

## DIANE ROSENSTEIN GALLERY

Vanessa Prager: Portraits  
February 14 – April 1, 2023

Opening reception: Tuesday, February 14, 2023

Diane Rosenstein is pleased to present *Portraits*, an exhibition of recent paintings by Vanessa Prager. This installation is comprised of fifteen oil paintings that depict individuals in a profound state of metamorphosis. In her mythic portraits, Prager works between still life and classicism to depict subjects that are a hybrid of floral life and human beings. This is Prager's second solo exhibition with Diane Rosenstein Gallery.

Prager contains her subjects in Classical bust-length portraits. Using an elaborate impasto technique, she directs our interest to her subject's faces – albeit faces whose features are completely obscured by bouquets of blossoming flowers. The sitters are turned towards us, their attention focused in our direction. Like Florentine portraits of women in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, some are draped in pearls or gold chains or chokers. While some wear simple tops that expose their necks, others have their 'bodies' fully painted with bold patterns such that a beguiling transformation takes place – their human form takes on the appearance of a vessel or jug or bottle. The figure becomes a floral still life.

With a humorous nod to Arcimboldo's Proto-Surrealistic naturalist visages, Prager's 'portraits' employ the flower as a metaphor for both the transformative and transitory qualities of life. The artist, acknowledging profound 'cataclysmic shifts' in the world over the past few years, notes that this body of work is a gesture towards connection and reconnection with others, an expression of optimism.

In *The Card Player* (2023), a monumental painting that anchors the exhibition, Prager expresses the archetype of the gambler who lays their cards on the table, displayed for all to see. Inspired by numerous art historical references, from Caravaggio to Cezanne, Prager's *The Card Player* also invokes the motifs in Cezanne's post-impressionist flower paintings. Here, a pattern of black diamonds wraps around the body of a vessel that can barely contain the opulent pageant of asters, freesias, ranunculus, peonies, and imaginary blooms that sprawl across this sixteen-foot diptych. In the upper areas of the painting, soft pink petals radiate from a pair of gerbera daisies, whose dark blue florets morph into a pair of unblinking eyes that gaze directly at the viewer.

In contrast to Prager's earlier paintings for *Static* (2020-2021) – in which she employed the thick paint in an enveloping abstraction that more quietly suggested form and concealed its subject – these new paintings have clean edges and distinct patterns. The environment of glowing, swirling pastel hues around the defined vessels is a formal element of so-called traditional portraiture while the dramatic relief of her shaggy impasto textures bring

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movement to the flowers that expand in all directions, barely contained by the edges of the canvas.

In Ovid's *Metamorphosis* and most Greek mythology, the distinction between a plant and person was always in flux. The pantheon depicted in Prager's portraits are 'featureless' yet imbued with character and personality. Are the flowers 'the mask' or the true face? Prager's new exhibition offers complex portraits that speak to our deepest instincts for transformation and renewal. They offer an omniscience, buried deep within each flower, of the cycles of life. Regarding us directly, with a touch of memento mori, they say: *Life is in session*.

Vanessa Prager (USA, b. 1984) is a self-taught artist who is known for her elaborate impasto painting technique that creates thickly layered and sculptural surfaces. Born and raised in Los Angeles, Prager's abstract paintings explore themes of identity, self-reflection, and the human condition in the 21st century. Prager received a solo show with Diane Rosenstein, Los Angeles, in 2021. Other solo presentations include those at Kristin Hjellegjerde, Berlin (2019) and London (2018); The Hole, New York (2018, 2016); Richard Heller, Los Angeles (2017); and Jenkins Johnson Gallery, San Francisco (2012).

The artist's work has also been featured in group exhibitions such as *Go Figure!*, Curated by Beth Rudin DeWoody, Eric Firestone Gallery, East Hampton, NY (2019); *Extra*, The Hole, New York (2018); *How They Ran*, Over The Influence, Los Angeles (2018); *Sweet Cheeks*, Big Pictures, Los Angeles (2018); Richard Heller Gallery, Los Angeles (2017); *Russian Doll*, M+B Gallery, Los Angeles (2015); *In the Heat of the Night*, Castor Gallery, New York (2015); *The Blob*, Richard Heller Gallery, Los Angeles (2015); *Me and Benjamin*, Galerie Xippas, Paris (2014); *Boy+Girl*, The Salon at Automatic Sweat, Los Angeles (2014); *Seven Sisters*, Jenkins Johnson Gallery, San Francisco (2013); *Good Intentions*, Subliminal Projects Gallery, Los Angeles (2013); *Portrait of A Generation*, The Hole, New York (2012); *High Five*, New Image Art, Los Angeles (2012); *MOCA Fresh*, MOCA Grand Avenue, Los Angeles (2012); *Incognito*, ICA/Santa Monica Museum of Art, Los Angeles (2012); *California Girls*, Katherine Cone Gallery, Los Angeles (2012); *Girls, girls, girls*, Jenkins Johnson Gallery, New York (2011); *Drawn*, Subliminal Projects, Los Angeles (2011); *Wreck the Walls*, Subliminal Projects Gallery, Los Angeles (2010); *The Big Show*, Silas Marder Gallery, New York (2009); *Under the Influence*, Gallery 1988, Los Angeles (2009); and *Crazy for Cult*, Gallery 1988, Los Angeles (2008).

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