 304.8 cm

Celeste Dupuy-Spencer
The Chiefest of Ten Thousand (Sarah 2), 2018
Oil on linen
105 x 96 in
266.7 x 243.8 cm

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INSTALLATION VIEWS

Installation view of Celeste Dupuy-Spencer in
Yesterday we said tomorrow
(October 23, 2021 - January 23, 2022)
Ogden Museum of Southern Art
New Orleans, LA, US

Installation view of Celeste Dupuy-Spencer in
Yesterday we said tomorrow
(October 23, 2021 - January 23, 2022)
Ogden Museum of Southern Art
New Orleans, LA, US

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Yesterday we said tomorrow
(October 23, 2021 - January 23, 2022)
Ogden Museum of Southern Art
New Orleans, LA, US

Installation view of Celeste Dupuy-Spencer's
Ode to Enjoyment, 2022
at *Luncheon on the Grass*
(February 19 - May 7 2022)
Jeffrey Deitch Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

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Installation view of Celeste Dupuy-Spencer's
The Dream of the "Burning Child"
(March 3 - March 24 2021)
Nino Mier Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

Installation view of Celeste Dupuy-Spencer's
But The Clouds Never Hung So Low Before
(November 7, 2021 - January 9, 2021)
Max Hetzler Gallery, Berlin, DE

Installation view of Celeste Dupuy-Spencer's
But The Clouds Never Hung So Low Before
(November 7, 2021 - January 9, 2021)
Max Hetzler Gallery, Berlin, DE

Installation view of Celeste Dupuy-Spencer's
But The Clouds Never Hung So Low Before
(November 7, 2021 - January 9, 2021)
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Installation view of Celeste Dupuy-Spencer in
MADE IN LA 2018
(June 3 - September 2 2018)
Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA

Installation view of Celeste Dupuy-Spencer in
MADE IN LA 2018
(June 3 - September 2 2018)
Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA

Installation view of Celeste Dupuy-Spencer's
The Chiefest of Ten Thousand
(September 22 - November 18 2018)
Nino Mier Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

Installation view of Celeste Dupuy-Spencer's
The Chiefest of Ten Thousand
(September 22 - November 18 2018)
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(September 22 - November 18 2018)
Nino Mier Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

Installation view of Celeste Dupuy-Spencer in
2017 Whitney Biennial
(March 17 - June 11 2017)
Whitney Museum, New York, NY

Installation view of Celeste Dupuy-Spencer in
2017 Whitney Biennial
(March 17 - June 11 2017)
Whitney Museum, New York, NY

Installation view of Celeste Dupuy-Spencer's
And a Wheel on the Truck
(April 2 - May 15 2016)
Nino Mier Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

Installation view of Celeste Dupuy-Spencer's
And a Wheel on the Truck
(April 2 - May 15 2016)
Nino Mier Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

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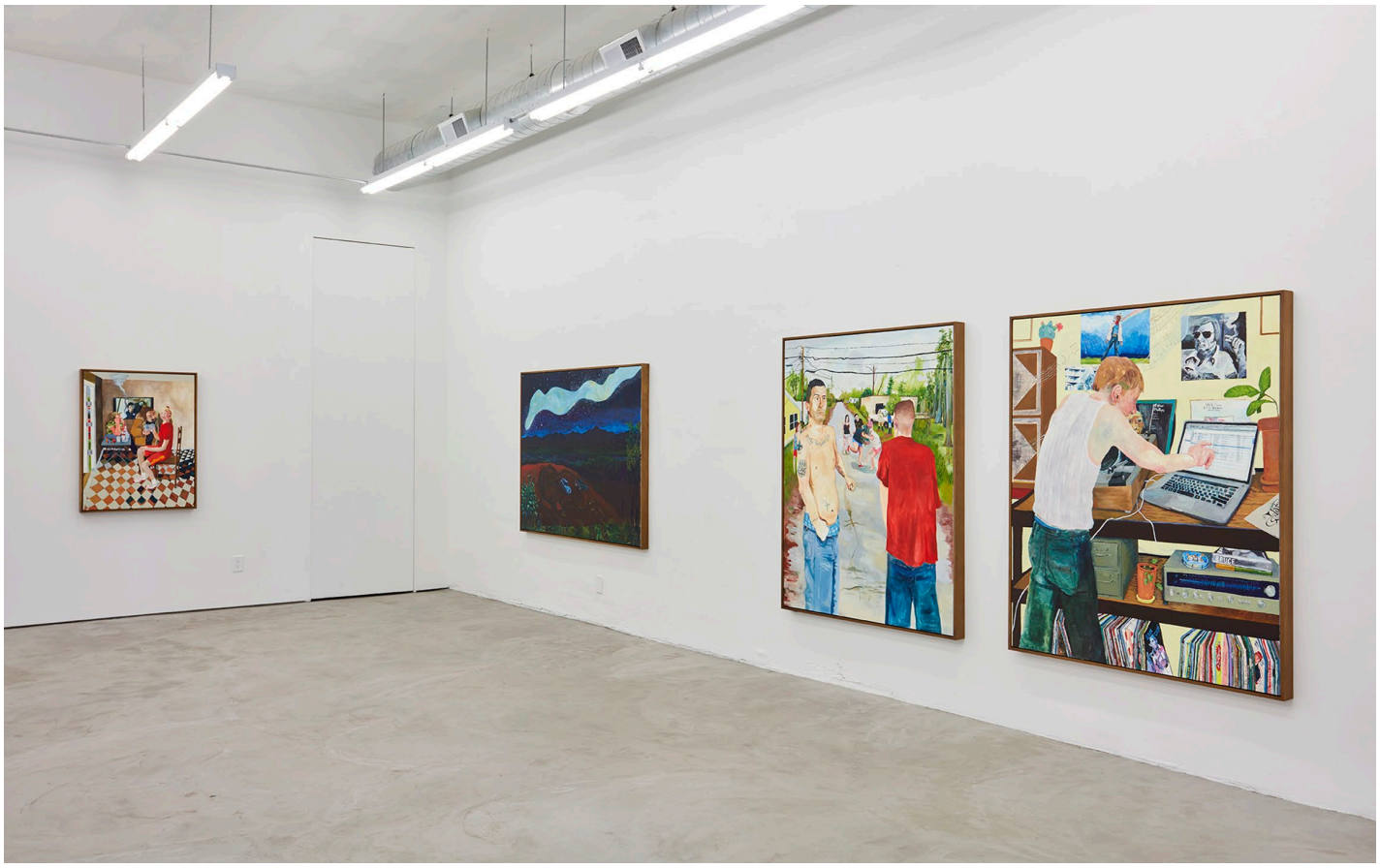

Installation view of Celeste Dupuy-Spencer's
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PRESS

Los Angeles MAGAZINE
December 2021

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

By Michael Slenske

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.

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 muddied 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 miasmic 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 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." 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.

Photo courtesy of Celeste Dupuy-Spencer

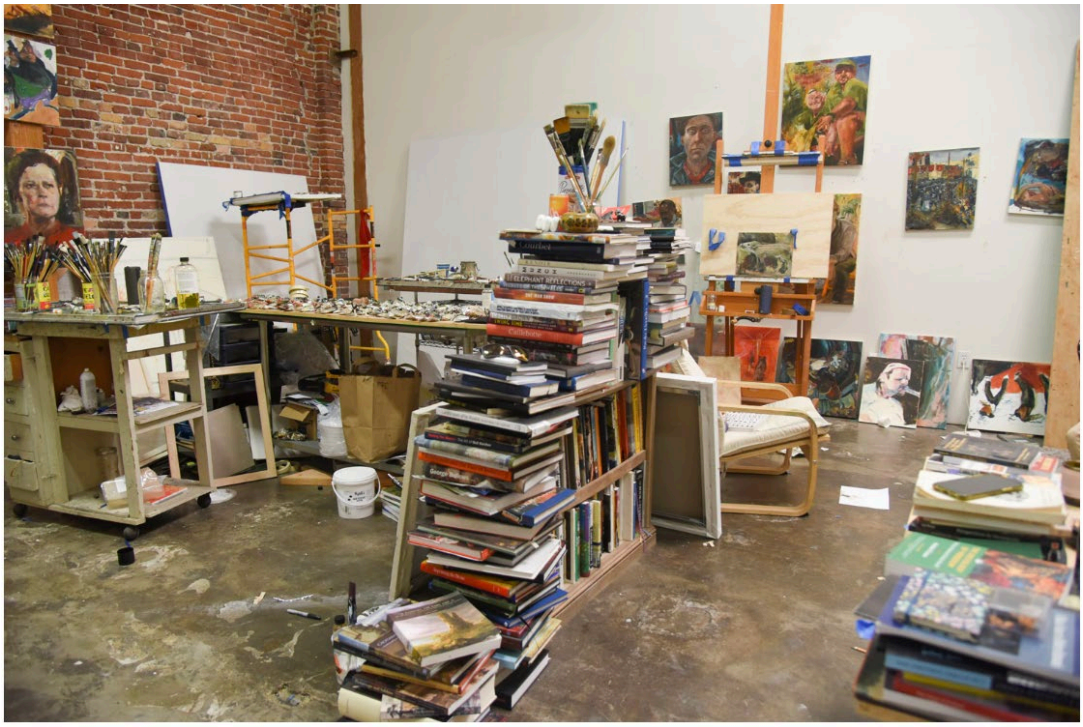

Photo by Irvin Rivera

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.

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 to male, 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 to 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."

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."

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.

Photo by Irvin Rivera

"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.”

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.”

NINO MIER GALLERY

ARTSPACE

July 2021

5 things to look out for in the Celeste Dupuy-Spencer edition

By ArtSpace Editors

Celeste Dupuy-Spencer moves between styles, gestures and a history of painting to interrogate the American experience. Hailed by curators and critics as a leading artist of her generation, she's known for her energetic brushwork and incorporating a montage of visual language. Celeste's paintings grapple with existential questions through figures and scenes that are at once confrontational and tender. Community and more broadly, society - in all its contradictions - is often the protagonist in a body of work that aims to capture the ever-evolving nature of America. Here the painter talks us through five things to look out for in her new Artspace edition When you've eaten everything below you, you'll devour yourself/except in dreams you're never really free, 2020/2021. Proceeds from the sale of this edition of 50 will be donated to New York City's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center.

"My paintings are packed with all of this information and there's literally no way for a person to know, so I'm glad to get the opportunity to pick out a few things in this one. So much of it smashes in and out and it makes total sense to me at the time, but if I don't write it down, in some paintings - not this one – the ideas can be lost forever.

"When I begin a painting it really starts off as just a basic idea. I don't actually know if this one started off with this heist scene but then it sort of developed into that. These were the faces that were there within seconds of the painting starting and then they began to tell me where it was going.

1. THE GUY ON THE PHONE
The story I had in my head - whether or not it's right – is that we're in a Manhattan loft belonging to the guy on the phone. The woman sitting next to him is his assistant and his wife is in the back in this glass container. He's on the phone at the moment when more rich and powerful people have come to take his life. I'm not certain who he is on the phone with, maybe his mom saying goodbye, or his lawyer signing over his goods to these guys who are going through his art collection and his property. Either way, he's got his black American express card out - I had to Google what sort of credit card he would have! The people who are alive are probably alive because they've done this to everyone beneath them. The title is me reflecting on the fact that once everyone else has been killed or doesn't have anything that anybody wants any more, that people are not actually going to be happy and relaxed. They're going to start turning against one another. The man is in that moment, mere seconds before somebody dies, when they go from pleading to smiling. He's at this moment when death on the horse is in front of him, shining its lights on him. We're here a second before the gun goes off essentially. Death is moving the gun to the back of his head. I sometimes wonder whether he's looking at Jesus come down but what we see on the canvas is just a pale horse with a skeleton on it. A gunman is also peering behind that painting to see if there's maybe a hidden safe there.

2. THE ART HISTORY ON THE WALLS
Including these references to art history is one of the pleasures of having an art process whereby a painting unfolds over time and during so many thoughts. You get to make a claim or a hypothesis and then, through painting, connect all of the reasons around it that can make it come into being.

The man is surrounded by art historical events. There are these intentional moments that come from art history but are mainly details from bigger art historical pieces. One of them, the one with the horses, is this painting by Lady Butler. I look at her as a sort of patriotic war painter. But when you look closer you realise it is not patriotic; she's painting the shell shock and the tragedy. Even between the soldiers who are smiling, there are those who are in absolute disbelief about what they're seeing around them. This particular painting is the death of the bugle boy. Walking next to him is this very short man who has this look in his eye that is so haunted. Above him is George Bellows' print of some of the atrocities that the Germans inflicted on Belgium during World War One where they massacred children in front of their parents. The soldiers are attacking the mothers of the children and the children are stuck on their bayonets.

Next to them is King Herod by Rubens. It's on the cover of a Rubens book that I have in my studio. But I have taped over the faces of the babies as it's too upsetting. And then to the left of the soldiers is the Raft of the Medusa by Théodore Géricault zeroed in on the father weeping over his drowned son. To the left of the gunman peering behind the painting to see if there's a hidden safe is a Tintoretto painting of a Venetian military man who protected Venice at sea against the Ottomans.

He won a battle at sea and saw a lot of death but died of a broken heart when a fire broke out in a great hall where a lot of beautiful art was kept. The idea of including him was centered on my thoughts about how devastating it is when our legacy is destroyed. All of these images are sort of like a mix tape of art. When I have a point I really do tend to end up grinding it!

3. THE MEN AROUND THE GUY ON THE PHONE
As frustrated as a I am about wealth disparity, and the brutality of what it takes to get to a certain level of wealth, I feel that while these people are deeply responsible for where they are, they are not fully responsible. They are 'born into it'. Their values are a certain way. Their lives are exactly how they were told it would be. It's complicated, but I think my empathy for the guy is in the way he's depicted in jeans. He's like how rich people always wear old jeans with bare feet, like they're at the beach. Like they're just a guy. He's just a guy.

I end up feeling pity, and sorrow, and all those kinds of emotions for my characters. They're humans right? And I dragged them into all of this. They came into being in this situation! But these are the people at the top. And they are going to be the people who survive. They're a symbol of extinction. It's a sort of a pointed anger. It's really about the human on human brutality. Like luscious violence. It's what happens when you have political opponents clashing on balconies! These things are brutal but they are the tactics that are used.

4. THE RIDDLES IN THE PAINTING

There are little kinds of symbols - like little signifiers or riddles that can add an element to the story. I put some wine bottles in there. One of the bottles of Austrian wine is in my mind a gift to the man from friends, thanking his family for 'really being there' when their son was killed in a car accident. There was this new Nazi party in Austria I read about, and Jorg Haider, one of the people in it, died in a car accident. And it's just a reminder that the money on top goes to fund these things.

You can also see in the image this child's ghost. In my mind one of the aspects of this is that presumably that child, if he were to live, would have been folded into this whole scene. In this core state I'm assuming the child hasn't moved much beyond, so the child is filled with terrible rage at what's happened and has this longing to go to the other side. So it ends up as being an angry or a terrified ghost that ends up clinging to its mother. It becomes a stand in for innocence. That symbol on the side of the boy's toy truck (behind the man who is doing the peace sign) is one of the 72 names for God.

5. THE ICE BUCKET

There's another painter who's coming up right now called Larry Madrigal. He's out of Arizona and he came to my studio and was hanging out. I said you're really good at doing metallic things so can you do the ice bucket? There are moments where I hit the wall in my ability to do things. I couldn't make it and I kept on scratching it away. So he painted the ice bucket. I love it when there's a chance to get someone else's hand into my painting. You're not really supposed to say that there are other hands that go into your paintings - even if it's past a certain scale. I think the rejection of that is important. The discomfort around it is capitalist bullshit. It doesn't make sense other than for the market.

NINO MIER GALLERY

ARTSPACE

June 2021

‘I was really trying to paint what it feels like to be living in the fall of human civilization’

By ArtSpace Editors

The highly acclaimed young American artist Celeste Dupuy-Spencer artist paints visceral, visionary, figurative works, which draw on her own personal fears, wider political and social pressures, as well as the existential conflicts within the human condition. The LA-based artist’s blistering paintings, loaded with a complex mix of iconography, drawn from the real and the imaginary, have seen her artworld standing rise exponentially in recent years.

Dupuy-Spencer has been the subject of numerous exhibitions at such institutions as the Hammer, the Whitney (where The New Yorker referred to her as ‘a standout’), the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the ICA in Boston. The Whitney, the Hammer and SFMOMA also have Dupuy-Spencer works in their permanent collections, as does the Los Angeles County Museum; many private galleries and collectors have followed these institutions’ lead, making Dupuy-Spencer one of the most appreciated painters at work today. Anne Ellegood, who co-curated the Hammer show, says Dupuy-Spencer is set to become “one of the great painters of her generation.”

In this interview, published to celebrate her new Artspace edition (to benefit the The Center Benefit Auction, in support of The New York City Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center), the artist describes the forces at work in her paintings, which include a Marxist upbringing, a struggle with addiction, as well as her admiration for, and reinterpretation of, movements such as Impressionism. Her own family history plays a part in her work too; Dupuy-Spencer is descended from one of the founding families of New Orleans, and her father is the acclaimed novelist, Scott Spencer.

AS: Tell us about how the original painting for this edition came into being.

CDS: I was in the last leg of working for a show at Max Hetzler gallery. Against my better judgement I pulled out a blank canvas when I should have been tying everything up. It happens every show and it always ends up to be the painting that I end up loving the most – which is lucky, because while I'm doing it I'm usually thinking this is a really baaaad idea!

The paintings that I was working on for that show were giant groups of animals racing off into oblivion and cities being engulfed by the ground. I realised it was an entire show of emotions and that I needed there to be a story. I needed there to be something solid, and so I wanted to make it about this part of our nature, this desperate need for wealth. I was really trying to paint something that's impossible, which is what it feels like to be living in what really is the fall of human civilisation.

I don't ever really go in with a plan; it's sort of an act of faith. Sometimes it's a composition or an idea. Then the painting unfolds on its own. This painting started with a composition triggered by a Tintoretto painting.

AS: So is there a routine for you?

CDS: I have a really strange routine. Which is that I really function very well in a dream state – exhaustion essentially. My normal one is a 26-hour day. So I often start working in the evening and then leave the following evening. And then I get a good eight hours sleep and then I do it again. I get a second wind and then a third. So I have different mindsets when I tackle a painting. It starts with the critical mind, where I'm intentional about what I'm doing, and ends with a dream state where I'll be surprised when I stand back.

The critical moment isn't necessarily when I start the painting it's just the beginning of that 'shift'. Like that first idea is how to get my foot in the door and then the ideas are cumulative. It's like starting your life in a home with a tornado. First it's a tornado and then it's the clean up to get a house out of the debris. But I have to utilise the debris.

It's almost like a spiritual or mystical practice. It feels highly collaborative, except that I don't know who I'm collaborating with. There's moments when the painting is rattling at the cage and I don't even know what it looks like. All I feel is that I am providing a way for it to come out. It really feels like a magical project and a relationship with time.

There is a moment with all of my paintings where it really is me wrestling with material against a surface and I'm pushing and pulling and trying to remember how to make light and shadow and sculpt something. Then there's often a moment all of a sudden where I make a mark and the canvas's eye opens up and it's looking back at me. And I really live for that.

Sometimes it's literally just this other world on the other side. It's magical. When that happens it makes me think there might actually be a place for painting in my worldview, and that I don't have to get stumped by the politics of the art world and capitalism. And that, even if I don't believe in fate, I was put on this earth to do this.

The shape and motion of the body in your works is incredibly revealing, along with the eye for subtle, telling detail. Were you the kind of kid that sat and observed?

Maybe it's that plus being queer. I learned early on how to read the room. There were a lot of feelings in the house, I guess. But the other thing might be that it comes from autism or having to find a way into a place where I can understand people and what they're thinking, because I don't automatically understand what they're thinking.

One of the things that I think is dangerous about how we are right now is this rejection of emotion for materialism. As someone who grew up Marxist I appreciate materialism. It's hard to be a Marxist in the artworld! That's my whine for the day. But I think we often intellectualize things that should be felt, and I think that we're in scary territory. So I feel strongly that either I could learn how to tamper that down, or try to find out what human beings are actually in doubt with, in terms of emotionality.

Obviously every painting is a little bit different, but one of the things that's important to me as a painter talking about Americans, is that I never want to be standing on the outside of something pointing in, and describing what I think is in it.

I really want the viewer to be aware of how they thought they were going to view the painting. For example: with the insurrection painting I did after January 6, on the first look I really want the viewer to think, 'look at these awful people storming the democratic palace'. But then I want them to be confronted with the way that they are. It's like old school impressionism, where all of a sudden the viewer is implicated or their view is implicated.

In the case of this edition image, the viewer is maybe able to feel that they are standing in the righteous place, looking at others with enormous wealth and political ties, tear the world apart while surrounded by bottles of Champagne and art historical pieces. But the question it poses is: what are you going to do when there's nobody left to blame, or to take all the responsibility? Because the circle is going to get smaller and smaller, and we have to find a place to be at peace with it or just stop doing it.

And that's important. We're going through a moment right now where we're pretty much top to bottom psychopathic. And it's maybe because if we actually stopped to feel what it's like to be alive right now, with all of the information that we have, plus what NASA tells us is in our future, and the statistics coming out of Africa, we'd pretty much lose our minds! And so actually there's actually a lot to be said about finding a way to access people's feelings center.

Did you always want to be an artist?

When I was a kid what I actually wanted to be was an archaeologist – it was before I knew about colonialism or anything like that.I wanted to find out what it would have been like to walk around in the day to day. You see the paintings in Pompeii and you think you had an idea of how the people lived but then you see a piece of graffiti or the dog frozen in time, and you go, 'oh God I feel I know how it feels

like. I feel like I'm standing there before Vesuvius exploded.' And that is magic actually. It's like being a time explorer and a magician! So I think of myself as being a portrait or a representation of what it feels like to be alive right now for future archaeologists or spacemen or whatever.

What did you learn at Bard and what did you have to unlearn?

When I went to Bard I didn't really know anything really about art. I'd always painted and I'd always done art, as far as I can tell. My mom had art books and I went to high school arts, but then I dropped out and was a landscaper and went to Bard because I enjoyed painting. But I always assumed I'd go back into landscaping. So I went to Bard as part of their continuing study program that enables local adults to attend without paying much more than it cost to have us in class.

I just happened to have been a young adult there at a time when there were really amazing women running the art program - Nicole Eisenman, Judy Pfaff, and Amy Sillman - these people actually grabbed me and took me aside and said you are a very good painter, and you are queer. It is your obligation to take this seriously!

And it was the first time I'd actually heard it. I knew I was an OK painter. People had said I would probably be an artist in the school yearbook. But I didn't know what contemporary art was; it was off limits to me. When I thought about art I thought about the Italian Renaissance. So when that happened and the professors confronted me it was life altering. And very loud!

I left Nicole's office that day with a stack of books and Sadie Benning videos that I couldn't see over the top of! Just tons of contemporary art. They sent me home with it and said, 'if you lose one of these we'll kill you!' It was like Hogwarts or something.

And then you somehow became a heroin addict? What was that all about?

I went from Bard to New York City in the queer art world. It just seemed so perfect. Like everything was being added intentionally. And I always thought that everything that I was adding was going to stay added. And... it turned out that all of that had to be obliterated.

There was no party element to my addiction. I feel it can get alluded to as a party fashion thing. It wasn't. It was a deep secret. When I hit bottom with that I was a complete blank slate. Everything I thought I knew about myself, about everything, just got wiped away. But I've learned to have an overwhelming gratitude for heroin, actually. I don't know if I'd be alive if it wasn't for...otherwise... because it was certainly something I'd reach for when I didn't have any other tools. When I bottomed out on heroin it reset the art – everything. It took me by the ankles and just shook everything out. And I got to put things into place.

I just like myself so much more than I ever did. And I feel more engaged and more empathetic. So all of a sudden to have this enormous love and empathy for people including their failures - everything was just brand new - it was like being a five-year-old again.

The empathy that it perhaps gave you is reflected in the paintings. The reading can never be just black and white - in reality and metaphorically.

I'm glad they come off that way because that's really important to me. My fear is that I make yet another scapegoat for our worst angels, because that's then the start of going into propaganda, in a way.

We're so easily charmed into thinking like that. The way I see it is if we always want to be the good person we have a really hard time being flawed or wrong - we're really not comfortable being wrong about things that we also know how to be the right way with.

And so I realise when I'm making these charged paintings I really run the risk of making something that again the viewer can dump all of their worst stuff onto. Like, right now I have a single insurrectionist in my studio whose parents are patting him on the back and sending him off with his AK47. And I just don't want people to look at him and think, 'look at that guy, I would never be that guy'.

The truth is that we have much more in common with 'that guy' than anything else in the universe. The universe is so massive and we're among an uncountable amount of things that exist. Therefore the similarities between us and the insurrectionist, or monsters such as Trump or (Boris) Johnson are very close – we're identical. This idea that we can separate each other ideologically it's just not helpful.

So some people might then say, 'so Celeste is painting about empathy?' and that's not it either. I don't think it's my place to tell somebody to forgive. When people hold positions that are wrong they don't deserve forgiveness just because they are human. But all I'm asking is that we don't scapegoat people.

We're really touched that you have chosen to create this edition with Artspace to benefit The Center Benefit Auction. It's a very democratic way of enabling more people to live with your work when they otherwise might not be able to.

Me too. I am really excited about this too for that reason. The paintings are so expensive and there's not really much I can do about that, right? So I find myself basically only in communication with certain people. So to have the opportunity to have a beautifully printed edition of my painting that people can live with means the conversation can include more people essentially. It's inspiring too and it's broken open my thoughts about what's possible to do with paintings.

FIRST OF THE MONTH

May 2021

“The Dream of a Burning Child”

By Celeste Dupuy-Spencer

What follows is a commentary on the painting available through the Nino Mier Gallery where Don’t You See That I Am Burning was on exhibit in Los Angeles from March 3-24.

On January 6th 2021 thousands of people stormed the U.S. Capitol in a coordinated attempt to overturn the defeat of the 45th President of the United States as a result of the 2020 presidential election. During a joint session of the 117th United States Congress to formalize the Electoral College Vote Count and confirm the 46th President, a throng of rioters occupied and vandalized the Capitol Building, breached police parameters to maim and ultimately kill police officers, and erected gallows to hang the incumbent Vice-President. Five people died and more than 140 people were injured.

Los Angeles-based artist Celeste Dupuy-Spencer’s painting, Don’t You See That I Am Burning, memorializes in paint the throngs of people that are caught in the act of this violent protest. Members of the anti-government paramilitary Oathkeepers can be seen next to ardent Trump supporters, while neo-fascist Proud Boy Groups are amassed together with Q-Anon enthusiasts, Evangelical and Christian prayer groups, white supremacists of all ages, as well as ordinary Americans both men and women alike. The palpable energy of the painting is aided not only by the sheer number of bodies that are present but by the rippling flags that bear slogans such as “Soldiers in God’s Army”, “Jesus is King”, “Trump’s Law and Order”, “Hang Judas” and “Father Don’t You See I’m Burning”. Dupuy-Spencer is able to conjure chaos not only throughout the crowds, but also through an alternate reality occupying the upper right quadrant of the painting where out of a smokey haze struts a stout Walrus and the Carpenter from Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland who overlook a sea of proverbial oysters dressed in red MAGA and green camouflage.

The gendarmes represented within the painting are driven as much by the truth of the actual events as our own mythologies surrounding them. For what makes this painting impactful is not the detailed representation of a historical assault on the nation’s capital, but the folklore surrounding the division of the nation’s political cultures, and it’s influence on the monstrous events of the day. The painting reflects the urge to utilize the right-wing masses and far-right rioters as a lens through which to see ourselves. By contrasting ourselves against “them” we set ourselves as diametrically opposed. In times of shock and inevitable horror, we become innocent and good. Celeste’s frenzied brushstrokes and painstaking detail encourage us to confront our own myths, not just about those who would wave those flags and storm the capital, because the rioters leave little room for embellishment, but about ourselves as among those who looked on in horror.

By painting the events of January 6th as a monumental historical painting, Celeste engages the viewer as a part of the story being told. Thus, while the painted figures are indeed monstrous, the viewer must take stock in their own perception – what does their perception of “them” say about their perception of themselves? If we are to bear witness to the fall of the American empire, will we be brave enough to recognize ourselves as the supporting actors who take part in the finale of its demise? Will the riots serve to wake us up from the fantasy of the American dream, or will they chase us further into the comfort of our imagined decency and goodness, thus into the anesthetic sleep?

The withering, fragile American dream has failed and a Freudian interpretation rooted in Die Traumdeuteung is able to dismount the symbolism which belies a factual and accurate historic description of the day.

NINO MIER GALLERY

Forbes

March 2021

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

By Brienne Walsh

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."

As she watched the riots unfold, Dupuy-Spencer was aware of how it would look to progressives who were watching it. "I don't think the insurrectionists need our empathy, or that we need to see their humanity," she says. "And at some point, we also need to forgive them, and accept them back into the fold."

In Don't You See That I Am Burning, a painting currently on view at Nino Mier Gallery in Los Angeles through March 24, Dupuy-Spencer lays the hypocrisy of absolutes bare. Crammed full of details and color, the painting, at first glance, reveals a familiar scene of chaos. Figures, most of them men, and some of them heavily armed, storm the Capitol stairs, waving Trump signs, right-wing slogans and Confederate and American flags. The composition, deftly layered and almost grotesque, recalls Last Judgement paintings from the Renaissance by the likes of Michelangelo and Jan van Eyck, as well as Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889 (1888) by James Ensor.

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."

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."

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.

NINO MIER GALLERY

artnet

March 2021

‘There Are Monsters on All Sides’: Celeste Dupuy-Spencer on Why Her Epic Painting of the Capitol Riot Is Not a Simple Morality Tale

By Brian Boucher

If you’re hoping to move on quickly from the memory of the deadly January 6 riot at the U.S. Capitol building, Nino Mier’s Los Angeles gallery is not the place for you.

If you want to bask in the rightness of your opposition to the right wing, also not so much.

At the gallery, you’ll be confronted with Don’t You See That I Am Burning (2020), a seven-foot-square painting by Celeste Dupuy-Spencer depicting the deadly insurrection, when thousands stormed Washington in an attempt to overturn the election of Joe Biden.

The picture shows right-wing militias and gangs like the Oath Keepers and the Proud Boys, adherents to the QAnon conspiracy fantasy, Evangelicals, and everyday Americans streaming toward the white building.

Numerous flags fly over the proceedings, bearing slogans like “Soldiers in God’s Army,” “Jesus is King,” and “Trump’s Law and Order.”

Dupuy-Spencer is adept at taking on the pressing issues of the day. In 2017, she painted a toppled Confederate monument in Durham, North Carolina; that same year, she depicted a speeding cop car mounted by demonic figures, summoning police violence. (Officers shot and killed nearly 1,000 people that year, according to the Washington Post.)

Descended from one of the founding families of the city of New Orleans, she has been thinking about how to address her own whiteness in a nation founded in white supremacy, and where dismantling systemic racism remains a profound challenge.

Though set up for greatness—she studied at New York's Bard College with the likes of Amy Sillman and MacArthur "genius" grantee Nicole Eisenman—she nearly left art behind after a bout with heroin addiction. But ever since Mier's first solo show of her work in 2016 (which sold out) she's been on a remarkable trajectory.

The next year, she appeared in the Whitney Biennial (the New Yorker called her a "standout"); a solo that year at New York's Marlborough Contemporary garnered coverage from Forbes to Vice to Art in America. She was included in the Hammer Museum's "Made in L.A." show in 2018; the museum's curator Anne Ellegood told Elle she would become "one of the great painters of her generation."

The Capitol riot, founded in white grievance and draped in Confederate flags, drew her in immediately. A painting as ambitious as this might normally take a year to complete, but this one was already on view less than eight weeks after the event.

The artwork's title refers to a passage in Sigmund Freud's Interpretation of Dreams. A young boy has died and is laid out in his bed, surrounded by candles. His father, asleep in the next room, dreams that his son comes to him, saying, "Father, don't you see I'm burning?" He awakens to find one of the candles has fallen onto his son's arm.

"I was thinking of the dream as a critique of the American Dream," Dupuy-Spencer said in a phone interview. In Freud's dream theory, she said, "disturbances that happen outside the sleeper are incorporated into the dream. In case of emergency, those are pulled in, and the dream wakes the dreamer up. This idea of the American Dream is a hallucination we're all having together, including, or especially, the Left. The rioters are one of the things that our dreaming psyche adds into the dream to try to wake us up."

When Trump's immigration policies shut out migrants and refugees, Leftists readily cited Emma Lazarus's poem The New Colossus, with its famous line "give me your tired, your poor, / your huddled masses yearning to breathe free."

But "that was propaganda, created at a time when the U.S. was persecuting and deporting record numbers of people from war-torn countries," says the artist.

If you fall for the propaganda, she says, you are just likely to believe that "we don't have to fight for justice if that's what the country does by itself."

To stay in the dream, the fantasy, it's necessary to believe you're on the side of good against evil, she says, and she's aware that this painting could easily be seen by progressives as just an indictment of the right. But look closer. The painting also shows bomber jets, referring to Biden's bombing of facilities in Syria that were supposedly in use by Iran-backed militias.

"I was conscious of the fact that most of the people looking at this painting are going to look at it as the spectacle of the monstrous right wing defacing our god-given Capitol, and this was a direct assault on the impulse to look at it like that," she said.

Biden's participation in ongoing war in the Middle East, with inevitable civilian casualties, doesn't allow us such an easy out.

"There are monsters," she says, "on all sides."

NINO MIER GALLERY

art and cake

November 2020

The Biblical Imagination at Missiongathering Church

By Nancy Kay Turner

The sprawling exhibit The Biblical Imagination is thoughtfully installed at the Missiongathering Church in Pasadena. It is a profound examination of Evangelical dogma by eight contemporary artists, many of whom have left the church but once were held in its thrall including the curator and artist-in-residence Gregory Michael Hernandez. At a time when Christian Evangelicals have become a potent political force in American politics, it is fascinating to take this deep dive into this complex and perplexing religion.

There are four tenets that Evangelicals believe in. They are the following: that the Bible is the actual word of God and is true; that the only way to Salvation is through belief in Jesus; that the individual must accept salvation for themselves and be born-again and that they must proselytize. These are the core beliefs that these artists have lived, have refuted, still believe, struggle with or are critiquing. The eight artists, Dustin Metz, Buena Johnson, JP Munro, Ben White, Akina Cox, Kim Dingle, Celeste Dupuy-Spencer and Edgar Arceneaux, primarily painters, are aesthetically diverse.

"Red Bible Book", 2019, oil on canvas, 11 x 9 inches, by Dustin Metz is the first "object" one sees upon entering the church and is strategically placed on a mirror. The viewer, reflected in the mirror, sees the Bible as part of the body where the head would be. This is a clever and quite pointed commentary on the primacy of the Bible, its precepts lodged in the brain, making it the ultimate head-trip.

Metz's piece from afar looks like a minimalistic single chroma painting (like an Ad Reinhardt black painting) and only viewed at close range does the image of the Bible coalesce. Metz describes his work often as a "slow reveal," only visible or understood upon further examination, in the same way one's eyes adjust to a dark room. Though the painting may look simple, it is a commentary on both religion and art, as the Church historically was a key patron of artists.

Down the hallway are several works by Akina Cox, including her small artist book entitled "When I tell you I was born into a Cult this is what it means", stating simply what it was like grow up a Moonie. Suffice it to say it was positively Dickensian. Her densely painted "Trail of Dead (Morrow)" 2018, ink and oil on linen, 17"x 17 ", is the outline of a raised hand referring to the laying on of hands before an animal was sacrificed by a congregant in order to become free from sin – though it reminded me of pre-historic cave hand paintings and Aboriginal art but here the hand is symbolic of a specific action.

Cox tackles sublime faith in God by referencing the well -known David and Goliath story, which to believers attest the power of God to protect and strengthen one against daunting odds. Her large loosely painted, child-like installation "Book of Goliath (Set)" 2019, whitewash and tempera on plywood, cotton gauze, looks like it might be used in a camp for a religious play and has an ephemeral charm. Nearby miniature black paper cutouts in profile of various Bible figures are affixed to the wall alongside a small ink study for the set "Book of Goliath (study)", 2019, ink on paper.) These paper cutouts echo Kara Walker's pointed political work but their childlike quality suggests early indoctrination and is therefore deeply unsettling. Cox wrote in an email "my friends and I are the collateral damage, sacrificed for our parents hopes and dreams."

In contrast, Buena Johnson's large–scale pencil and color pencil drawings are richly detailed, highly decorative tour de force pieces, which highlight her deeply felt religious convictions and situate the Black figure front and center. "The Pieta", color pencil on paper, N.D., 39" x 32", features a very muscular Jesus in the arms of a beautiful Black Mary and is one of the few depictions of Jesus. JP Munro's "Christ on the Cross", 2014, oil on panel, 14"x 11" is more aligned to traditional devotional religious painting with a touch of Gauguin's rich color but with a more sorrowful sensibility.

The only other artist to incorporate the body or face of Jesus is Kim Dingle with her ironic and conceptual piece, "The Cram Dingle Snow Vision", 1991, photograph, pen, 10" x 8", 15" x 8". This is a send-up of those visions where people see the image of Jesus in toast or a tortilla but with a slight feminist tweak. Part of the scrawled text reads, "So, Cram, what makes you always think God is a man? Oh, I know because I've seen his photograph." And then cheekily written underneath is: Snapshot of Christ, Pueblo, Colorado, 1937. The rest of the text is about the "miracle" of the vision appearing. The handwritten text and the high contrast image are side by side, casually placed on a table, which in itself is a curatorial statement. This is definitely one of the lighter pieces in the show.

All this time, as the viewer walks down the hallway, there seems to be a sermon coming from the main sanctuary through the closed doors. As one rounds the corner the rest of the show is revealed as the space opens up theatrically and the Church architecture itself becomes a major player in the exhibit. The darkness of the interior (so different than the bright white of gallery walls) is pierced by light coming from the large stained glass windows along with the intense spotlights on various painting that ring the walls.

Edgar Arceneaux's mesmerizing forty-five minute video, "A Time To Break Silence", 2014, the star of this exhibit, is shown on two large screens flanking the chancel (similar to an altar or stage,) and the soundtrack is the muffled sound of a preacher that could be Martin Luthor King, Jr. The flickering and fractured imagery, which mimics early TV when the antenna didn't work properly (a metaphor, in itself) flashes images of political upheaval, riots (lots of fires and flames), Black soldiers in Vietnam, and footage that seems staged at an abandoned church. We see the back of a Black Preacher orating to an empty ruin of a church. This is an image ripe for contemplation. Is this where the church is headed? Another recurring enigmatic image is a mystical half man, half beast creature hunched over amid the Church's graffitied ruins where a fragment of text is visible that says " ...And Shall Say God Did It." What God did is left unsaid and open for speculation, as most of the work here is deeply ambiguous and contains coded narratives.

In the middle of the room, recalling the monolith from 2001:A Space Odyssey (cue the epic music) with bright lights shining on it is a plinth. A closer inspection reveals an oil painting, entitled "Book Bible", 2017, 13" x 10" x1", by Dustin Metz. The black bible is on a black ground with the pinkish gray of the pages visible on the right and the bottom reminding us once more of the allure and importance of the book.

"The Baptism" by Celeste Dupuy -Spencers, pencil on paper, 17" x14", is a drawing of a congregant becoming born-again reminding us of the centrality of this ritual. The drawing is literally positioned in front of the baptistry where adult immersion takes place. Dupuy -Spencers work is a representation of ordinary congregants who might worship here. To further this notion of the regular people who inhabit this church and leaning casually against a chair is another Dupuy-Spencer work, entitled "The Crucified God", 2020, oil on canvas, 20" x 16". A scruffy fellow is seen reading the seminal theology book by theologian Jurgen Moltmann. From afar, the painted subject looks like he is sitting on the chair that the painting is leaning on, another surprising and meaningful decision by the curator.

The complex and entertaining narrative painting by Ben White, "Behemoth at The Mystery Spot", 2017, acrylic on canvas, 48" x 60," challenges the viewer to make a complete story out of disparate elements including a burning planet about to be destroyed by an asteroid, a dog decked out in survival gear, a looming scary Snake, a house about to fall down, an old white haired man, fires and a weird cartoon animal. Looks like a good time to get raptured up to Heaven as all Hell is about to break loose down here on Planet Earth.

This show reminds me of graffiti I once saw in a book "If God didn't exist, Man would have invented him." The artists in this intense and impactful exhibit critique religion, which should champion the poor and the unloved, but so often falls short. Hernandez, in his press release says eloquently "But the idea of God, the images and dreams and words inspired by this God of the imagination has real power- power to demand conformity, power to kill, power to heal, power to summon a new beginning. There is too much at stake to let the empire speak for God, claim ownership of God, contain God, manage God. If there is a God, we shouldn't risk blasphemy by putting words in its mouth, but we should risk engaging those that do." Amen. At a time when the boundaries between Church and State are narrowing it is especially worthwhile to see artists grappling with the true nature of the divine.

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The Ecstasies of Love and Hate: Celeste Dupuy-Spencer's Painterly Transformation

By Jess Dorrance & Erin Kimmel

Photo Credit: Max Hetzler

In her recent exhibition, "The Chiefest of Ten Thousand," the Los Angeles-based painter Celeste Dupuy-Spencer continues her exploration of US culture in a series of figurative canvases that confront religion and whiteness, ecstasy and entanglement, love and hate. Jess Dorrance and Erin Kimmel discuss irreverence, female ejaculation, the weather of anti-Blackness, and the slippery abstraction that goes by the name reality in Dupuy-Spencer's head-on canvases.

Erin Kimmel: As is often the case with bold expressionistic paintings, the snap-narrative of Celeste Dupuy-Spencer's The Laying of the Hands (Positively Demonic Dynamism) (2018) cracks open with a smack. A gruesome-faced white man reaches toward the viewer as a congregation of bodies infuse him with spiritual light. Shirt open, tie akimbo and head thrown back, a cloud of certain doom billows from his open mouth. One of his eyes remains open, but its gaze is vague. Does it address the teeming swarm of demons wafting in the smoke above him, the preacher with the microphone who beckons and ordains that smoke, the ostensible lady to whom the bejeweled hand laid on his forearm belongs? Or is his gaze directed at the viewer, in my case, a white viewer? Am I that lady? If so, what, exactly, am I doing?

Jess Dorrance: I'm chuckling because I think we are both those white ladies, Erin, though I hate being called "lady." I agree that the arm is feminized by the giant ring and long red nails, and that Dupuy-Spencer's exhibition is thinking a lot about the feelings and behaviors of white women and queers of all genders. To me, this painting is the most aggressive-or direct-in the exhibition. It's not just that the man's gaze addresses the viewer. As you point out, the pale white arm reaching out at the bottom of the artwork is a theatrical positioning of the viewer within the painting itself. The arm-which is also reminiscent of a Nazi salute-conscripts the body of the viewer into feminized whiteness, regardless of their actual gender and race or whether they want to become part of the crowd or not.

For white viewers, this conscription implies complicity: you are part of the performance on display here. We could also read it as commenting on the whiteness of the art world itself, and as disallowing white viewers from moving around the gallery and imagining themselves as "neutral," non-racialized bodies. It makes me think about how and when whiteness comes into view for white people. What does it mean, however, to conscript non-white viewers into the whiteness at hand? This provocation, which I reckon Dupuy-Spencer must have thought about, is complex. This whitening, I imagine, could feel unwelcome or disturbing. But perhaps it could also feel campy, and therefore easily shoved aside.

EK: At the same time, the arm functions as a distancing mechanism. Unnaturally long, it quite literally puts the viewer at arm's length from the scene—a pointed critique of the white armchair liberal? Whether we read the arm as a propulsive pushing away

or as a compulsory, tentative tap, it leads our gaze straight into the arrangement of titular hands at the heart of the painting. I love these hands. They are painted variously: a series of short, wet brush strokes compose the outstretched palm of the man receiving the light; the still slick but flatly blended hand holding his stomach is contoured by a scratchy, dry outline; the jaundiced, bracing hand of the well-coiffed woman is also contoured by a cartoony outline, but this one is accented with exaggeratedly flat salmon nails. The preacher's coaxing hand is a greasy, sinewy intermingling of deep purples and maroons. My favorite is the spirited, almost paw-like hand of the preacher on the right, which the artist has animated with swift, sketchy pats and smears of an exuberant dried-blood red.

The variation on display here speaks to the painter's technical breadth and reminds me of something Willem de Kooning told his friend, the critic Harold Rosenberg, in an interview, "I am an eclectic painter by chance." Dupuy-Spencer's receptivity to painting traditions careens across historical styles and movements. As such, an avalanche of diverse historical precedents come to mind when looking at her work—Max Weber, Henry Taylor, George Bellows, Maria Lassnig, Hale Woodruff and Egon Schiele to name a random few—but de Kooning resonates for me as an unlikely brother in arms.

In his statement about being "an eclectic painter by chance," de Kooning wasn't defining his methodology or style, but refusing to be defined by either. His was a wayward and lifelong dialogue with the Western figurative tradition, in which the body was unbounded, sensual and tactile matter. He went as far as to say that flesh was the reason oil painting was invented. Dupuy-Spencer shares this fleshy material irreverence: she doesn't avoid painterly trouble. Rather, in the vibrant, brushy armature of an outstretched palm, she opens it up and leaves it there.

JD: The material impiety you're referring to and the fact that your favorite hand is almost coming apart while endowing light, or grace, speaks directly to the parenthetical portion of the painting's title: (Positively Demonic Dynamisms). Dynamism originated with the seventeenth-century philosopher and physicist Gottfried Leibniz who believed that physical motion was based on energy flow and therefore that space was relative instead of absolute. As a metaphysical concept, dynamism has been taken up in a plethora of ways in an array of disciplines.

EK: The Italian Futurists' adaptation of the concept is probably the most relevant-and damning-conduit through which to understand Dupuy-Spencer's painting. The 1912 Futurist Manifesto on painting provides shadowy guidance on how to achieve the sensations and aesthetics of speed, movement, violence and change. Dupuy-Spencer's reference to dynamism confirms one of the core facets of this exhibition: paint as prima materia-primordial energy-in a state of constant transformation.

JD: Transformation is an apt theme to raise in the context of this artwork, which depicts the laying on of hands in the throws of a pulsing crowd. In Christianity, this ritual performs a dramatic spiritual alteration: it is used to ordain ministers, to baptize people, to bless and heal people, to "reconcile" penitents and heretics, and to confirm congregants.

There is an inherent tension to any mass, assembly, or crowd. For "insiders," those that feel kinship with a congregation, they can be sites of immense power and hope. A place where the individual can exceed herself, melding with the energy of the whole to find greater if unstable and sometimes unknowable potential for action, connection, and transcendence. For "outsiders," those that feel or are made to feel out of place, a crowd can be a site of fear, of psychic and bodily threat, and of repulsion.

But let's go back to the arm. No matter how we read this limb, its energy pulls us in. Through the arm, we touch the chosen man, who is in turn touched by others, and we are pulled into the wild, convulsing mass of it all. When I first sat with this painting, it seemed to deliberately teeter on an edge. Is this a benign scene of Christian worshippers or is it somehow more menacing? How I felt about the crowd seemed to depend on my relationship to whiteness and evangelical Christianity.

EK: Formally it reminds me of another one of my favorite de Kooning quotes: "The figure is nothing unless you twist it around like a strange miracle." Emotionally, it felt immediately ominous-but also complicated-because I had both good and bad childhood experiences in the Southern evangelical church. I know that crowd and I can still sing those songs.

JD: The work became clearer the longer I looked at it. I eventually noticed two ghostly Klansmen, pitched slightly forward and huddled together on a balcony. They watch the crowd from above, one arm is raised up in excitement. To the right, just under the swirling smoke, three Klan hoods peek up from the top edge of the balcony railing. I spotted the notorious red-and-white of a "Make America Great Again" hat jutting out from behind a Barbara Bush look-alike. Here, in this sea of white bodies, Dupuy-Spencer suggests an intimate proximity between all of these symbols. Representations of sociality and white bodies mix with practices of conservative evangelical Christianity that, in turn, mix with MAGA hats and the KKK, suggesting that these phenomena are deeply entangled.

EK: Totally-Dupuy-Spencer presents us with a chaotic surfeit of emblematic signposts that accrue both within and across her canvases. In The Chieftest of Ten Thousand (Sarah 2) (2018), for instance, the exhibition's namesake painting, what at first glance may appear as the detritus of a haphazardly strewn bedroom is quickly revealed to have great symbolic import. Dupuy-Spencer is eating her girlfriend out, and has carefully inserted the trappings of a still life around the couple.

JD: The painting is replete with no less than three cats (the ultimate lesbian signifier?), a half-eaten apple, a dried flower, books, a painting, a tipped over glass, a human skull. Visual puns abound. The skull is at once a memento mori, a nod to la petite mort of cumming, and another kind of "getting head." There are pussies galore. There is a dangly cat toy that, on first glance, could be a whip. The glass seems to spill water out onto the lush red carpet, suggestive of cumming or squirting.

EK: This work is a sequel to a painting entitled Sarah (2017) that depicts the artist in her underwear, cradled by her girlfriend. It also expands a burgeoning canon of feminist paintings of women getting head and/or lovingly rendered vaginas that includes Mikalene Thomas's revision of Gustave Courbet's Origine du monde (1866)-Origin of the Universe I (2012)-and Nicole Eisenman's It Is So (2014).

JD: This celebratory tradition of paintings of two queers loving takes on biblical proportions in the title of Dupuy-Spencer's work, which references "Song of Solomon" from the Old Testament: "My beloved is white and ruddy, the chiefest among ten thousand" (5:10). This verse is translated differently in different bibles. While the King James, for instance, uses "white and ruddy," others substitute "dazzling" for "white." One literary scholar notes that biblical commentaries today still see in this verse "a prefiguration of Christ's ministry, at once 'white,' fair and pure; but also, 'ruddy,' the body bloodied by the cross." This glossing of the symbolism of "white" is obviously drawing

on racist histories that conflate whiteness with lightness and goodness. What does it mean for Dupuy-Spencer to take up such a racially loaded biblical verse, substituting her queer beloved for Christ?

EK: I understand it as a contemporary transfiguration. While Dupuy-Spencer explicitly renders pictures of Christian churches in her exhibition, there are other types of "churches" in these paintings too: the church of queer love, the church of demonic whiteness, the church of familial culture, the church of Al Green, the church of rural matriarchy. The Chieftest of Ten (Sarah 2) brings to mind St. Teresa of Avila who, after being pierced by a burning arrow that represented Christ's love, experienced physical ecstasy. She was set ablaze with love for the Lord as rendered by Gian Lorenzo Bernini in his famous Baroque sculpture, The Ecstasy of St.Teresa of Avila (1647-52). With her painting, Dupuy-Spencer demonstrates the metamorphosis of ecstasy from one form to another; the ecstasy of God's love becomes the ecstasy of sexual love.

At the same time, given their physical proximity to paintings like The Laying of the Hands, Dupuy-Spencer's substitution also suggests that, even at the height of affectionate domesticity and erotic acts, these two lovers cannot depart from their complicity with white power.

JD: For me, these variegated churches indeed share in a sensation of ecstasy, though to radically different ends. In her book Undoing Gender, queer theorist Judith Butler notes that to be 'ec-static' means, literally, "to be outside oneself, and this can have several meanings: to be transported beyond oneself by a passion, but also to be beside oneself…in sexual passion, or emotional grief, or political rage." Her point is that all of these intense feelings are modes of being dispossessed. They break down our senses of autonomy and of being "in control" of ourselves, opening us up to the fact we are all always entangled with one another, given over to one another, and undone by each other. Sometimes we seek this feeling and sometimes we don't. Sometimes it is catharsis and sometimes it is terror.

EK: In this exhibition, Dupuy-Spencer, as you point out, asks us to hold conflicting 'ec-stasies' within one shared grammar. This is not an experience meant to be resolvable, but it does ask for a burning appraisal. It asks us to think about how white liberalism and white queer life is related to white evangelicalism, about how whiteness seeks to mend its wounds and sate its pains, how whiteness finds pleasure and what whiteness holds sacred.

JD: In addition to ruminating on what whiteness does, I feel like this exhibition is also asking and laying bare what whiteness is. In To Be Titled (2018), for instance, Dupuy-Spencer reflects on the compositional nature of skin color. In this small drawing, textual descriptions of how to render skin are accompanied by a sketch of a bushy browed, long-faced man in black-and-white garb. Next to the statement, "Color zones of FACE / on any color skins," Dupuy-Spencer has scratched out the word "color." To the left are three statements: "Light golden color / Less capillaries"; "Red / (Ears, cheeks, nose) / more capillaries carrying blood + oxygen near surface"; and "Blue-Gray / hair follicals / on whiskered people / or / Blue-Green on everyone / blue deoxygenated blood."

With these statements, Dupuy-Spencer performatively reveals "the outside" of the human subject as a representational phenomenon- and therefore as something that can be interpreted in multiple ways. We could read this drawing, then, as reflecting on the constructed nature of what Frantz Fanon famously dubbed as race's "epidermal schema": the belief that race is ineluctably visible and that someone's skin color (their external surface) says something about their internal "essence." This schema, he argued, is a central tenet in the making of race. What is it that we think we are seeing when we look at skin? Additionally, if we understand this long-faced man as white, Dupuy-Spencer's schema draws our attention to the fact that "white" skin is not actually white, but in fact comprised of golds, reds, blues, grays, and greens.

EK: Dupuy-Spencer notes that these principles about colors and capillaries are relevant to "any skin color." I'm not sure how seriously to take this commentary.

JD: I'm inclined to read it ironically. This nearly conceptual attention to rendering skin color reminds me of Kerry James Marshall, who famously paints Black subjects without using a single drop of white paint (his formula for flesh uses three shades of black). It also makes me think of Toyin Ojih Odutola's work. In her series The Treatment (2015-17), she drew portraits of 43 prominent white men, picturing their faces through many lustrous layers of black ink from a ballpoint pen. She often draws Black skin through similar complexly textured shaded strands that weave together to form a whole. She has said that she developed this style in part as an investigation into what skin feels like. Given the rest of Dupuy-Spencer's exhibition, the fact that the artist universalizes her schema for depicting skin across all skin colors seems more like a provocation than anything else. Whiteness, as we know, loves to universalize itself.

In a different To Be Titled painting, Dupuy-Spencer addresses this universalization. The painting depicts the soul singer turned born-again Baptist minister Al Green preaching from the pulpit of his famous Full Gospel Tabernacle Church in Memphis, Tennessee. Behind Green, a line of Black congregants gaze in various directions: some look towards the bishop, some towards the viewer, others have no facial features whatsoever. Behind the singers, a luminous, pale yellow cross extends upwards, framed by a pearly deconstruction of the church's interior architecture.

EK: As with The Laying of the Hands, Dupuy-Spencer explicitly inducts the viewer into spectral whiteness: the viewer is positioned as holding the program which sits at the bottom of the painting. A row of white onlookers that Dupuy-Spencer has sanded down and scratched out form a solemn gossamer front, dividing the white audience from the Black congregants. These onlookers emit both a polite and menacing air. A scarlet red line circumscribes the scene. Painting over the scene and at points painted over, it breaks the immediacy of our voyeuristic position. A scroll through the artist's Instagram account indicates that she has occupied that space.

JD: The church is apparently a popular pilgrimage site for Al Green fans. In her recent book In the Wake: On Blackness and Being, Christina Sharpe, an English literature and Black studies scholar, describes the anti-Blackness that structures our world as "the weather." In the afterlife of transatlantic slavery, she writes, anti-Blackness is a "total climate" in which we all live that produces Black life as unfree and Black death as the norm. Though, out of this weather, she argues, Black people also produce "their own ecologies."

For me, Dupuy-Spencer's exhibition asks: How do white people live in this climate? How do we produce it? How are we seeking to change it, if at all? How does this climate transform us? How, where, and with whom do we position ourselves within it? Her exhibition presents various pictures of whiteness, each of which has its own tenor, or microclimate. These microclimates are all part of the weather of whiteness, anti-Blackness, and white supremacy.

EK: Yes, weather that goes habitually unacknowledged, at least in many dominant communities. A handful of apocalyptic landscape paintings depicting ominous atmospheres are interspersed between Dupuy-Spencer's figurative works. They offer a divergent approach to Dupuy-Spencer's central concerns. The largest and the second of three works in the show titled To Be Titled (2018) portrays an electric implosion of what may have once been a picturesque seascape. Waves chasm and cascade, clouds swirl and eddy, and the trunk of a sturdy tree is made serpentine as sky and earth are pulled down in torrential gusts with the setting sun. Two miniature whales wash up in the toxic seafoam greens of a cresting wave, while two others are pulled down into black water in sinking nosedives. Two more seem suspended inertly as the elemental maelstrom, enhanced by burning colors, fulminates above.

In another painting, Don't Lose Your Lover (2018), a California hillside is on fire as two figures illuminated by the headlights of their broken-down car make out. Nearby a pack of wild animals attempt their own escape, echoing the biblical tale of Noah's Ark.

JD: Dupuy-Spencer's canvases arise from the situations and circumstances of her surroundings. She is clearly drawing on a great deal of media and documentary imagery but she is also explicit about painting people she loves, whether it's her girlfriend, women from her childhood, or her uncle who is a country musician. The paintings both surveil and revere the communities she tracks. She highlights connections between Christianity and white power at the same time that she depicts her own search for salvation. Darkness Is Not Dark (Light Shines As Day) (2018), which shows the artist on the verge of a baptism, makes explicit that Dupuy-Spencer has skin in the game here; she's not seeking to transcend what she critiques.

EK: Speaking of Dupuy-Spencer painting her loved ones, I regard Dutchess County Border (Matriarchs of the 90s Line) (2018) as an oversized devotional painting. Six women whom the artist grew up with are presented frontally in a yellow living room of a cluttered house. Once again, Dupuy-Spencer has lavished the domicile with symbolically loaded objects. A brightly colored floral tablecloth is covered with empty beer cans and wine bottles, cassettes, magazines. A cross-section of the living room ceiling separates the matriarchs from a line of the lower halves of children's bodies who are sitting cross legged on the floor.

JD: It's true, the planar arrangement of the women and the cross-section of the living room ceiling echoes the configuration of altarpieces and devotional icons. But this isn't a line of empty vessel Virgin Marys; these cadre of women have been affectionately rendered while smoking, drinking, and generally getting up to no good, and they are distinct from the children above. I want to hang out with these matriarchs! In its queering of conventional domesticity, this painting reminds me of Catherine Opie's photography, which also warmly queers ideas of home, children, and kinship.

EK: Dutchess County Border, like most of the scenes Dupuy-Spencer offers, is rigidly composed in spite of the heterogeneity of paint style and surface. In this sense, Dupuy-Spencer is also indebted to the meticulous draughtsmanship of her former teacher, Nicole Eisenman, whose large and colorful multi-figure canvases plumb the psychological depths of the human figure through allegory and satire. However, Eisenman's canvases have a polish that produces smooth estrangement from the psychic and physical snares she presents.

JD: Dupuy-Spencer's paintings, in contrast, refuse all manner of meditative distance. As a result, there is immediate brutality to a sustained engagement with them. In each painting, the viewer is thrust right into a dilemma that is full of the tension between formal doing and material undoing.

EK: Part of the power and importance of Dupuy-Spencer's textured, kaleidoscopic paintings is their resistance to the virtual image mall in which we live today. I'm thinking specifically of the crisp, light-drenched lifestyle images of mostly white women, often holding babies, in immaculately rustic interiors replete with the signature speckled artisanal vase brimming with flowers cut from the lush garden peeking through handcrafted windows. This edenic paradise is being sold to upwardly mobile whites, particularly those in the culture industry, right now in Los Angeles, where the artist resides. This image mall is selling a damning edenic dream: have your own slice of pastoral perfection. It's a gloss over mass displacement and the fact that the landscape is on fire, a phenomenon that Dupuy-Spencer makes explicit in Don't Lose Your Lover. Dupuy-Spencer's textured, colorful paintings are anathematic to the visual world we live in—they interrupt any surface clarity through the overwhelming delivery of visual information in various stages of composition and decomposition. They refuse the crisp simplicity of any marketing gestalt.

JD: I live in the Bay Area and have recently observed the horrific and peculiar reality that nothing structural is changing as climate-change induced fires rage around me, hurting the earth and those of us that live in the region. Sometimes, as in Don't Lose Your Lover, it's all we can do to grab our friends and lovers and hold them close. And, of course, this reaction is not enough. This conundrum tracks with Diana Nawi's assertion in the exhibition's press release that this exhibition is "a record of the deeply felt task of trying to be good in the contradictions of this moment."

I like this framing of the exhibition because it underscores that the white search for "goodness" is historically fraught and continues to be so. White violence, such as colonialism, is often carried out in the name of "helping the world" through so-called civilizing acts.

EK: We can safely assume that all the white people represented here want to think of themselves as "good people." Yet the performances of whiteness that Dupuy-Spencer presents are not sympatico with one another. Presumably, the white evangelical Christians don't love the white queers who fuck adjacent to them and the white queers don't love the revelry of the white evangelical Christians. What love is for one might be hate for the other. And yet these different traditions of loving and hating are all atmospherically related. As such, Dupuy-Spencer's large, loud and unruly canvases are an argument against the very rhetoric of "goodness." Their material irreverence and expressive distortion underscore the contingency of the term, pointing to the impossibility of its absolute reality.

JD: Her paintings offer critical love. They're not answers but vivid menageries through which to confront the multiple, warring realities of racialized life in the US today.

NINO MIER GALLERY

FRIEZE

January 2019

Celeste Dupuy-Spencer: Fusing the Formal and the Informal

By Simone Krug

Celeste Dupuy-Spencer invokes the devotional in her portraits and landscape scenes. There is something hallowed in her depictions of the mundane – a gathering of women, a hem on a shawl, a man at an electronic keyboard. A light ekes in, casting an eerie yet pleasant glow. In some works, the artist employs a faint chiaroscuro, transforming ordinary moments into dramatic narratives. This show's titular painting, The Chiefest of Ten Thousand (Sarah 2) (all works 2018), takes its name from a declaration of physical beauty in the biblical Song of Solomon: 'My beloved is white and ruddy, the chiefest among ten thousand.' The painting portrays an intimate sexual act, with the exposed back of a woman at its centre, kneeling like a penitent saint at the altar of her lover. This woman is plenty awkward – the outline of bra straps cut into her torso; her bony ribs protrude – yet her elongated, exposed musculature is imposing, even grand.

Baptisms, glossolalia, the invocation of the holy spirit and other religious scenes appear here. In Through the Laying of the Hands (Positively Demonic Dynamism), a man materializes in front of a congregation, arms outstretched as the horde lunges forward to touch him. He emits a paranormal ectoplasm from his mouth, a grotesque grey cloud with fragments of teeth, bulging eyes and other monstrous features. A priest in the corner calls forth this billow of darkness. In the White House (Perfectly Demonic Dynamism) features a similar mob who strain and claw their arms, this time to graze Donald Trump. Although he appears near a cross, Dupuy-Spencer's Trump echoes a boxer by the ring in a pensive moment before a sensational fight; he is certainly no Christ. The artist blurs the notion of religious saviour, politician, celebrity and cheap entertainer. Other paintings reproduce the pageantry of nature. In Lighting Shadows, Leaving the 99, the artist depicts a sunset as a violent, fiery hellscape. A swell of nervous brushstrokes recalls the theatrical parting of the Red Sea in Grand Panorama of the Wave (Fall on Your Knees). William Blake, the Romantic-era master of biblical suffering and flaming vistas, would surely approve. Elsewhere, a sheep and a lion curl up at the foot of a piano in a field – an oneiric landscape sown with humour.

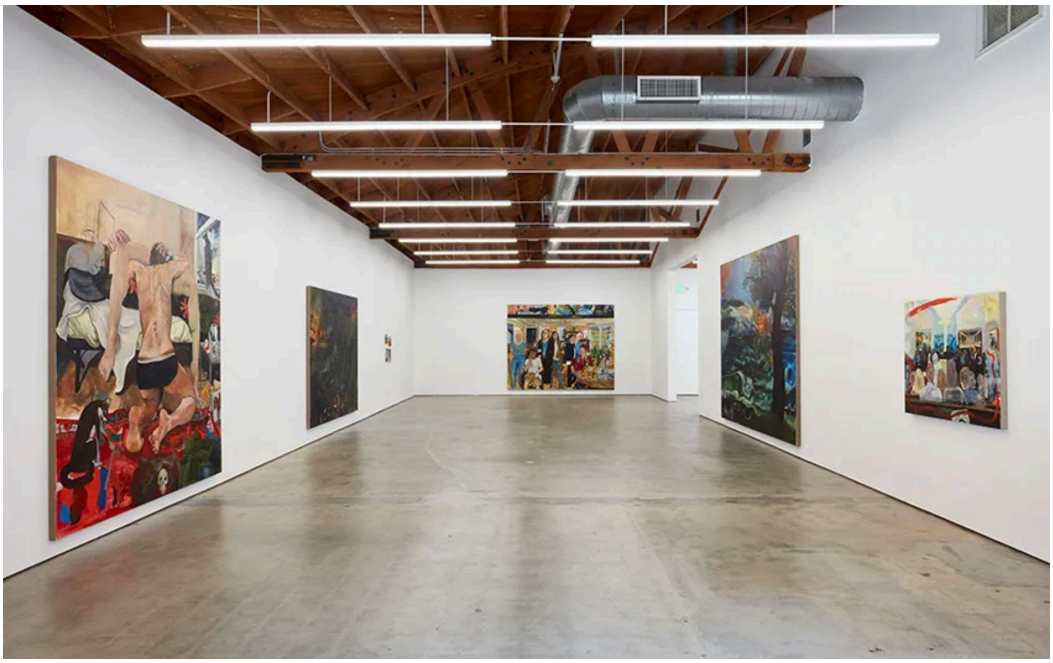
NINO MIER GALLERY

Contemporary Art Review .la

November 2018

Celeste-Dupuy Spencer and Figurative Religion

By Catherine Wagley



The evening after Brett Kavanaugh secured his Supreme Court nomination, elite Evangelicals held a party in North Carolina. At the Westin in Charlotte, the Council for National Policy—an outfit that oil heir T. Cullen Davis co-founded after he discovered Jesus and after a jury acquitted him of double murder1—had gathered for their annual meetings. Ginni Thomas, Clarence Thomas' wife, and Nikki Haley attended, among senators and strategists. They were happy that night.

Davis, who told The Intercept that at least Trump "is not hostile to Christianity like Hillary and Obama,"2 used to be an art collector. In 1982, he gave $1 million worth of his antique treasures to the televangelist Jim Robison, who'd gotten into debt. Robison drove off to sell the trove but then remembered Old Testament proclamations about graven images and the like, and brought the art back to Davis. Davis didn't want it back. So out came the hammers and, two years later, gawkers and collectors left a Texas auction with shards of lapis and bits of faces carved from ivory.3 Others at the CNP's Kavanaugh party still had their figurative art intact, however. GOP policy advisor Frank Luntz hangs his specially commissioned portraits of the founding fathers in the faux oval office built into his Brentwood home. Conservative Christians have been partial to figurative work, certainly since the 1980s—when the culture wars turned so many Evangelicals into traditionalists set against avant-garde experiments—its recognizable content seemingly more honest than esoteric abstraction and conceptualism. Some like to quote Pope John Paul II's letter, in which, citing Bernini and Michelangelo, he calls on the contemporary artist to render "visible the perception of the mystery" that makes the Church "a universally hospitable community."4

The work in Celeste Dupuy-Spencer's recent show at Nino Mier Gallery almost did this—it had all the right references without the right reverence. There are baptisms, worship sessions, choirs on altars, exorcisms. Indeed, the exorcism in Dupuy-Spencer's 2018 painting, Through the Laying on of Hands (Positively Dynamic Demonism), appears to be going quite well. Three men up at the altar wear church suits, crisp white shirts and suspenders. The other men wear jeans. A woman who looks like Margaret Thatcher has her hand on the afflicted man's shoulder. Demons of all breeds fly out of his gaping mouth—aliens, reptiles, screaming men. The painting is full of loosely rendered flesh, packed-in bodies, fast fashion, and smoke. It could be interpreted as crass, a representation of religious pageantry at its worst, or as an empathetic attempt to understand such spiritual passion.

That Dupuy-Spencer walks this line is partly why her work compels: "an inventory of white experience," that has "new urgency in the age of Trump," wrote Aruna D'Souza for Vice.5 Her "figurative paintings and drawings capture the zeitgeist without sacrificing soul," wrote Margaret Wappler, for Elle.6 She can do both, be the critic and the empath. That the work is representational matters; it reads immediately as accessible, even to non-art-worlders, its grappling with us-versus-them impulses thus legible to both the "us," the "them," and whoever lies between. Dupuy-Spencer is in good company, other artists working in similarly empathetic, vulnerable figuration that puts its politics—and its questions and frustrations—on the line in a way that feels more invitation than antagonism.

Resurgences in figurative painting have accompanied turns to the political right before. Sometimes by force (when regimes deem experiment a threat), but other times just in response to, or in an attempt to grapple with, the zeitgeist. Eric Fischl, David Salle, and Robert Longo's ascendancy coincided with Reagan's. The painters poked at times at whiteness, even as white people celebrated and supported them (think Fischl's painting A Visit to/A Visit From/The Island, 1983, of white vacationers cavorting while black islanders rescue black refugees from waves of a storm). Jeffrey Deitch, dealer and former MOCA Los Angeles director, explained two years ago that figuration was of the zeitgeist again. "That's really what most artists do," he told ArtSpace, right after he'd put both '80s phenom Julian Schnabel and the much younger Sasha Brauning in the same show, "and what the general public generally expects out of painting. They relate to it." He then further peddled the myth of populist art form ignored by the establishment, saying, "there's hardly been an ambitious exhibition of new figurative painting in any American museum in a long time."7 (He isn't entirely wrong, if he means group surveys.) His words echo past critics who framed figurative resurgences as repudiations of the avant-garde, returns to more traditional and thus comprehensible ways of representing life.

Explicitness sets Dupuy-Spencer and her peers apart from the likes of Fischl, Salle, Michael Andrews, and others who made a name for themselves in the mid-to-late 20th century, painting in intentionally open-ended ways. In contrast, Dupuy-Spencer makes clear in her work the stakes she grapples with. She names her context and concerns, sometimes literally, with Trump hats, hipster record collections, or captions that poke at people across political spectrums and classes. Henry Taylor, whose work hung with hers in the Whitney Biennial in 2017, has similarly done this; his references to slavery (That Was Then, 2013), police shootings (THE TIMES THAY AINT A CHANGING, FAST ENOUGH!, 2017), and class warfare are direct enough to leave no question as to what he's probing. Jordan Casteel too falls into this camp, her portraits of incidental moments pregnant with context— a brown-skinned man wearing gray reading Lost Tribes and Promised Lands: The Origins of American Racism in an intimate oil-on-canvas; or, in Glass Man Michael (2016), of a guarded man selling vases and platters street-side, in front of crisp graffiti that says "Harlem not for sale—fight back." (All this stands in stark contrast to the other strain of figuration with traction now, the Sascha Braunigs and Jamian Juliano-Villanis, which recall in a way the '80s market surge, paintings not about relatability and empathy but about calculation, visual provocation, and seduction.)

The religious content in Dupuy-Spencer's recent work provides particularly coherent parameters, and an intuitive recipe for blurring together poles and worldviews. In To Be Titled (2016), another of the Dupuy-Spencer paintings at Mier Gallery, a baptism plays out. The soon-to-be-redeemed stands in waist- high water, flanked by two friendly peers in "Oasis All-in Team" t-shirts (the L.A. mega-church called Oasis sponsored a star for Jesus on the Hollywood Walk of Fame). A robed figure (an apparition of Christ?) stands behind, his face cut off by the top of the canvas but reflected, ghoulishly grinning and crowned by thorns, on the water's surface. Beneath the water, anxious horses scramble. From the water up, this is the kind of painting easily mistaken for idyllic, maybe happily pro-faith, like the early aughts rom-com Baptist at My Barbecue. Except that those ghostly horses sliding around in murky liquid and that discolored face, more like the demons in Dupuy-Spencer's exorcism than a saint, introduce a bleaker counter-narrative, in which redemption is only an above-the-surface sort of story.

Francis Schaeffer, the Evangelical theologian, wrote in his book Art & the Bible, that, for Christians, art can evoke the "mannishness of man,"8 all the more so because the Christian, armed with God's truth, is particularly equipped to distinguish reality from illusion. Would this enlightened Christian see in Dupuy-Spencer's baptismal scene the competing narratives? Or maybe the Christian would favor a more affirming interpretation, like George W. Bush in the memo he famously sent to office staff in 1995, when he was still Texas' governor. He had just received a 1916 W.H.D. Koerner painting on loan from a friend. He told his staffers that the panting was called A Charge to Keep, after a hymn by original Methodist

Charles Wesley:
When you come into my office, please take a look at the beautiful painting of a horseman determinedly charging up what appears to be a steep and rough trail. This is us. What adds complete life to the painting for me is the message of Charles Wesley that we serve One greater than ourselves.

Where the president-to-be got this notion is hard to say. While he believed the picture, of riders racing through brush, depicted Methodists urgently spreading gospel, Koerner had in fact painted it to illustrate a story about a horse thief escaping a Nebraska lynch mob.

The potential for such slippage is partly what makes figuration so accessible and enjoyable. It reads as legible, because we all can recognize limbs, landscapes, faces, and interiors. But familiarity, as the Bush episode illustrates, is subjective. The text Dupuy-Spencer embeds into her paintings keeps her meaning from being as easily twistable (a strategy both Taylor and Casteel interestingly use as well). In her 2017 Marlborough Gallery exhibition, she included Love Me, Love Me, Love Me, I'm a Liberal (2017), in which a woman with a fleshy face hides behind a flower vase with a peace sign and "flowers not bombs" painted across it. An "I love NPR" mug and a book called The Burden of Blame: How to Convince People That It's Not Your Fault, also sit on the table before her. The woman writes letters (to the editor? Senators?). Her self-righteous liberalism comes off as embarrassing.

A drawing in Dupuy-Spencer's previous, 2016 exhibition at Nino Mier Gallery depicted a Trump rally, the attendees posed as if for a selfie, with men in KKK hoods lurking behind. Faux Western text mixed with bubble letters waved along the top of the paper: "Trump: 'Cause we Don't Know What The Hell Is Going On!!!" Dupuy-Spencer titled the work Trump Rally (And Some of them I Assume Are Good People). (While on the campaign trail, Trump said "some, I assume, are good people" after calling Mexicans who come the states "rapists" who are "bringing crime.")

Such work eschews subtlety and ambiguity, two strategies artists use to seem potent without seeming literal, crass, or naïve. Yet Dupuy-Spencer's more heart-on- sleeve relation to content does not make her work overly blatant or flat. Even in the drawings of Trump supporters or lazy liberals, there's diversity of personalities, expressions, and class trappings (though definitely not always a diversity of ethnicities). More notably, she combines these deep dives into political confusion and religious passion with intimate, relaxed personal imagery. In her recent show, her painting of a church service hung across from The Chiefest of Ten Thousand (Sarah 2) (2018), a large delightfully cluttered painting of the artist performing cunilingus on her partner, surrounded by a cat, a warm red rug, a skull.

Something happened when evangelists, priests, and purportedly blameless God-fearing patriarchs began openly supporting a pussy-grabber and praising a chief justice who defends his "love of beer" while badgering U.S. senators. The hypocrisy of associating morality with partisan- ship became so barefaced and indefensible that a space opened up where God, orgasms, left, right, queerness, family, church, redemption, and disaster could blur into each other, steeping together in the same confused stew. Depicting that space, as Dupuy-Spencer does so well, won't ever erase the chasms that divide those of us living in this country, but it can render a version of America raw and contradictory enough to feel invitingly believable.

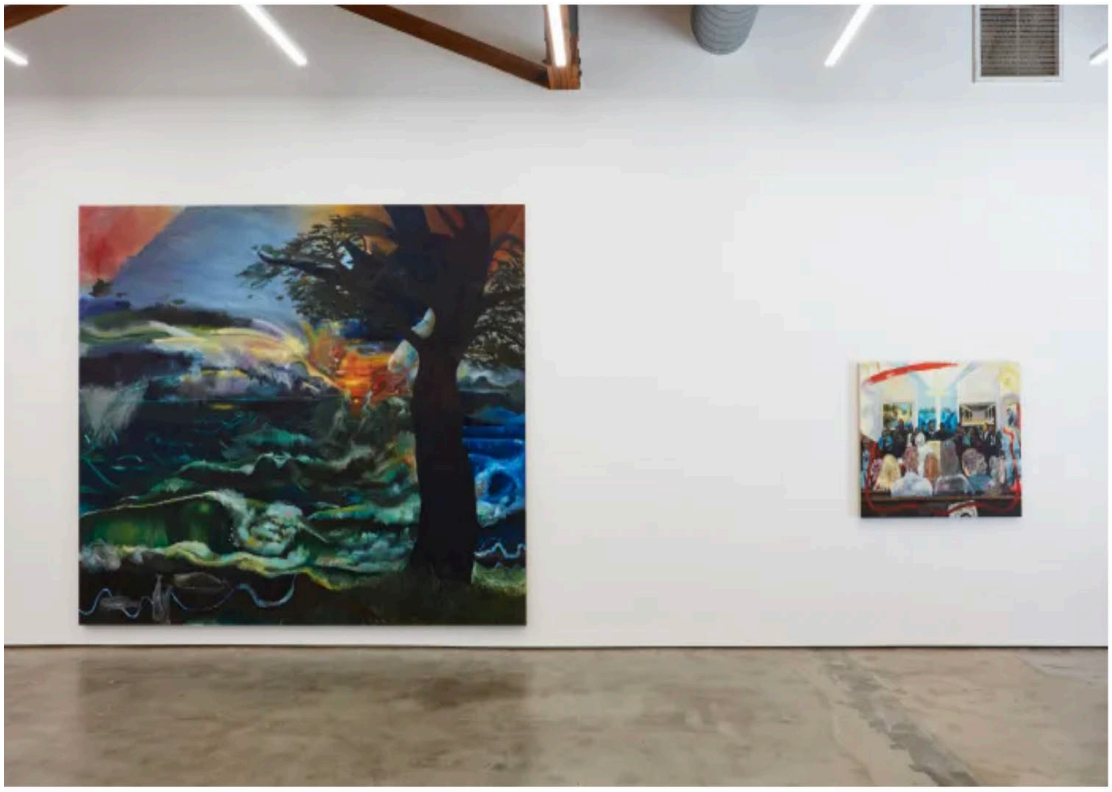
NINO MIER GALLERY

art and cake

November 2018

The Chiefest of Ten Thousand

By Shana Nys Dambrot



Paintings by Celeste Dupuy-Spencer are wicked and fraught, elusive and dense, saturated and shadowy tableaux. She wields an edgy, folkloric style that is both naive and sophisticated, depicting figures in landscapes and interiors enacting versions of the American experience. Throughout interlacing series, she chronicles contemporary communities that for lack of a better term formulate what appear to be variations on "the forgotten America" in a way — rural, working class, blue collar, townie. House parties and forest fires, religious healers and amateur musicians, scripture and satire — the works on view at Nino Mier Gallery combine an uneasy appreciation for the symbolism and homespun pageantry of religious dogma and the exceptionally ordinary details that give individuals their memories and build their character.

In her latest show, she turns this emotionally earnest, judgement-free, eccentrically nuanced Op-Ed page reverence on the Evangelical, Revival-style extreme religiosity of certain segments of the U.S. population. Drawn both from her personal experiences and images from the media and news reels, she mixes up pictures of religious ceremonies, rituals, prayers, and performances with some art-school students and zesty same-sex love-making, for balance. For example the correspondences of

exaggerated anatomy, actions of intimate touching, and sense of public/private spectacle that bounce between “Through the Laying of Hands (Positively Demonic Dynamism)” and “The Chiefest of Ten Thousand (Sarah 2)” speak to each other in a rush of tongues. Dupuy-Spencer’s array of spatial planes and mark-making modes accumulates passages and accents from the sparse to the thick, wavering, and ephemeral, demonstrating gestural abstraction and hyper-stylized renderings. But in her content she examines the distortions of passion and the darkness and hypocrisy of our shaming and shameless culture.

In the mundane operatics of the monumental genre scene “Dutchess County Border (Matriarchs of the 90’s Line)” the artist also gives us sparks of beer-infused social intimacy, ironic art student humor, and domestic adventure that animate both everyday experiences and watershed moments. A kind of counterpart, “Don’t Lose Your Lover” depicts a rapidly advancing forest fire cresting a foothill. A stampede of panicked woodland creatures like deer, owls, and foxes rushes away from it, across the pictorial space in the foreground. The back of the valley is obscured by night and thick smoke. In between, a car is parked and in the bright beam of its headlights, a young couple is making out like it’s the end of the world. It’s romantic and silly and pastoral and frightening; the overall effect is like an Outsider Thomas Cole, a cautionary homage.

Nature itself plays a huge part in other works as well, both in the form of a veritable menagerie of wild and domestic animals, and as sweeping landscape settings, sometimes both. A lion and a lamb literally lie down together underneath a piano in the small work “In the Racquetball Room” and a rat sits atop a volume of spiritual verse in “And Joy Shall Be the Crown” — both seeming to acknowledge and poke fun at the role of religious overtones in society. A wary cat and dog watch their parent in bed in “Sarah 2” and animal spirits lurk beneath the surreal surface in “Darkness Is Not Dark (Light Shines As Day).”

Even with the one work in which American politics are addressed directly, “In the White House (perfectly demonic dynamism)” demonstrates an obscure ambivalence toward the subject. Is it the religion itself being critiqued as embodied by Trump, or is an indictment of Trump’s cynicism in hijacking and faking religious feeling for his career? On whose behalf would indignation rightfully be felt? That and related observations recur, albeit more gently, throughout the show, in which issues of spiritual and cultural tribalism take center stage in the narrative, but also in the style and aesthetic of the work itself. By addressing paradoxical questions in chimerical visual form, Dupuy-Spencer generates the same cognitive dimension in both style and substance. Her social explorations are as frank and brave and subversive as her relationship to art history. They ask all the right questions, but they don’t give you any easy answers.

NINO MIER GALLERY

Los Angeles Times

October 2018

Review: Celeste Dupuy-Spencer's searing paintings delve into the structures of spiritualism

By Christopher Knight

Celeste Dupuy-Spencer has religion on her mind – not individual faith, which is based in spiritual apprehension, but the equivocal structural systems that grow up around it. Those systems today define much of American life, even if they are rarely considered in art. She seems determined to break the silence.

At Nino Mier Gallery, bracing new paintings ricochet off religious fundamentalism, employing vivid formal messiness that clashes productively with strict assumptions of moral purity. The stimulus for this new body of work, her first to be shown since a standout presentation at the recent Hammer Biennial, was a shocking press photograph of conservative evangelicals and "prosperity gospel" preachers with presidential candidate Donald J. Trump, engaged in an Old Testament ritual of "laying on hands."

In her searing small painting, Dupuy-Spencer altered details of the picture to clarify context, such as emphasizing a looming, sash-draped cross in the background and the spangled jacket of boxing promoter and ex-con Don King, thrusting in from the side. The most chilling revision, however, is a spidery, grasping hand on the president's chest, closely juxtaposed to an enlarged lapel pin of the American flag.

The laying-on of hands, a superstitious gesture that supposedly transfers spiritual holiness to the recipient (or sins to a designated scapegoat), is rendered as a grim and imminent capture of the state by the fundamentalist church. Dupuy-Spencer paints in a wet, brushy, darkly Expressionist style, familiar from German painting, which adds cautionary historical resonance to the topical scene.

Pressing a loaded brush of oil paint onto linen is the artist's own version of laying on hands. The combination turns up again in a second picture of the subject, this one featuring a worshipper whose chest glows white-hot from the clamoring touch of the surrounding crowd. Gray smoke rises from the figure's gaping mouth, forming a dingy smog across the top filled with monstrous faces. Is the worshipper cleansed, or is he releasing horrors upon the world?

Nearby, a painting of a young man in a black T-shirt shows him prepared for baptismal dunking in a swimming pool. The face of a grinning congregant is slashed with scratch marks, perhaps from the stick-end of a paint brush, as if in a futile attempt at graffiti-like erasure. Below the water line, where the blurred face of Jesus floats as a vision, animals maraud.

A partially clothed couple of indeterminate sex cavorts on a monumental canvas, engaged in enthusiastic oral copulation. Titled "The Chiefest of Ten Thousand (Sarah 2)," a line about love from the King James version of "Song of Solomon," the composition of a conjoined couple conjures an unexpected apparition of an angel on bent knees. The miracle is quietly observed by cats.

The exhibition includes 17 paintings – some as large as 11 feet wide, others just 9 inches – as well as five pencil drawings. Many, such as a riveting wooded nighttime scene of lovers amid wild animals fleeing raging wildfires, are apocalyptic.

In clipped graphite markings, Dupuy-Spencer trades in voluptuousness for vulnerability in a fractured graphic drawing of painter Antonio da Correggio's famously wild, Mannerist Renaissance vision of the god Jupiter as a dark cloud sensuously enveloping a nude nymph. The drawing's billowy cloud is less a dramatic caprice than an ominous fog-bank, however, its representation of lust less a playful sin than a fraught occasion for possible violence.

Dupuy-Spencer has a skill for impassioned political commentary absent simplistic posturing, something exceedingly rare in art today. (The gifted Nicole Eisenman was among her painting teachers at Bard College, which may partly explain.) Emblematic is a small oil sketch, "Grand Panorama of the Wave (Fall on Your Knees)."

A tiny couple stands on a radiant, grassy hill at the seashore to watch the sensational gathering of an enormous swell of frothy blue and white paint. A blue wave is coming, the composition suggests, using landscape as a metaphor to illustrate a familiar prediction for this November's elections.

But in Dupuy-Spencer's concentrated pictorial telling, things are never monolithic. This wave could break two ways – one a cleansing crescendo, another that just might sweep the innocent little couple away. Après nous, le déluge.

NINO MIER GALLERY

RIOT MATERIAL

October 2018

The Chiefest Of Ten Thousand

By Nancy Kay Turner

Celeste Dupuy-Spencer's exhibit, entitled The Chiefest of Ten Thousand, at the sparkling new Nino Mier Gallery is as complex and open to interpretation as the Bible passage that the title comes from. Dupuy-Spencer (who is half Jewish and half Catholic) explores the mysteriousness of religion, friendship, love and sex in her large-scale paintings. The first painting one encounters is the "The Chiefest of Ten Thousand (Sarah 2) (2018, oil on linen, 105 x 96"), which shows the back of an androgynous figure engaged in cunnilingus. If one is heterosexual, one might assume the figure is that of a man. One would be wrong. It is two women who are pictured surrounded by cats watching them — one voyeuristic cat is humorously spread eagled on a window watching a nude female neighbor on her bed. A half-eaten apple, an empty glass, family pictures, clothes strewn around, a flower in a tacky vase without water, all haphazardly scattered about, provide a homey, cluttered and even a mundane touch to this intimate scenario.

But then what does one make of the skull lurking at the bottom of the picture? This is reminiscent of the famously anxious Woody Allen's movie "Love and Death" (his two preoccupations.) Does this imply that our fear of death drives us to seek love often through sex? Is this a secret rumination on the specter of death? Dupuy-Spencer studied with the abstractionist painter Amy Sillman and the figurative painter Nicole Eisenman at Bard College, and her work reflects the influence of Eisenmen's content as well as Sillman's painterly gesture. Dupuy-Spencers' "The Chiefest of Ten Thousand (Sarah 2)" can be seen as an homage to Eisenman's, as it is quite similar to Eisenman's "It Is So," a painting also depicting two women having sex in a room filled with books, a flower in a vase, and a poster on the wall.

Like clues in a detective game, Dupuy-Spencer sprinkles text into the visual mix by including the titles of books, such as "THE CAT: A TALE OF FEMININE REDEMPTION," which is a Romanian fairytale authored by a Swiss Jungian psychologist. The Princess of this tale is turned into a cat and can only be released if beheaded by the Emperor's son (which happens, as it turns out!). Another clue is a book that is shown cropped, only revealing the name of the author (who is Richard Rohr, a Franciscan Friar known as a spiritual author). Philosophy, theology and psychology all have a place in the erudite narrative thread of these paintings.

And like all those heady disciplines, these paintings only ask the big questions to which there are no definitive answers. "Don't Lose your Lover" (2018, 84" x 108" oil on linen) is an ambitious allegorical painting that depicts a vast burning landscape. Two lovers in the mid-distance kiss near their car. The hood is up, indicating car trouble. Over heated? Out of gas? Both are metaphors for what can go wrong with a relationship. They are surrounded by so many dangers. Not only are there two fires raging at opposite ends of the canvas, but there are lions and tigers and bears (oh my) around them, along with rats, skunks, deer (reminiscent of Bambi and that epic forest fire), wild and domesticated horses and mules bunched together at the forest below them. All the animals and the people seem unaware of each other. Dupuy-Spencer's painting style here is brushy, and more anecdotal, suggesting forms rather than actually defining them.

With the "To Be Titled" (2018, 90" x 120" oil on linen), Dupuy-Spencer gives the viewer a psychological look at a group of family or friends at an informal social gathering. Unlike the dark, fantastical "Don't Lose Your Lover," this is a more traditional structure, possibly based on a series

of photographs. There are hints of both Alice Neel and Joyce Treiman in these specific portraits of real people. The mood here is jaunty, and indeed one of the main figures (an older red-haired woman with smoke emitting from both nostrils) seems to be winking at us knowingly. Dupuy-Spencer gives the viewer hints to the inhabitant's politics and lifestyle by the bric-a-brac that she surrounds them with. These include a boombox (is this the 80's?) sitting on a shelf in the back of the room along with little pink post-it notes sprinkled everywhere. They admonish us to "CLEAN CONSTANTLY," "SIT DOWN NOW," and to have "NO DOUBT." This group portrait includes various people sitting or standing rather stiffly or awkwardly. Dupuy-Spencer employs scraping (like Leon Golub) down to the canvas with some of the figures but not others. In this painting as with her others, there are various levels of representation—from naturalism, to highly abstracted, to almost child-like depiction of body parts – especially of hands.

The ceiling is lowered to allow the viewer to see only the crossed legs and shoeless feet of multiple children upstairs entertaining themselves. There are knowing touches like an unfinished amateur Matisse gold fish painting (possibly a nod to Warhol's "Paint By Numbers" painting) near an art book with "Matise" misspelled. The group seems congenial and yet there is definitely some tension and uncertainty in their body language, which gives a clue to their individual personalities. This painting is a show–stopper, jam packed with so much information (books, bottles and knick-knacks, all indicating class and economic status). Perhaps Dupuy-Spencer means to demonstrate the complexities of any affinity group gathering?

Dupuy-Spencer really soars with her compelling depictions of Evangelical Christian religious rituals in two medium-sized paintings that are both steeped in mysticism. "Through The Laying On Of Hands (Positively Demonic Dynamism)" (2018, oil on linen, 48 X 40") is a complex image that puts the viewer right into the sacred claustrophobic space that the action takes place in. The swaying congregation with hands in air, is witnessing a believer having his demons removed through the miracle of the eponymous action. The congregant's heart is literally aglow and the demons fly out of his open mouth. In some ways, this is quite a compelling image as the evil forces swirl in a tornado of terrifying faces above the congregation. And what is demonic dynamism? It is the name given to the infighting amongst various Christian groups about scripture and refers to the battle between Cain and Abel. And we know how that turned out (not well). Is this a foreshadowing of more religious violence? The jam-packed space and paint application is reminiscent of James Ensor's expressionistic religious paintings of the late nineteenth century. Is the mood ironic, cautionary, dismissive or inquisitive? Is Dupuy-Spencer merely fascinated with these tribal belief systems or judging?

In the "To Be Titled" (2018" oil on linen, 40 x 48"), painting, Dupuy-Spencer further explores religious spaces as she positions the viewer in a church pew of the Reverend Al Green's (yes, that Al Green of R&B fame) Full Gospel Tabernacle church in Memphis, Tennessee (this information is given on the Church program in the foreground). This is a real church, bought by Al Green after he became a minister. It is a modest church filled with an all-black gospel choir, led by Al Green himself and the congregants are a diverse bunch. Green bought the church after he was severely burned by a disgruntled lover, turning an evil act into a redemptive act. Hate the sin, love the sinner?

The exhibit is quite satisfying, although there are landscape paintings and other pencil drawings that seem incidental or are just not that strong. There is an inconsistency of tone and style in some of the works along with the annoying lack of titles for other pieces — especially since Dupuy-Spencer so successfully employs titles that inform and expands the meaning of many of the works. However, Celeste Dupuy-Spencer is an authentic, fresh voice who is at her best when she examines, with humor and clarity, the foibles of the human condition.

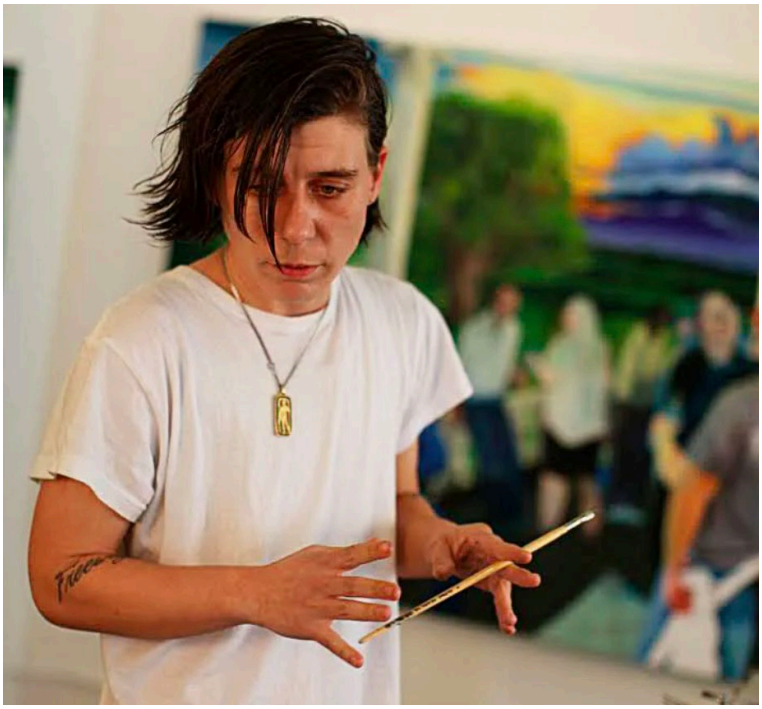
NINO MIER GALLERY

ELLE

September 2018

Celeste Dupuy-Spencer's Art Is A Reflection Of Her America

By Margaret Wappler



In her skylighted studio near downtown Los Angeles, between cigarette drags that flutter ashes onto her dark denim and work boots, Celeste Dupuy-Spencer talks about identity as it relates to her art. "I'm an American painter. I make paintings about America," she says, prompting the questions: Which America? And whose?

Vitally self-reflexive and saturated in color, Dupuy-Spencer's figurative paintings and drawings capture the zeitgeist without sacrificing soul. Her work encompasses the full prism of her person: Caucasian. Queer (Dupuy-Spencer identifies as trans, and has no preference about which pronoun is used.) A 38-year-old native of Rhinebeck, New York. An addict in recovery. A former landscaper. An atheist raised culturally Jewish. A country-music lover. The owner of a cat named The River. Together, these disparate elements inform a perspective with a searing sense of intimacy. Her eye always turns to people, some fictional, some real. A childhood first love holding a fawn; a police officer turning off his body cam; her good friend and fellow artist Eve Fowler cuddling her dogs while making a collage. Infused throughout each work is the artist herself, searching for personal connection during a time of social and cultural upheaval.

Four years ago, Dupuy-Spencer was living in New Orleans, recovering from a heroin addiction that had sent her mother to New York City to rescue her. She wasn't painting, even though she'd studied it at Bard under the painter Nicole Eisenman. "I had to quit being an artist 100 percent," she says. "I was not interested in it anymore." Dupuy-Spencer thought about going to grad school to become a drug

counselor, but then "it turns out painting is actually part of who I am." She moved from New Orleans to Los Angeles on a whim to be near friends, started working out of a garage in Silver Lake, and met Nino Mier, a gallerist who also represents Fowler. When Mier first visited Dupuy-Spencer's studio in 2015, "I immediately fell in love," he says. "There was a real sense of honesty to her work that I responded to, and her skill level was very high. She has an independent and unique voice." Mier gave her a solo exhibition in 2016; it sold out. A year later, one of her paintings was auctioned at Phillips for $23,750.

In the years since, major museums have taken notice—Dupuy-Spencer was included in the 2017 Whitney Biennial and in Made in L.A. 2018 at the Hammer Museum. This month, she appears in the inaugural show at Nino Mier Gallery's West Hollywood space, opening September 22 and running through November 3. Anne Ellegood, who co-curated the Hammer show, says Dupuy-Spencer is set to become "one of the great painters of her generation."

In one image (Durham, August 14, 2017) from her critically acclaimed New York solo show, Wild and Blue, at Marlborough Contemporary, Dupuy-Spencer focuses on a statue of a Confederate soldier toppled by antiracist protesters in North Carolina in the aftermath of the violence in Charlottesville, Virginia. The statue is a near-grotesque pile of metal; two hands grasping a gun barrel are among the few recognizable elements.

Dupuy-Spencer isn't just looking at the statue or the protesters or the white supremacists; she's thinking of the ways she is mixed up in all those representations. She's thinking of her roots as a descendant of one of the white founding families of New Orleans. "There is some real violence in that side of the family that I've been trying to come to terms with in my work." Sunlight, especially on a canvas, is the best disinfectant. "I'm sort of going after these people. I'm pulling them into the light on a personal level and inside of myself. Whatever is coming out of me, it's like when you're dreaming—you're every character."

At first glance, her new show at Nino Mier tackles a subject that seems unlikely for an atheist. "This is really an investigation into American spirituality, which is essentially evangelical," Dupuy-Spencer says. Her father, the novelist Scott Spencer, used to drive her and her brother past churches on Sundays to gawk at the believers. "You can't make American paintings without painting about Christ," she says. "I've been looking as deeply as I can, and being as personal as I can—you know, like, really allowing myself to drop my skepticism."

One of her pathways into religion has been through music, a frequent motif in her paintings, which have referenced John Hiatt lyrics and the outlaw country musician George Jones. Inspired by Sam Cooke's song "Touch the Hem of His Garment," one painting shows an outstretched hand touching a gilded robe. The Reverend Al Green is seen delivering a sermon in a sun-soaked church. At its roots, Dupuy-Spencer finds the message of Christianity "actually beautiful. It's unconditional love and forgiveness, but it's sort of like a moot point, because we're not actually looking at ourselves. We very much don't look at ourselves, but we're already forgiven."

Another image, still in progress when I visit her studio in late June, is spiritual in a more personal way. On a huge 72-by-90-inch canvas, Dupuy-Spencer captures her own mother, as well as the mothers of a few childhood friends, sitting around drinking beer and wine, their eyes fixed on the viewer. Upstairs, young Celeste and her friends listen to their banter. "These people created my world on a really obvious and basic level. There's nothing more religious than one's mother."

Dupuy-Spencer plans to hang this at Nino Mier across from another grand-scale painting dedicated to a different kind of holy—the orgasm. In it, she and her lover, Sarah, are depicted engaging in oral sex, Dupuy-Spencer kneeling in front of Sarah's parted legs. "I'm not thinking about it as queer sex, but of course that's what it is, straight up," she says. The details, not the broad statement, anchor the piece. The messy carpet, the cat curled up on the bed, the private moment boiled down to its pure essence: two people, searching for connection on one quiet afternoon.

NINO MIER GALLERY

BOMB

January 2018

Interview: Celeste Dupuy-Spencer

By Katherine Cooper

"I'm dating a committedly masochist painter," my friend Sarah told me about a year ago. "Her name is Celeste." The name and description piqued my interest and kept popping up—on the address line of the airmail letter Sarah asked me to drop in the post, on Eileen Myles's Instagram feed, halfway through Maggie Nelson's The Argonauts, and eventually in my inbox inviting me to Celeste Dupuy-Spencer's most recent show, Wild and Blue, at Marlborough Contemporary this past fall. I had made a point to get to the Whitney Biennial to see her work there, but I wanted more.

Walking through her exhibition, I was struck by how these paintings could have been located anywhere—museums, basements, houses, junkyards. Their figuration made me believe I would understand what I was looking at, but as I spent more time with them, I began to see that this apparent accessibility was only a gateway to their thematic complexity. The hand that painted them was highly skilled and unrelenting. When I encounter works by artists of such talent and vision, I always hope they have answers for me, but more pressingly, I hope we're asking the same questions.

Dupuy-Spencer's Wild and Blue felt defiantly messy and raw, just like our current political—and physical—climate, yet she acts as an assertive guide through our brutal contemporary landscape. Her compositions are organized, her brushstrokes confident, while the depicted scenes are equal turns apocalyptic and quotidian, intimate and political, tender and harsh. I detect homages to Kerry James Marshall and Jacob Lawrence in her paintings, while ghosts of Egon Schiele and David Hockney haunt her drawings. As I walked through the gallery alone, uneasy, even distraught, I knew I wanted to talk to her.

Celeste Dupuy-Spencer: I don't care about pronouns at all, but I don't use gendered nouns to describe myself.

Katherine Cooper: Like woman or man?

CDS: Yeah, or in family, it's like no daughter, sister, lesbian …Jewess.

KC: Shit. Jewess painter Celeste Dupuy-Spencer. There goes my headline.

CDS :You know, if it's funny enough, you can do anything you want.

KC: I wanted to jump off from a word that I think gets tossed around too easily these days: personal. It's used to refer to work that is graphic or sexual, or made by a woman or a person of color, or all of these things. What's your relationship to these interpretations of the personal?

CDS: We're coming to the end of a third wave of identity politics, which I think has become more complicated. There's this idea of the personal being political, and that's valid to a certain extent. But a personal story can be discredited as narcissistic the moment you refer to it as personal.

My work is personal in the sense that I'm talking about things that are meaningful to me, but there's a part of me that wants to take myself out of the equation. I use people and environments mostly because they're what I know. Often, it's a person that I feel is a good archetype but also someone from my life. My work at the Whitney Biennial was essentially a kind of personal essay—months and months of research and reading and translating that into visual work.

I was sort of burnt out after that, but I had this gallery show coming up, and I made a decision to paint things and people I particularly loved. It's a way of super-personalizing a painting and putting myself deeply inside the situation. In the end, I didn't find myself weary to the extent I thought I would. Sarah, the painting I made of me and my partner, has a personal note painted for her on the back. I wanted to make it really clear that I wasn't making that painting to talk about gender or sexuality, or to shock anyone or tell anyone anything, but as a love letter.

KC: If I asked you to summarize the phases in your artistic evolution, what would you call them?

CDS: Oh, jeez. I'm doing essentially the same thing I've always done. The only difference is that I'm now getting paid to do it, and I'm not completely flipped out about my imminent demise and eviction. It's like a knot's been pulled out of my hair. For now.

I was at my dad's house recently [novelist Scott Spencer], and he has a collection of my paintings from high school. The work is very similar to what I'm doing now, though back then I had no idea about contemporary art. It wasn't until I went to Bard as an adult that I learned about other painters.

KC: What were the works you saw and liked as a kid?

CDS: Like, portraits of people that don't exist but that look so personal. In high school I was looking at Egon Schiele and Alice Neel. They were big influences on me. Our art teacher took us on a field trip to New York City to see the John Waters film retrospective, which blew my mind out of my head. My mother had a ton of books on classical painters, like Caravaggio, and the greats of the Renaissance, whom I loved, but no books on contemporary art. Also, being a kid growing up in Rhinebeck, my aesthetic is 1990s Hudson Valley. My paintings seemed to be of people who I loved very much, but they didn't actually exist. The people I painted were just out of my head.

Some of these early paintings look really religious. Or romantic. This was probably because I was looking at so much Michelangelo and Giotto in my staunchly secular home. But the things that influenced my work have mostly been personal experiences as seen via politics and music. So the phases are basically: painting, not painting, painting, not painting. (laughter) Or painting, doing landscaping work, painting, working in a rehab in New Orleans, painting.

KC: When did you start painting people you knew?

CDS: When I thought that I could get them to look remotely like the people I was painting. I'm not very good at painting exactly what I see. Often, I'm trying to paint something realistically and then I fuck it up and attempt to make that into a good painting.

KC: You just had a huge year—artistically, professionally—and you are sort of in a new, perhaps interim place.

CDS: This is the first time I've taken an intentional break, knowing the date of my next show at Nino Mier Gallery and how many paintings I want to make for it. I have the materials ready at my kitchen table in Hudson—cold-pressed paper taped to the table, a lamp over it, and my pencils. If I want to start making sketches, it's all there. And every time I go to sit down to do it, my hand is like, "Oooh, I'm not going to hold that pencil right now."

When I was in New Orleans from 2012 to 2014, it was more of a forced break. I thought I was over as a painter. Before that I'd been living in New York, surrounded by artists, having work in a lot of group shows. But then I decided I didn't want to be a painter anymore. I was just sick of the conversation and the insular world of art. I was sick of the notion that art is super important to the lives of people, regardless of whether or not they have the ability to see the work or not, or understand its complicated language, so I went to work at a long-term drug and alcohol rehab for people without resources—many of them homeless or coming out of prison. For about two years, it was my entire world. That's where my friends were. I still did sketches but only for myself, and I'd make drawings for my mom, who lives in New Orleans. Then I moved to LA, where I started painting in a garage, and all of this stuff started bursting out of me, almost out of my control. I understood that, no matter what, as a painter I'm digesting faces, and I should step out of the way of that. Like, if I am in a slump, one way to move past it is to tackle it head on and work through it. But sometimes the brain that drove me into a slump can't be the one to get me out. The brain that got me into a meaningless corner of queer, feel-good identity politics in New York is the same brain that would try to figure out what I was looking at as a painter, so I had to lay off for a second. It's like trying to think yourself out of a depression with a depressed brain. It doesn't work.

KC: What's your relationship to addiction and creativity? Do you want to talk about that? Or… not?

CDS: I'll totally talk about it. That's actually why I left New York. I come from a long, thriving line of Cajun addicts. I'm the last person on this particular branch, and it's been something that I've battled with forever. I do want to talk about it, but I don't quite know how. I tell people that I went to NOLA because of a family emergency, which isn't untrue, but the family emergency was myself. (laughter) I went to New Orleans because my mom lives there. Essentially, she came and picked me up in a hospital in New York City and drove me (and my fifteen-year-old dog, Freeway) down to New Orleans and stuck me in a rehab. I actually stuck myself in there for six months, then worked in the same place, which is quite common.

KC: Was painting part of your life at that point?

CDS: Nowhere near it. I was on kitchen duty in the rehab. I felt like I'd become the pariah of the queer art scene in New York because they'd never met a heroin addict. And lucky them. It was really heartbreaking. Also, I thought my career was over, and I was like, What's an art career anyway? I'm gonna move in with my crush on the bayou and raise her kids! (laughter)

Then I got hired into administration at the men's building of the same rehab center I went to. It was life altering. I'm a work addict, so when that was my job, I would be completely emotionally strung out by the time I got home, go to bed, and do it again next day. I burned out eventually because it's the wrong line of work for a work addict! My relationship with addiction is actually really, really present in my artwork. I don't know if you saw my work in the Biennial—

KC: I did.

CDS: There was a watercolor I did in 2012, in Brooklyn. It's called Good Morning. It's the methadone clinic on Sixty-Eighth Street in Manhattan. I was desperate for many years to keep my addiction a secret and get clean, and that became really present in my work but in a lot of coded ways. Luckily, the people in the group I was running with were completely oblivious, so I got to keep my anonymity around it, which ultimately led to them feeling absolutely betrayed.

KC: Listening to you talk about this, I get some insight into your practice. I can't help but think there must be a relationship between learning to show up to kitchen duty every day and learning to show up to painting every day. Most artists negotiate some kind of addictive behavior or compulsion—the sister of addiction—in their lives, regardless of whether they identify as addicts. I'm not interested in addicts as one type of person versus everyone else.

CDS: Nor am I. I'm an artist. It's wildly selfish, and I defend my time like a pit bull. I try not to spend a lot of time thinking about whether I'm a true drug addict or whether I'm a person who has pretty complicated brain wiring. I know that I'm depressed, sensitive, and selfish. I'm just determined to do this thing, which is paint in solitude, and I will burn bridges to do it, including relationships. That's compulsion and addiction. When I used a drug it got much worse, so it's better for me not to. But I don't know that I want to cure myself of the addictive wiring inside of me because it's what my connection is, my conduit. I don't really want to dull it down. I need to spend forty-eight hours awake in my studio painting, responding to nobody. That's a slippery slope for an addict, but I'm willing to do whatever it takes to make work and to make sure that I'm there when the work starts happening.

KC: The compulsion to work is something I watch in my own life, and I wonder how it plays out in relation to my work, other people, and the world at large.

CDS: I do think that drugs saved my life in a lot of ways and then ruined my life. The goal was to survive. The compulsion to use drugs came from an absolutely devastating feeling of inadequacy. Had it forever. This feeling of just not being able to connect to people, not being good enough, not being smart. A lot of those things are also fueling my studio practice. I'm afraid if I don't show up and don't work as hard as I possibly can, I will be humiliated. People will know that I'm a fraud. Part of me wonders if my goal of life is actually just to make myself feel okay, to find peace. But then I wonder if I'd show up in the same way. Is my brain wiring just something I have to live with, making me feel connected to something greater than myself only when I'm inside my studio working?

Do fear and shame become tools for me while I try to make every painting better than the last?

KC: So it's the question: Will I paint if I'm happy?

CDS: Yeah. My father sent me a note one Valentine's Day with this John Zorn quote: "I'm constantly in doubt about what I'm doing, I'm constantly tortured, and that's why I say happiness is irrelevant. Happiness is for children and yuppies. I'm not striving for happiness, I'm trying to get some work done." My dad really gets me.

KC: I want to ask you about your influences, broadly speaking. I definitely see Schiele in some of your drawings. I also see Kerry James Marshall.

CDS: He's the master painter.

KC: At the Whitney Biennial, your work was shown near Henry Taylor's.

CDS: He is also one of my influences.

KC: Which other influences are of note?

CDS: Lately I've been looking at Charles Burchfield's watercolors. I studied with Nicole Eisenman in college, and she really brought it home for me in a lot of ways. But I don't spend a tremendous amount of time looking at paintings while I work. Sometimes I will run up against a problem and quickly scan around to see if someone else might have found a secret way around whatever issue I'm having, technically. Like, what color is a white house in moonlight? What color is moonlight anyway? Goya? Not quite. Hopper? Maybe. James Gurney? Yeah! And to my surprise, Gurney also painted the Rhinecliff hotel, albeit in daytime.

One of my favorite paintings is Portrait of the Merchant Georg Gisze by Hans Holbein the Younger. I lifted his table cloth for Veterans Day. It's just a joy to look at. I mostly listen to music, though, when I'm painting. I prefer music that tells a story. I want to paint like the music I listen to.

KC: Like what?

CDS: I mostly listen to country. Country music touches on subjects that the majority of people are experiencing in life. The profoundness of the everyday, the complications around the simplest as well as the deepest of feelings, the choices we are faced with. These songs talk about people who are widowed by war or coming back from war, not knowing how to interact. They talk about cancer and not being able to pay bills, about having three kids and working a job as a waitress. And they talk about class. In America we're not even supposed to say "class" because it's considered counterproductive to the American Dream. We call people who don't have jobs and are suffering "working-class Americans" and then we call people who are poor "lower middle class." It's just insane. Country musicians are my heroes, as deeply flawed, archetypal artists. Those are my influences.

KC: Who are some of these artists specifically?

CDS: Emmylou Harris! John Anderson. I love Tim McGraw. George Jones hits these notes that are all the things that are beyond words—the sorrow. Sturgill Simpson is just the most beautiful—mind and heart exploding. I adore Miranda Lambert. The high lonesome sound is what it's like to be a human. Vince Gill and how he could sing the high harmony to Alison Krauss any day of the week. My gateway into country music in 1998 was Steve Earle—who's a fucking commie! I turned on the radio and heard George Strait, Joe Diffie, and Clint Black. Country is the most listened-to genre of music in America, and America is busted, so the music gets a very bad wrap. In many ways, it earned its very bad wrap. The common perception is that the majority of the fan base are ultra-conservatives, maybe even alt-right. And those people are definitely deep in there. And so are the Bible thumpers. But that's not all. There's a tremendous amount of room in that genre. The musicians have brains wired like artists, they're politically and socially complex people. Tim McGraw sings this song, "Red Ragtop"—a personal narrative about being in love with somebody who he gets pregnant, but they weren't ready for a kid. It's coded enough that the fan base goes, "No, but he regrets it, so it's anti-abortion," but it's actually him regretting it, like: We live with what we do, and yeah, it sucks, but it was a choice we needed to make. The complex conversations in this genre are wildly beautiful and fascinating.

KC: Yeah, country makes a lot of sense as a cross-genre influence.

CDS: Bruce Springsteen's biggest influence is John Steinbeck.

KC: Butchness has been misinterpreted in your work in the past.

CDS: Oh my god, it drives me crazy.

KC: In your own words, how would you describe the role and the aesthetics of butchness in your life and work?

CDS: I've been categorized as butch; I've been hit on as butch. The only thing I've ever been able to say to somebody who's hit on me based on their perception of my butchness is, "You're going to be wildly disappointed. I'm gonna be bored. Let's not go there." Butch aesthetic is only put on me because I'm identified as a woman. If people saw a man, they would see a fey motherfucker. It's just ridiculous, I don't even know how to talk about it.

KC: Yeah, so maybe it's not really relevant.

CDS: I don't know. It might be, since I have such a visceral response. It relies on a binary that I completely disagree with. I find that when I'm being looked at as a butch, so many real things about me are being overlooked. I don't even give a shit about gender. (laughter)

I don't think about myself as a queer person when I'm painting. I don't even think about myself as a queer person when I'm painting myself with Sarah. We got together after the election of Trump, sticking together through the inauguration and all the anxiety, these moments when we were just weeping. I was also weeping because all the work my grandmother had put in for the Left, explicitly for women's rights, gay rights, and the Civil Rights Movement—all of which was being undone. These were, and still are, irrational, emotional, and scary times, and we clung together, finding comfort in each other, massaging each other's heads in bed at home. I

hope what transcends in the painting I made of us is love. Just that.

Part of my politics is the need for erasure of a specific kind of queer politics. When you start identifying in certain ways, you're giving other people the power of perception and it becomes a complicated hierarchy of really simplified ideals. I want to say right here that I am so happy to be so gay. It's one of the greatest things I've ever been given. I love radical gay history, and when queers take to the streets against oppression, I'm proud to be counted in that number.

But to look at my work only through that lens is presumptuous, even kind of violent. Hyperallergic talked about my paintings as all about being gay. The writer referred to The Matriarchs of the Hudson Valley (1980s–90s), which is a portrait of my mother and her friends, as "glorifying a homey, soft world of women."

KC: A profound misinterpretation.

CDS: Then she said that Veteran's Day, in contrast, was a butch painting, "interrupting femme associations," because it was about war.

KC: In Swamp Girl, I see de Kooning, but the female figure seems friendlier than his.

CDS: Swamp Girl came out of a series of paintings I made while I was at Shandaken Project, a residency in Upstate New York. I had just discovered the absolute joy of doing watercolors and was trying to incorporate what that felt like into oil painting. My previous work had sort of sunk into a hypernarrative pit, and I was losing the paint thread. I was spending too much time making paintings that I didn't really know how to paint yet, skill-wise. Swamp Girl was me breaking it up so I could make room in my work for things that were not literally recognizable. Also, there might have been a little bit of a personal white flag waving in that painting.

KC: Teeth seem like such a dominant feature of your portraiture. I'm thinking of Two Guys and a Girl and Trump Rally. How do you approach teeth formally and allegorically?

CDS: I have very big teeth. Teeth are just ridiculous. What a purely mechanical, utilitarian addition to our crazy bodies. No matter how close we come to envisioning some kind of ideal body—which is an inherently violent thing to envision anyway—we always have to make psychic room for these ridiculous white food grinders in our mouths.

KC: You seem to portray disaster with tenderness. Your painting Rhinecliff Hotel compositionally balances order and chaos. Those pointillist stars contrast the fluidity of the foreground. It looks inviting, but then it's a flood.

CDS: That painting is actually called Early Snow, Rhinecliff Hotel. It's a painting of one of those fluke snows we sometimes get up in the Hudson Valley in the beginning or middle of autumn. Suddenly, it snows while all the leaves are still on the trees. And then it warms up again, and the snow turns to mud. It can be pretty damaging to the trees. Disastrous for the maples! Those stars above the hotel were actually painted by my best friend, Mariah Garnett, who came in and rescued me on a day of tiny dot-making a week before the painting shipped to New York. She also put most of the stars in Not Today Satan.

The Rhinecliff Hotel was the local bar for all of us from the towns around there. I was a regular by the time I was fifteen. Mariah was there, too. It was really important to me, and while it may not be the greatest idea for a young teen to be drinking regularly, it made me feel like there was a place I belonged. The bar was filled with the most wonderful people I have ever known (and some really bad ones, too). It was sloped and smelly, and the paint was peeling. Packed with locals. I loved that place. I actually used to have my school bus drop me off there! So, intrinsically there is a tangible feeling of disaster in that place for me. I'm filled with deep tenderness for it, having the fondest memories of that bar between age fourteen and twenty—isn't that a disaster?! It was eventually closed and then reopened as a historic hotel or something where you can have a wedding or spend the night for 150 to 300 dollars. That's the perfect story for what has happened to the Hudson Valley, really.

KC: Upstate, New Orleans, New York City, and Los Angeles have all played roles in your work to varying degrees.

CDS: The Hudson Valley is just where I grew up. That's my landscape—super rural and a little utopian in a way. In LA, I felt alienated. I didn't really know how to interact with the place except by painting shitty dusty plots of land that people had bought. New Orleans plays a huge role. My family history on my mother's side is troubling. We were French aristocracy sent to the swamps. We were actually some of the founding families in Louisiana. Whenever I land in Louisiana, I feel parts of my DNA sort of snap in. But in my work, I'm also talking about race. I'm talking about my whiteness very specifically. My family was involved with sugar plantations in the islands, which were basically worker prisons. The money was lost, thank god, generations before I was born, but it's in our blood. When I'm painting New Orleans, I'm talking about whiteness in a complicated, painful way, trying to find the archetype and also out it. I'm trying to celebrate its demise in a certain way, actively identifying it and keeping my heel on its neck. I want to talk about race in contemporary America, and I want to be very honest with what it's done for me.

KC: After what we discussed so far, I'm curious about the politics of resentment and the politics of dignity in your work.

CDS: I don't think they are at opposite ends. They are at the core of everything. People have inherent dignity and that dignity is attached to a higher purpose. At the same time, people are schmucks. Give them a certain amount of power or social currency, and they have the potential to become monsters. These two don't cancel each other out.

I'm full of real resentment that I believe I've come by pretty honestly. Some of it is directly personal, and some of it is just systemic. Like, I look at white men, and it's a fucking comedy act. I feel a deep resentment. But then I see these moments of heroism that are just the most beautiful thing in the world. It's often brought out in times of unthinkable trials. My favorite archetype is the firefighter. They might be total dicks in their day to day, probably they are, and some of them might be absolutely monstrous. But then the bell rings, the helmet goes on, and they're running up the stairs of a burning building for anyone trapped inside. That's the most extreme example. There is the Cajun navy too. I hear Bill Murray is a real schmuck to strangers who approach him, but, like, thank god for Bill Murray. He is brilliant! I think the natural go-to is to be self-serving. The go-to is basically the jerk, but everybody's capable of getting a "call" and answering it. It may not be what makes humanity worth saving, but it's what makes humanity heartbreakingly beautiful, and that's why we have a spiritual life. That's why we created the archetype and why we believe in god or don't. The calling becomes the standard we measure ourselves against. That's fine. Painful but fine.

NINO MIER GALLERY

Art in America

December 2017

Celeste Dupuy-Spencer

By Eric Sutphin

Los Angeles–based painter Celeste Dupuy-Spencer frequently mines news stories and her own personal experiences for her work's content, producing contemporary genre paintings that are politically charged but ambiguous in meaning. Most of the twelve paintings and five drawings featured in "Wild and Blue"—the first solo exhibition in New York for Dupuy-Spencer, who was included in the 2017 Whitney Biennial—were made after the 2016 presidential election. Overall, the selection foregrounded the complexity and texture of American life today.

The jovial group of people shown in Rokeby (2017) suggests a mix of blue-collar workers, artists, and liberal-arts professors. The scene is set on the porch of the main house at Rokeby, a sprawling estate in New York's Hudson Valley that serves as an artist retreat and rooming house. In the background of the image, the sky transitions from deep blue to acid orange, as if the sun were beginning to set, and a cloud formation casts a vaguely ominous glow. Not Today Satan (2017) offers a more overtly sinister image. In a dark, cloudy city, a troupe of demons and spirits, reminiscent of the grotesque creatures in Hieronymus Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights (1490–1505), haunts a police cruiser bearing the slogan protect and serve on its side. The two white male officers visible through the car's front windows stare straight ahead (perhaps panicked, perhaps oblivious) as these specters that might symbolize brutality, injustice, or rage descend upon them. Which is the evil force here? The demons or the officers?

Love Me, Love Me, Love Me, I'm a Liberal (2017) is titled after a satirical 1966 song by Phil Ochs and likewise pokes fun at American liberals. A forlorn woman sits at a cluttered table with a bankruptcy statement in one hand and a cigarette in the other. On the tabletop, which occupies about half of the picture, are a handmade vase with the phrase flowers not bombs scrawled on it, an NPR mug, and a book whose title, The Burden of Blame: How to Convince People That It's Not Your Fault, humorously conjures an image of third-party-candidate supporters working through a sense of post-election guilt. R. DiMeo III (2017) is a portrait of a sunburned man with a receding hairline holding a fawn in his arms. The man's rugged masculinity at first appears tempered by his seemingly tender relationship with the animal. As one continues to look, however, it seems possible that this image of caretaking is instead one of entrapment and conquest. Such shifting meanings are a constant in Dupuy-Spencer's work. Though she gives her scenes a great deal of specificity, the details rarely add up to single narratives. Rather, they allow for a multiplicity of possible, at times conflicting plotlines, much like those of the national narrative itself.

NINO MIER GALLERY

THE NEW YORKER

October 2017

Celeste Dupuy-Spencer

By New Yorker Staff

With a wry observation of detail and a near-Fauvist palette, the American gurative painter—a standout in this year's Whitney Biennial—intertwines the personal and the political. She also works fast: in her characteristically small-scale "Durham, August 14, 2017," she commemorates the recent toppling of a Confederate statue in front of a North Carolina courthouse, showing the crumpled metal soldier defeated in sunlit grass, the smudgy legs of protesters in the background. A painting of the Cajun Navy, although made in 2016, feels eerily topical in its depiction of a oodwater rescue. Other canvases are more intimate—and more raucously rendered. In one of her larger paintings, queer lovers spill out of an open window; in another, Dupuy-Spencer offers a transporting view of a busy, ramshackle country hotel on a starry night.

September 2017

Painting in Black and White: Race and the New Figurative Art

By Aruna D'Souza

GARAGE is a print and digital universe spanning the worlds of art, fashion, design, and culture. Our launch on VICE.com is coming soon, but until then, we're publishing original stories, essays, videos, and more to give you a taste of what's to come. Jordan Casteel paints the street life of Harlem and its black residents, Celeste Dupuy-Spencer the quirky, and often decrepit, trappings of whiteness. But don't let their subject matter fool you. At heart, these two young artists—both of whom are having buzz-worthy solo shows in New York galleries right now—share a common idea: that to deal with our racist past and present, we need to see the world with empathy and care. The results are compelling, and transformative, and, in very different ways, beautiful.

Jordan Casteel's exhibition at Casey Kaplan is titled Nights in Harlem, and that's precisely what almost all of the 10 oil paintings on view (all from 2017) represent: the people who occupy the sidewalks and stoops of a neighborhood that has always been synonymous with the African American experience in the US. Her decision to focus on night views came from a desire to explore the colors produced when street lights hit skin, clothing, and pavement.

Casteel's choice of subjects stems from something far more personal, however: conversations with her two brothers in the aftermath of the 2012 murder of Trayvon Martin, and the acquittal of his killer the following year. Casteel came to realize that there were relatively few images of black men that showed them as the kind of people she knew her brothers to be: fully human, that is to say—people who had social lives and were integral, valued members of families and communities.

From that point, she devoted herself almost exclusively to painting black men and boys, first in interior settings, and now on the street. “I needed to find a way to combine my desire to create a sense of visibility around my family and my brothers that was feeling absent at that time,” she has said of her decision.

Finding her subjects means, for Casteel, forging relationships—she prowls the streets with her (serious) camera in tow, making eye contact, striking up conversations, learning about people’s lives, and taking their pictures. She gets their contact info so she can email them the photos later, and often stays in touch long-term, too; a number of the subjects of the paintings in this show attended the opening, she says. “Q [one of the men she depicts] gave me fifty hugs when he saw the show last night,” she laughs. “And he said he would have given me a thousand more if he could! There’s something really powerful about knowing that someone has seen you.”

So we see Zen walking his dogs, Q having a beer on his stoop, Cowboy E, Sean Cross, and Og Jabar hanging out in front of a parking garage, MegaStarBrand’s Louie and A-Thug selling t-shirts on the street, and so on. Each one of these works is highly particular, showing the people represented as individuals through their unique body language, facial expressions, surroundings, and even skin tone: while they are all African American, none of these men are black—instead, their skins reflect the light around them to become peach, purple, orange, brown, red.

No matter how predisposed a viewer might be to see any of the portraits’ subjects as types, a few moments of looking makes this impossible. One of the knockout works in the show, Harold, depicts an older gentleman—and really, gentleman is the only appropriate word—sitting in a plastic chair in front a laundromat, with another, younger man standing behind. The fluorescent lights from inside the shop contrast sharply with the reds and yellows cast on the figures outside. Harold and the other man look, not without kindness, at the viewer, bodies relaxed, fully at home; Harold is slightly apprehensive, hands folded in his lap, while his younger companion is confident but also a bit bemused. The surface of the painting is lush and colorful—Casteel is someone who enjoys the sensuality of paint, and the freedom it offers.

If the results seem almost anthropological in their care and specificity, she comes by that approach honestly. “I was always the kid sitting in the corner watching people interact—trying to figure out how and why people developed relationships with each other, in a sort of sociological way,” she said in a recent conversation. “I studied sociology and anthropology as an undergraduate, so that way of looking at the world has always been really important to me, as has social justice. When I got to Yale [School of Art, where she completed an MFA in 2014], by my second year I figured out that I could use painting to say the things that I wanted to say on that front—art could be a vehicle to do that. I could focus on a body’s humanity—through the idea of empathy.”

Celeste Dupuy-Spencer’s subjects can be a lot harder to love. Her current exhibition at Marlborough Contemporary is an inventory of white experience, a project that has taken on an added urgency in the age of Trump. “I’m really trying to paint this moment in America, this moment that white people in America are being called towards,” she said in a conversation at the gallery the morning after the show opened. “Now we get to not shake off what we are, to acknowledge it. And after violent deconstruction there is actually a possibility of redemption. It’s hard, because it produces a lot of fallen heroes, fallen ancestors. But once you do it honestly you get to look at the ancestors again in a more complete way.”

It’s fitting, then, that the first thing you see when you walk into the space is a small image of Dupuy-Spencer’s maternal grandfather (Not Strangers [Jack Dupuy 1924–1961], 2017). The artist grew up in the Hudson Valley, but her maternal family has lived in New Orleans for generations—”since the founding,” she laughs. “We were French aristocracy, but we were such slobs that they sent us away to be the aristocracy of the swamps. We’re bad! So I have the pride of my family’s blood running through my veins, but really it’s poisoned blood.”

“Its important for me to talk about what I’m seeing when I deconstruct my family’s history,” she continues, “because now I have the complicated task of balancing love and gratitude with clarity and responsibility. One of the conversations I am hoping to have with this work is one with white people, to ask them to really look hard at their history, and locate where their history lives on inside them today. I think the strong resistance against doing this is that the majority of white people would find that they very clearly and directly owe reparations.”

The show is filled with paintings that resonate with Dupuy-Spencer for similar reasons—if not coming to terms with her literal ancestry, then coming to terms with what it means to be white. An image of the Cajun Navy, a group of Southerners who went out in their motorboats in the wake of Hurricane Katrina (and more recently, Harvey) on rescue missions (Cajun Navy, August 2016, 2017); a painting of her first love holding a fawn in his arms (R. DiMeo III, 2017); a group of the locals she grew up with hanging out on the porch of the grand Hudson Valley estate that they inherited, without having been left the money to maintain it (Rokeby, 2017)—all of these speak tenderly, if in a complicated way, to her history. The people she paints are often those to whom she feels a deep connection, I observe. “Yes,” she replies.” But empathy doesn’t necessarily mean a free pass.”

At the same time, works like Not Today Satan (2017) and Love Me, Love Me, Love Me, I’m a Liberal (2017) are unflinching and even a little caustic. The first shows a police car manned by skeletons—a surreal, Book of Revelations-type image of vengeful demons wreaking havoc that seems straight out of James Ensor or even (per the artist) Michelangelo. The second shows a white liberal woman all but hidden by the expected accouterments of her species: photographs of her at the Women’s March on Washington, an “I heart NPR” mug alongside a vase of flowers, a mortgage statement, and a profuse bouquet in a vase made by her children. Dupuy-Spencer twists the knife by inserting, front and center, a book—one so on the nose I had to Google to see if it actually existed (it doesn’t, thank goodness, but as the artist said, laughing, “if it did I’d be totally on it”): The Burden of Blame, the title blares, How to Convince People That It’s Not Your Fault.

Some of the paintings were done in one sitting, such as Durham, August 14, 2017, which she completed hours after seeing the video of anti-racist protesters pulling down a confederate statue in the aftermath of the white supremacists’ riot in Charlottesville. Talk about fallen ancestors. Others took far longer. She jokes about her “untrained” technique. She says she bought books on Amazon to help her work out some finer points of her medium—a self-deprecating comment from someone who studied painting with the likes of Amy Sillman and Nicole Eisenman at Bard College—but the slightly naïve approach, awkward spatial relations, jarring color juxtapositions create an effect that is, ultimately, vulnerable, open-hearted, and immediate.

The emotional impact of the work is important for Dupuy-Spencer. “I’m asking people to slow down to look again, to absorb, to feel,” she says. “It’s the scariest thing you can ask people to do right now. Giving space to feel.”

NINO MIER GALLERY

THE NEW REPUBLIC

September 2017

Celeste Dupuy-Spencer is Painting the News

By Josephine Livingstone

Art is always political. Shoe design, ceramics, tapestry: all creative acts are made within historical and political contexts. But artists express their politics in different modes. Some critique indirectly, as in, say, the femininity-satirizing works of Sarah Lucas. But others work much closer to the headlines.

"Wild and Blue" is the first New York solo exhibition for painter Celeste Dupuy-Spencer, whose paintings of bookshelves and people were a Whitney Biennial 2017 highlight. In that show, Dupuy-Spencer's drawing "Trump Rally (and Some of Them I Assume are Good People)" stood out from her other works for both the timeliness of its content (people in MAGA hats) and its dark humor—Ku Klux Klan hoods become whimsical Caspar-the-Ghost-shapes, the ralliers' faces distorted cartoonishly.

In this new show, Dupuy-Spencer continues her engagement with the current moment in America. The painting "Love Me, Love Me, Love Me, I'm a Liberal" shows a warped figure obscured by a vase. In one hand she holds a letter with part of the name "Merrill Lynch" visible on it. A letter addressed to GRANDMA lies on the table, near an I SUPPORT NPR mug. The painting works as satire because it is also partly an intimate and traditional table scene. Is this distorted person a type, standing in for Clinton, or a specific person who is sitting at a specific table, by a specific bunch of flowers? Or is this instead just the latest installment of a long tradition of table-paintings, crudely filled in with the symbols (keywords?) of our time?

That ambiguity—between satire and traditional figurative relations—continues in Dupuy-Spencer's landscapes, which may be the strongest element of the show. "Lake Pontchartrain Causeway" is a large (65 x 50 in.) landscape of the long, long overwater bridge in Louisiana. The road plunges downward in a dynamic curve. To the left and in the sky, storms are bubbling. The painting shows a prosaic stretch of tarmac at the moment before meteorological tension is unleashed, again, on New Orleans.

"Durham, August 14, 2017" is a painting of the statue of a Confederate soldier, after its destruction by a North Carolina crowd following the racist violence in Charlottesville, Virginia. Dupuy-Spencer has chosen an angle from which the soldier's hands are still visible among the whorls of metal. The metal is very flat in color, making the statue seem ersatz, plasticky. By contrast, the crowd of people around it are a host of multicolored and dreamlike legs. In the distribution of technique across this painting, Dupuy-Spencer draws out an experience of this important political object that has otherwise not been part of the public discourse around it. It is ekphrastic, but this artwork also depicts another work of art: in the wreckage of the fallen statue, Dupuy-Spencer sees a monument to search for justice.

Dreams and magic continue in "Not Today Satan," a painting with a funny title and an interesting subject matter. In the back of a cop car sits a ghoul. On top, a host of goblin-ish figures cavort. One is wearing a gold chain. Just beyond them, a Delacroix horse rolls its eyes in terror. In the front seats the oblivious, blankly-staring human officers drive. At the base of the painting the cop slogan POLICE PROTECT AND SERVE is legible. The juxtaposition of this platitude with the joyful burlesque of demons constitutes a lighthearted, anarchic commentary on police brutality.

Dupuy-Spencer is interested in labelling. In several paintings words are legible, and in some drawings the people (like the country hero George Jones) are in labeled by name or given words to say. This technique lends the effect of a political cartoon to Dupuy-Spencer's works, which otherwise would exist too much in the abstracted and uncommitted sphere of fine art qua fine art.

It is not possible to walk around this show and get a strong sense of Dupuy-Spencer's specific political convictions. In an interview with the World Socialist Web Site recently, she said that "Identity politics is the poison of the left," the "easiest, most narcissistic form of political debate, to only view things from the point of view of one's personal race or gender." (Dupuy-Spencer has since stated that these comments do not reflect her position.) Issues of class are lost in these conversations, she said, and in that elision we lose interest in and information on the real people who elected Trump. The working class becomes a scapegoat.

This is not orthodox thought on the left now. But Dupuy-Spencer is without doubt committed to deepening and making more detailed the representation of places and people and material circumstances in America, and for that reason her work is ideologically aligned with the activism of those working in literature, in broadcast, in journalism broadly conceived. In that same interview, she compared her painting Veteran's Day (2016) and her surrounding project to Picasso's Guernica in the Spanish Civil War, and "Horace Pippin's drawings from the front line in WWI." Like those artists, Dupuy-Spencer sees her own work as a "call to the front line in a revolutionary time."

Figurative painting, especially the intimate and human works of a painter like this, provides a textured and emotional treatment of political topics. Dupuy-Spencer's playful approach to our political moment is at the same time deeply serious, because its timeliness makes it urgent. It is also arguably serious in its assertion that painting can be a kind of journalism, and can serve the same purpose.

NINO MIER GALLERY

artnet

September 2017

Fresh From the Whitney Biennial, Painter Celeste Dupuy-Spencer's New Show Reveals a Tumultuous and Divided America

By Caroline Goldstein

Celeste Dupuy-Spencer's *To Be Titled* (2017). Courtesy of the artist.

In Celeste Dupuy-Spencer's first solo show in New York, "Wild and Blue," don't expect a respite from polarizing conversations around class, gender, and race. The paintings, now on view at Marlborough Contemporary, are densely populated tableaux that are painstakingly detailed, attributing personalities to a host of characters: demons, cops, cats, lovers, friends, and foes. But just as much as she shows a commitment to specificity, her paintings often edge toward the symbolic. The show features canvases so timely it is a wonder the pain t has dried. In Durham, August 14, 2017, a toppled statue of a Confederate soldier, crumpled on its plinth, exactly mirrors a photograph taken in North Carolina when protesters pulled down a monument just days after the deadly "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Much of Dupuy-Spencer's new work is inspired by time spent with family and friends in New Orleans and upstate New York. The locales provided her with the subject matter with which to imagine or re-imagine their particular geographies. For example, the painting Cajun Navy (2017) shows a handful of people in a sma ll boat, drifting down a flooded road, passing sunken cars and fallen trees. Images like this, ubiquitous after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Big Easy in 2005, now circulate again in the wake of record-breaking storms in Houston, Florida, and the Caribbean. Dupuy-Spencer is one of a cohort of contemporary painters mining the headlines. She deals compellingly with subjects of collective trauma and identity politics.

NINO MIER GALLERY

BLOUINARTINFO

September 2017

‘Wild and Blue’ by Celeste Dupuy-Spencer at Marlborough Contemporary

By Blouin Staff

The Los Angeles-based artist Dupuy-Spencer’s artistic vision drives her brush to create an individual perspective, a decidedly personalized worldview that paints a broader spectrum, a geography that ranges from Upstate New York to all the way through New Orleans. The space is as much geographical as it’s emotional to the artist as well as the spectator. Her works compressed in the emotionality depicts a division of close friends and a broadened pantheon fantastically painted of bygone legends of country music. As the works compose a summer party in which a number of interesting narratives take place enacted by a gathered band of cast they also depicts an open and endless road underneath a story sky waiting to unleash an omen. Dupuy-Spencer’s depiction of subjects are determined with specificity and painted as individuals but nevertheless they transcend into a universal territory of symbolization. Just the way the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway transforms into some kind of conveyance as the aftermath of Katrina in her vision. Her vision reaches beyond assumptions while a storm waits afar, not too distanced, shaping up an approaching sea that conjures up into a threat of inescapability and the expected government inaction.

There’s a friction of physical proof of facts and emotionality of artistic notion summons humanity through signaling and appeals to their core intelligence.It’s not an easy task, yet it does not weigh down the brush of the painter, rather Dupuy-Spencer labors her art long enough and more diligently upon her canvases. She posses the anxious soul of the lover worrying over the subjects she creates through her art, sometimes an old friend and oddly enough sometimes even an old and familiar building. It’s her style that shapes the personality of her subjects, yet not exceeding or escaping the original sense, struggling to create it just right, struggling to assure justice. Often, the intention is to create meaning or find interpretations that reach beyond the reach of the materialistic view of the subject. Yet the artist is ever so careful to avoid any stylization. Her process imbibes painting from photographs and often from her memory palace but it never tilts the balance of the physicality. Dupuy-Spencer never restricts it to her style or her process, as she hustles through her paintings the viewer is aware of the length she has gone through to create yet she manages to live the performance of painting with specific details of her process.

NINO MIER GALLERY

Forbes

September 2017

Do White Males Deserve Love?: The Paintings of Celeste Dupuy-Spencer At Marlborough Contemporary

By Brienne Walsh

Celeste Dupuy-Spencer's voice hints at what type of lover she might be; it's husky and deep, given texture by the packs of Marlboros that so frequently make appearances in her Instagram photographs, along with The River, her kitten. There's a painting in "Wild and Blue," an exhibition of her work at Marlborough Contemporary open through October 7, that does the same. Entitled Sarah (2017), it shows Dupuy-Spencer with her legs unshaven, her pubic hair escaping from the edges of her white underwear, lying in the arms of her girlfriend, Sarah, in a sun-filled apartment. It is a self-portrait, and also a love letter. The look on Dupuy-Spencer's face? Pure bliss. I have never been with a woman, and the painting makes the absence clear.

I first encountered Dupuy-Spencer's work at the Whitney Biennial. I never even noticed Open Casket, the painting of Emmett Till that caused so much controversy. Instead, I left the show with Dupuy-Spencer on my mind. Her paintings were like photographs of emotions. The titles — Fall With Me For A Million Days (My Sweet Waterfall) — like a song you can't stop listening to after a break up. They were sticky with something I don't ever talk about — all of the falling in love that I've done, which I carry around with me all of the time.

Her show at Marlborough includes recent works made since the gallery approached her in April. Dupuy-Spencer told me that she normally takes anywhere between six months to a year-and-a-half to complete a painting. For the exhibition, her first solo show in New York, she had the summer. “It was really hard, and super fun,” she told me. “The paintings just got ripped out of me.”
When I asked her if there was a theme, she told me that they reflected her position politically. When pressed what that position was, she said, “I’m having a conversation in my paintings, but I don’t want to…I don’t like men, I don’t want to be like, ‘This is how it is!’” she said. “I am super critical of that kind of power structure.”

Dupuy-Spencer hasn’t done enough interviews to have developed a clean narrative about herself; and this is fine, she’s not a marketing expert, she’s a painter, and her medium is wordless. From my reading, I would say Dupuy- Spencer is critical of bigotry, white supremacy, police violence and the patriarchy, but also loving towards the white working class, which often gets blamed for all of the above.

Born and raised in Rhinebeck, New York, before it became, as Dupuy-Spencer puts it, “the Upper East Side,” she is nostalgic for the community of poets, writers, carpenters and artisans she grew up around. “They were really good, hard workers,” Dupuy Spencer says. Her father was a writer; her mother hailed from New Orleans.

“I want to talk about class without romanticizing it,” Dupuy-Spencer told me. “In this climate where liberal people are calling white Americans deplorable as if that’s a thing, and also laying all of this blame, I also want to be able to talk about whiteness without excusing it for the problems it does cause.”
All of the paintings in the show are worth seeing; certain ones stand out. Rokeby (2017) depicts an estate where Dupuy-Spencer hung out as a kid. Owned by Ricky Aldridge, Dupuy-Spencer told me that the property been “passed down through generations long after the money has been gone.” In the painting, a group of people hang out on the porch of the main house. What stands out is the tenderness shown by men towards children in the composition — one man caresses the back of a baby’s head. Two others look off into the distance while children lean against them. In the center of it all, Ricky Aldridge, sitting in a chair, looks at the viewer as if he knows we’re there. The painting shows the type of community that so many people fantasize about finding in today’s fractured world; it shows men as good fathers.

White males are many things in today’s culture — mansplainers, Bernie Bros, mass killers, the Alt-Right, power under threat of extinction — but they are almost never the tender beings shown in Rokeby. In “Wild and Blue,” Dupuy-Spencer, a queer white woman who says she doesn’t like men, makes space for white maleness to be loved.

In R. DiMeo III (2017), a skinny white guy with a hoop earring and a receding hairline — the sort of person you see more often in mug shots than art — is depicted holding a baby deer. This is Dupuy-Spencer’s first love; the first person she ever kissed. “I found him on Facebook through his sister,” she told me. “I didn’t know if he was alive. I was waiting to see this face… he’s suffered addiction, and he’s had a tough go of it. And all of a sudden this picture pops up, and he’s holding a baby deer looking as sweet as can be.” Her voice, as she says the last part, softens so much that in the recording, it almost sounds like she’s crying.

Dupuy-Spencer told me she set out to paint what she loved, and in doing so, created her most political work yet. The politics are there — where are they not, these days? — but the love, more so. Are they great paintings? I don’t feel qualified to answer that. They stick with me still, two weeks after we talked.

PELICAN BOMB

June 2017

American Myths: The Paintings of Celeste Dupuy-Spencer

By Hyunjee Nicole Kim

There's a gap in the exhibition history of Celeste Dupuy-Spencer's CV. In 2012, a family situation initially forced the painter to move from New York to New Orleans. The painter effectively "quit art" to live and work there until 2015. She had been frustrated with her own output and wanted to expunge the competition and myopia of the art world from her life. In New Orleans, she accepted a position to work as a caretaker at Bridge House and Grace House, long-term rehabilitation centers for those suffering from substance abuse, and she did not produce artwork in that period. Though she did not relocate to New Orleans to abandon painting, the time to reflect upon herself as an artist was much needed, and at the time she had no intention of picking it back up.

Now based in Los Angeles, Dupuy-Spencer spends the bulk of her days in a cozy studio where numerous works-in-progress are hung neatly on the white walls. The city's reputation as a site of myth-making suits her paintings, "supernarratives" that often deftly snatch moments of contemporary rural life in thematically layered, figurative scenes. (Several examples of her work are currently on display in the 2017 Whitney Biennial.) When I visited her studio, we discussed our awkward appreciation for Americana, in its schmaltzy and unexpected variations, and how sentimentality can be accommodating of both sadness and humor—how the feeling's vastness can be as slyly revealing as the shrewdest displays of irony.

Raised in Rhinebeck, New York, Dupuy-Spencer traces her family history back to both revolutionary Jewish communists in Chicago and rascally nobles who were banished from France to the swamps of Louisiana. She spent her youth shuttling between East Coast "country" and the Louisiana bayou. After studying at Bard College, Dupuy-Spencer then lived in Brooklyn for about ten years before heading south. Her mother had fled New Orleans for New York at the age of 17, grappling with an

ambivalent relationship to her Southern heritage. As Dupuy-Spencer tried to navigate her own way through the South, she was increasingly disturbed by the cognitive dissonance between history and present: “Our relationship to that stuff is so twisted…It’s…desperately trying to be like, ‘that has nothing to do with me’—when in fact it has everything to do with you.” Dupuy-Spencer refused to attend a family member’s wedding, which was held at a plantation used as a location for filming director Steve McQueen’s 12 Years a Slave (2013).

Inspired by these thoughts from her stint in New Orleans, Dupuy-Spencer returned to painting with a renewed confidence and found her output “completely changed.” Her work can depict lively mise-en-scènes that could have been plucked from Renoir paintings—had he lived in the present—like My Brother Grilling Mushrooms Upstate, 2016, and elegant New Objectivity-inspired portraits, like Glassel Park, 2016. She also showed me a number of tidy, intimate landscape paintings based on drives she had taken through America’s winding highways that connect city and country. In the watercolor CigScape, 2015, a craggy rock formation is capped with the profile of a face and the ground is littered with cigarettes. The details that Dupuy-Spencer amplifies in her compositions highlight the quotidian and universal, yet reveal distinctions defined by geographical and cultural contexts.

Much ado has been made over the past few months regarding the sharp political and cultural divisions between the urban and rural areas of the United States, but it seems that actionable steps toward reconciliation and healing are still unknown. How do we, as a country, begin to reckon with America’s fraught history, undeniably tethered to the oft-ignored trauma of the transatlantic slave trade? After spending an extended period of time in Berlin last year, Dupuy-Spencer began to recognize the particularly American failure to contend with its horrific past and how deeply that legacy was intertwined with her Southern roots. She noted the moving way Germans had mounted “monument after monument of their failure” in the wake of World War II, attributing and acknowledging their complicity in propagating mass genocide. She laments that “we don’t get a chance to sift through this,” and instead ignore the crippling inheritance of slavery and racism in America while continuing to honor fallen Confederate soldiers. (Four Confederate monuments in New Orleans were recently removed after years of City Council hearings, court cases, and death threats.) Our complicity and repression fuels a poisonous narrative we would rather ignore and forget—one that will continue to metastasize across all American locales, whether New Orleans, Rhinebeck, or Los Angeles.

NINO MIER GALLERY

HYPERALLERGIC

March 2017

Painting on Message at the 2017 Whitney Biennial

By Jennifer Samet

Scarcely two months into the Trump administration, it's impossible not to crave art and culture that is relevant. Our generalized collective anxiety supersedes almost everything. In this sense, the 2017 Whitney Biennial delivers. The two curators, Christopher Lew and Mia Locks produced a show in which half of the artists are women and people of color. Issues like police brutality, climate change, the wealth gap, gun violence, immigration, and hate crime pulse through the fifth and sixth floor of the museum. Like many others, I couldn't help but think of the 1993 Whitney Biennial, where identity politics ruled the show.

A crucial distinction is that, in the 1993 Biennial, painting was all but ignored. Sculpture and installation art, the curators suggested, were the media capable of delivering a political message. This year, the Whitney Biennial includes plenty of painting. And — for the most part — the painting is on message. It's eccentric figuration with political content. Some of it is seductive, some of it is accomplished, and some is mediocre or worse. As I walked through the galleries, I feared that all levels were being equalized — curatorially and institutionally — under this category of figuration with political content.

Is it enough for a painting to have a message? Is it enough if the painting successfully communicates relevant political content? Does content obscure our ability to discern qualitative differences? Should we not expect or demand that the Biennial curators are rigorous cultural arbiters — especially in a show that bills itself as gauging the current state of American art? In a couple of cases, the work is transcendent.

The world that Aliza Nisenbaum, another figurative painter included in the Biennial, depicts, is focused on Mexican immigrants. She paints figures, couples and group portraits, like “Latin Runners Club” and “MOIA’s NYC Women’s Cabinet.” I found myself seduced, at first, by “La Talaverita, Sunday Morning NY Times” (2016), with the markings of a cultural mash-up inscribed into a complex composition. (All works 2016.)

But the longer I looked at this work, the more I felt conscious of the separateness of its parts. Certain elements — namely, the pinned-up Virgin Mary calendar, the details of the front page of the New York Times, and the patterns of the decorative tiles comprising the backdrop of this interior — were more compelling than the figures. And yet, this is a painting of people. I thought of Alice Neel, because certainly, Nisenbaum is taking on a similar project: to communicate something of our time, by depicting the individual. Like Neel, she shows us how the intimate details of the interiors, and the fashion, can be signs of a cultural Zeitgeist. Neel’s painting “Mary Ellen and Benny Andrews” (1972), like Nisenbaum’s, shows two figures in a domestic interior with a mustard-yellow floor. Even the floor, with its suggestive shadow-shapes, is fully inflected with emotional charge. The minute details of the couple’s hand gestures and postures — where and what they touch — are the carriers of psychological content. This heightened awareness of a person’s interior life radiates, in Neel’s work, across every part of the painting.

I had similar questions about the inclusion of topical details when I looked at the work of Celeste Dupuy-Spencer. Her paintings and drawings are abundant with visual information. She depicts a subculture that many of us read as the stereotypical Trump supporters — a disenfranchised, white working class. There’s a sports bar, tattooed, shirtless dudes hanging out in run-down suburban streets, a house-closing party on a lawn heaped with junk.

Dupuy-Spencer’s work is fun to look at, and she’s an accomplished draughtsperson. My favorite piece was “Fall with Me for a Million Days (My Sweet Waterfall)” (2016), where the pose of the guy huddled over his computer and shelves stocked with a turntable and vinyl albums, is a compelling, relatable image. But I wondered how it would look two years from now. The risk of too much time-sensitive detail, without an overarching container of human sentiment, is a short lifespan of relevance.

In looking at Dupuy-Spencer, I was reminded of the work of a contemporary — Matt Bollinger — who often includes these same kinds of details in his paintings of interiors. There are computer screens, records, books, a can of beer, and a partially obscured figure. They might be paintings of fragments, but Bollinger’s paintings are not fragmentary. There’s something bigger he is revealing about loneliness, alienation — even while he points to a specific American socio-economic class. It surpasses this particular news cycle — in part because his packed compositions are fully orchestrated with a sensitive control of tone and light.

In the 2017 Biennial, the curators acknowledged the worlds that individual artists can construct. They chose to use the bigger floor plan of the museum to present multiple works by each participant — often installed together, occupying whole galleries. A single painting can also be that world: a unified, synthetic visual statement. In this exhibition, only a few paintings rose to that challenge.

NINO MIER GALLERY

CULTURED
March 2017

Celeste Dupuy-Spencer's Own American Pastoral

By Maxwell Williams

When I stop into the Chinatown studio that Los Angeles gallerist Nino Mier keeps for his artists, Celeste Dupuy-Spencer is working on a big still life painting composed of several parts: a newspaper clipping of Muhammad Ali's dissent of the Vietnam war draft, a recreation of Picasso's Guernica, and books on a shelf including "Matterhorn: A Novel of the Vietnam War" and "Preparation for the Next Life," a work of fiction by Atticus Lish set on the outskirts of the Iraq war.

"It's almost like a syllabus," says Dupuy-Spencer. "For us here living in L.A., if we don't have the impulse to look into the war or read about it, we could go through our entire lives here and really just never think about it. And that's sort of wonderful but the fact is we're Americans, and I feel like we need to remember that we're a brutal, terrorist country."

It is Dupuy-Spencer's first work about war, and it is one new painting she is creating for her participation in the 2017 Whitney Biennial, which is on view from March 17 to June 11. The Hudson Valley-born artist moved to L.A. two years ago after a decade in New York City and promptly held a show of drawings at Eve Fowler's Artist Curated Projects. Mier reps Fowler, and he was "blown away" by Dupuy-Spencer's work. Soon her paintings and drawings hung on the wall of his gallery and a visit from Biennial curators Christopher Y. Lew and Mia Locks followed.

"Something really magical is happening here," says Dupuy-Spencer, who is also preparing a group show for Berlin's Galerie Max Hetzler, and solo shows for Chicago's Shane Campbell Gallery and Mier after the Biennial. "This is not what I expected my life to be but the facts of my life are awesome. The Biennial curators called me on the phone to tell me, and I was trying to be really cool about it. I'm all like, 'Thank you very much,' but then I was basically screaming, 'Oh my god!'"

Mier touts the artist's ability to convey honesty in her work as what originally attracted him to Dupuy-Spencer. Her paintings of Upstate New York life—a subject matter she often returns to—contain people from all socioeconomic scenarios, each given their own respect and honor through tender rendering. "Her work contains lessons about society or culture," says Mier. "Besides the craft—she's an amazing painter—it's much more about things that I just don't know about: subcultures, the Hudson Valley, New Orleans." It's fair-handed, slice-of-life painting, but it's not as dark as it could be, according to Mier. "She had this drawing of a Trump rally in our 2016 show ["Trump Rally (and Some of Them I Assume are Good People)"] but within the disgust in the commentary is humor," says Mier. "She looks at the positive in everything."

NINO MIER GALLERY

THE ST.CLAIRE

January 2012

Celeste Dupuy-Spencer in The Deal

By M. Rooney

CELESTE DUPUY-SPENCER'S wry, and sometimes ominous, paintings possess a self-deprecating humor. This tendency is spelled out explicitly in her painting How to Scare People and Alienate Your Friends. Here, a ghost, smoking a cigarette and drinking wine, reads a book of the same name. In Eviction Notice the danger appears to be eminent as a commune of renters react in fay and dramatic poses to bad news; an eviction slip is handed over to the most central figure in the painting who has chosen to ignore it in favor of his own distress. In both of these works Celeste's involvement, or guilt is implicit.

It is, in part, this humble, and humorous self-reflexivity that lends itself so well to a series of works Dupuy-Spencer made about Occupy Wall Street, with which she is actively involved. These paintings, track both the everyday- ness of the protests; general assembly, posters, occupying bodies, as well as the violence and intimidation stated in dark, and blurry tones, with softly painted figures sitting inside fenced areas, or being pulled away by the police.

There is a language of protest, in her paintings, that seems to excuse the coexistence of defeat, humor, pride and hopefulness all at once defying the idea that one message must be understood—a capitalist notion to begin with. Poetic language, utilized in many of Dupuy- Spencer's paintings (as opposed to symbolic language easily co- opted by the rhetoric of protest, and inversely advertising) begins first as a disruption or destruction of meaning, and the signifying operations of social structures. In Julia Kristeva's essay,From One Identity to Another, she claims that poetic language will "accompany crises within social structures and institutions [at] the moment of their mutation, evolution, revolution, or disarray." She goes on to say that poetic language's "very economy borders on psychosis." It is exactly that place, where the banal and the psychotic meet, in which Dupuy-Spencer's paintings gain momentum.

Even in her sexier paintings there is a sort of listlessness expressed. In one untitled work, a figure in an old- fashioned swimsuit kneels on all fours in a swampy river, while another figure (both ambiguously gendered) fingers the first one from behind. The top figure looks out toward viewer, while the bottom figure looks ambivalently straight ahead. Two dogs appear, in the background, with their tongues out. There is a picnic laid out to the side. The scene is idyllic, even Manet-esque, yet the positioning of their bodies, the closeness of their faces to the ground (and to the dogs) implies a feeling of baseness, in their act, or to their bodies, that runs rampant throughout the work.

Dupuy-Spencer's subject's bodies are often seen with mashed, discolored faces, distorted limbs, squatting in the woods with impending bowel movements, or in some sort of liminal physicality (i.e. between wrestling and dancing). The phenomenon of "base seduction", at work in Celeste's paintings, is a predicament of our species, Bataille argues in his essay, The Big Toe, in which we place our selves in likeness to the gods – in praise of our uprightness, concerned with the air, and the trees, and all things pointing upwards, towards the heavens. We have come to think of hell as a place below us, inadvertently tied to the ground, the mud and therefor our feet. In this separation between the tops and bottoms of things our feet have become grotesque hand-like extremities that thrive in filth— ever complicit in the sinful deeds of the world beneath them. It is only through, or because

of, this baseness that they become fetishized or achieve what Bataille refers to as “burlesque value.” How Celeste’s paintings achieve this seductiveness, without any transpositions (without becoming fetishized objects) is in the movement between types of seduction. One, safe and superficial, caused by the luminosity of the paint, the vibrancy of the pallet, and the familiarity with its form (it’s two dimensionality). The other seduction caused by an attraction/repulsion to formlessness, her subject’s dislocations (an unfinished meal, an unpleasurable sex act, an unidentifiable face), and an unsettling presentness to it all—as though the artist is completely resistant to the idea of nostalgia.

Like the new casualists, described in Sharon Butler’s Brooklyn Rail piece about new abstraction, Celeste Dupuy- Spencer’s paintings “seek to accommodate a world in which there is often no clear truth or falseness. They are more intrigued by the questions and contradictions than by any definitive answers the work might provide.” But unlike many new abstract artists, and even her figurative abstraction mentors Amy Sillman, and Nicole Eisenman (all of whom have worked to complicate traditional painting discourse with feminism – in varying forms) Celeste Dupuy-Spencer’s work continues to grate down on the figure, and it’s detritus as if to reassert that our own bodies are still the best political agents we can hope for, as subject to chance, change, disaster, and abuse as they are. In recent months, Celeste has taken a break from oil painting in favor of watercolor and gouache. The resulting pictures are a series of small, fresh works including the aforementioned OWS paintings, a series called Butches of My Childhood, and a handful of paintings made especially for our first edition of The Deal.

NINO MIER GALLERY

CV

CELESTE DUPUY-SPENCER

Born 1979, New York, NY
Lives and works in Los Angeles, CA

EDUCATION

2007 BFA, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, US
2006 Yale Norfolk Painting Fellowship, New Haven, Connecticut, US

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2021 *The Dream of the Burning Child*, Nino Mier Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, US

2020 *But The Clouds Never Hung So Low Before*, Galerie Max Hetzler, Goethestraße 2/3, Berlin, DE

2018 *The Chiefest of Ten Thousand*, Nino Mier Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, US

2017 *Wild and Blue*, Marlborough Contemporary, New York City, NY, US

2016 *And a Wheel on the Track*, Nino Mier Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, US

2015 *(mostly) works on paper,* Artist Curated Projects, Los Angeles, CA, US

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2022 *Women Painting Women,* Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Fort Worth, TX, US *(forthcoming)*
Luncheon on the Grass, Jeffrey Deitch Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, US

2021 *Prospect 5: Yesterday we said tomorrow,* Ogden Museum of Southern Art, New Orleans, LA, US
Equal Affections, in collaboration with Edwin Oostmeijer, GRIMM Keizersgracht 241, Amsterdam, NL
Inaugural Exhibition, Nino Mier Gallery, Brussels, BE

2020 *All Them Witches*, Jeffrey Deitch Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, US
This Is America | Art USA Today, Kunsthal Kade, Amersfoort, NL

2019 *The World According To*, Pace Gallery, New York, NY, US
Transworld, Nicodim Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, US

2018 *Made in L.A.,* Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA, US
TEN, Artist Curated Projects, Los Angeles, CA, US

2017 *Summerfest 2017*, curated by Lauren Taschen, Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin, DE
The 2017 Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum, New York, NY, US

2016 *Human Condition,* Los Angeles Metropolitan Medical Center, Los Angeles, CA, US
Tomorrow Never Happens, The Samek Art Museum at Bucknell University, Lewisburg, PA, US
Pleasure Principle, Artist Curated Projects, Los Angeles, CA, US
Frida Smoked, Invisible Exports, New York, NY, US

2015 *Queer Fantasy*, OHWOW Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, US
Fetching Blemish, Invisible Exports, New York, NY, US

2012 *In Plain Sight*, Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York, NY, US
Be-Out, Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York, NY, US

2011 *Dance/Draw*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA, US
LEIDY, CELESTE, NICOLE, curated by Lauren Cornell, Museum 52, New York, NY, US
The Page Turners, FiveMyles, Brooklyn, NY, US
Small Works for a Big Change SRLP, Jack Studios, New York, NY, US
A Gay Bar Called Everywhere (With Costumes and No Practice), The Kitchen, New York, NY, US

2010 *I am a feMENist, (with MEN),* Museo Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City, MX
Now Playing, (with MEN), San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA, US
Now Playing, (with Ridykeulous), San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA, US
B.Y.O.P. (Be Your Own Placebo), 28 Holden St., North Adams, MA, US

2009 *Ridykeulous Hits Bottom*, Leo Koenig Inc. Projekte, New York, NY, US
Chicks on Speed/Girl Monster, Breite Str. 78, Hamburg, DE
Sessions, Taxter & Spengeman, New York, NY, US
If You Can't Find A Partner, Use a Wooden Chair, American Donut, Miami, FL, US
DiSoRgAnIzEd (Another 24 Hours), Museum 52, New York, NY, US
Dome Colony, *Hogan Community,* X- Initiative, New York, NY, US
The Collection of Silence, Dia Art Foundation, Hispanic Society, New York, NY, US
NY Art Book Fair, The Classroom, PS1 Contemporary Arts Center, Long Island City, NY, US

2008 *Bent,* Leslie Loheman Gallery, New York, NY, US
Balenciaga for Artists, *Ridykeulous Event, Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, MoMA PS1, New York, NY, US
Making It Together, The Bronx Museum of the Arts, Bronx, NY, US

2007 *Shared Women*, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, Los Angeles, CA, US
Ridykeulous: At Least It's Not Abstract, The Kitchen, New York, NY, US
Small Works For a Big Change SRLP, Sarah Metzer, New York, NY, US
Future 86 24 Hours of Art in the Catskills, Catskills, NY, US

SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA, US
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA, US
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA, US
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, US
Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA, US
Aishti Foundation, Beirut, LB

PUBLICATIONS

2019 *Unrealism: New Figurative Painting,* Jeffrey Deitch, New York, NY, US

2018 *Celeste Dupuy-Spencer*, publ. by Nino Mier Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, US
Made in LA, Exhibition Catalogue, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA, US

2017 *Whitney Biennial 2017,* Exhibition Catalogue, Whitney Museum, New York, NY, US

2016 *Randy Zine Anthology*, Capricious Press
Tomorrow Never Happens, Samek Art Museum, Lewisburg, PA, US

2015 *Uncounted*, Emily Roysdon, Secession Distributions: Revolver Vertag

2011 *OCCUPY! Scenes From Occupied America*, Verso Books
n+1 OCCUPY! And OWS-Inspired Gazette #2
RANDY! Issue 2
Monument, A Queer Relational Associative Project Dictionary, Emily Roysdon (together with Jeanine Oleson)
Out of Line, Catherine Lord, in Dance/Draw publ. by Hatje Cantz
An Introduction, Helen Molesworth, in Dance/Draw publ. by Hatje Cantz

2010 *RANDY!* Issue 1

2009 *Sessions: Con Verse Sensations,* Bard Center for Curatorial Studies

2007 *LTTR Positively Nasty,* Issue 5

SELECTED PANELS AND VISITING ARTIST TALKS

2010 Monya Rowe Gallery, *Macho Man, Mother Man: Rethinking Masculinity,* New York, NY, US

2009 Columbia University School of the Arts (with Friends of the Fine Arts), New York, NY, US

2008 School of Visual Arts, New York, NY, US

2008 Bard College, Annondale on Hudson, NY, US