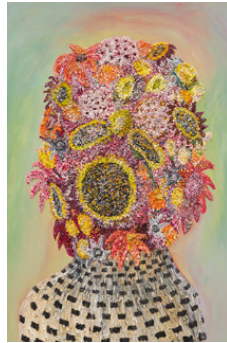


WHAT'S ON LOS ANGELES

PICK OF THE WEEK: VANESSA PRAGER, *PORTRAITS*

By Jody Zellen

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Just looking at her paintings, it seems obvious to conclude that Vanessa Prager loves paint. Her canvases are filled with thick blobs of oil paint that become bubbly-textured surfaces reminiscent of multi-colored cottage cheese ceilings. Over the years, she has created abstractions as well as figures, faces and flowers, all encased in gloopy paint. For her current exhibition, she creates evocative quasi-portraits replacing sitters' heads with elaborate floral arrangements. These hybrid plant/people are humorous and grotesque simultaneously. The paintings undeniably pay homage to the works of Giuseppe Arcimboldo, the 16th Century Italian painter who created portraits made by combining a variety of foods and plants. While Arcimboldo's depictions were illusionistic, Prager's portraits are expressive and abstracted.

For example, *The Card Player* (all works 2023) is a monumental diptych that spans two long large canvases. An overabundant bouquet appears as a huge plume of brightly colored hair rising above a bit of white and green diamond patterned clothing covering the neck of a figure at the bottom of the image. Although it is hard at first to discern if Prager is depicting the front or backside of the person, upon close examination, two deep blue off kilter eyes emerge from the wide swirl of flowers. More monster-like than human, a face slowly appears from the mass of colors.

While Prager's paintings clearly draw from Arcimboldo, they also reference paintings of flowers by artists such as Claude Monet, Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin, as well as many other Impressionists. They also derive from portraits of Florentine women from the 15th Century, many wearing jewelry on exposed necks, their gazes toward the viewer. Although these art historical references can be cited, Prager's portraits are uniquely her own and speak to a transformation from person to thing, be it real or imagined. As a self-taught painter, she is knowledgeable about the history of art, yet chooses a style of depiction that is more naive than realistic.

Viewing the exhibition can be like a treasure hunt, looking for eyes and mouths amongst the foliage. The works play with personification and it is interesting to think about how the constructions of these towers of flowers take on different personalities. In *Visit of the Sun*, Prager paints a torso wearing a white shirt with black rectangles supporting a blossoming array that recalls Van Gogh's images of Sunflowers. The shapes of the sunflowers can be seen as a cartoony face and give the painting a comical aura. *Silhouette in Yellow* is a side, rather than front view of a female figure. Here, the flowers form her hair, brow and chin, as well as suggest decorations in her hair.

Prager's impasto and sculpted surfaces are filled with flowers, created with true to life colors— red, yellow, purple, blue, pink— and often dotted by areas of green (leaves). They can be seen as elaborate masks, like those worn at masquerade balls that obscure the faces of the wearer. Who these faceless entities were and who they have become is part of the intrigue. Prager embraces transformation and imbues her paintings with a *raison d'être* that celebrates an uncanny sense of beauty and opulence.

