

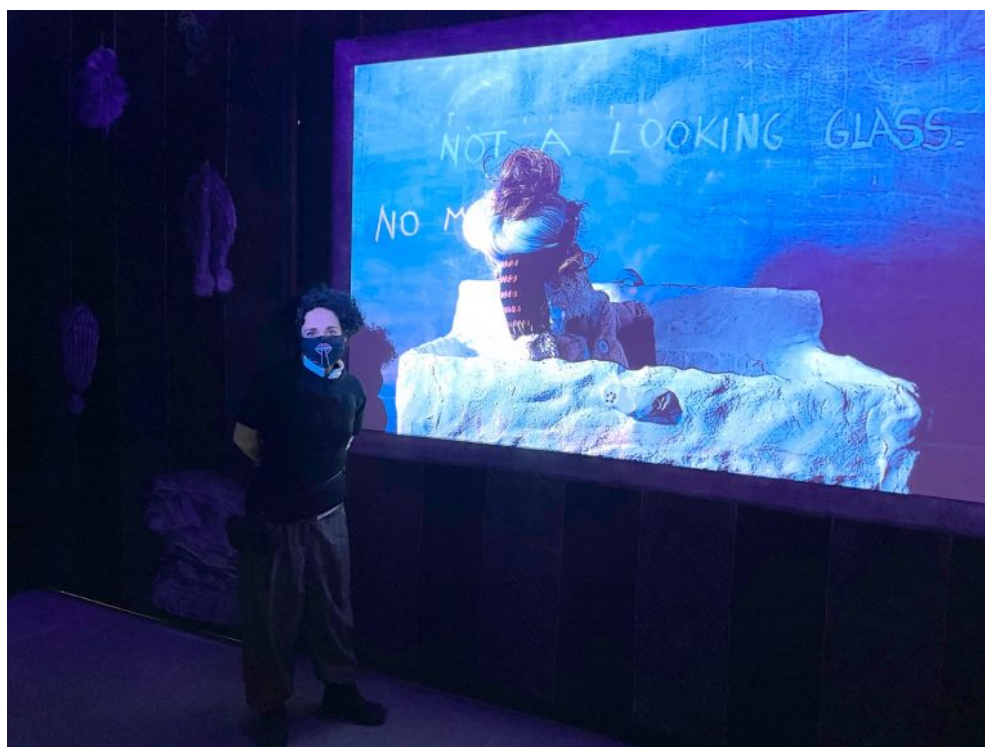
ART SPIEL

Reflections on the work of contemporary artists

JUNE 1, 2021 BY ETTY YANIV

Beatrice Scaccia: My Hope Chest at Katonah Museum of Art

In Dialogue with Beatrice Scaccia



Beatrice Scaccia at the KMA, in the spot Gallery with the install of My Hope Chest. Courtesy of Ellen Rachlin. The animation was realized also thank to the Queens Arts Fund Grant.

Beatrice Scaccia's solo show at [The Katonah Museum of Art](https://www.katonahmuseumofart.org/) includes a stop-motion animation and site-specific wall drawings, altogether exploring the links and tensions between tradition and modernity. This body of work by the Italian born and NYC based multi-disciplinary artist has developed based on a furniture item with layered connotations

– Hope chests were (and are) used by young women to collect items in anticipation of married life. The show runs through June 27, 2021

Tell me about the genesis of this body of work and why Hope chest?

I have been always intrigued by the *nature vs nurture* debate. I fairly often question my choices, my personality to understand why I am the woman I am. I grew up in such a narrow-minded town: religious, sexist, unsophisticated. I never felt I belonged there. Then I left, but I am still deeply attached to that reality, which is similar to so many other realities all over the world. When I was young, I wasn't even aware that my gender was going to be a limit for my ambitions. I was completely blind, even though I would daily experience the differences in behavior toward girls and boys.

I started thinking about the Hope Chest as a topic when I went back home to visit my mom a few years ago. While organizing my former bedroom, I opened all these boxes with precious items inside. My grandma and my mom wanted me to have that 'corredo'—even though we couldn't afford it, and even though it was clear, since I was a young girl, that a conventional life was not what I wanted. Intrigued, I began researching about the tradition of the dowry chest, glory box, hope chest.

I think a visual artist mostly gets visual ideas; and as soon as I found online images of some precious wooden chests, I imagined a figure living in one of those, stuck in a role that she didn't want. It was a surreal, compelling image and I began considering how to realize it. The Hope chest is obviously a visual excuse to reflect upon something wider and more complex. Growing up, I experienced several times the pressure of a role that was somehow pushed on me by the society I happened to live in. We tend to imitate behaviors; in particular when we deal with relationships. I didn't know how to be a woman without mimicking the manners of the people around. That created a strong *short circuit* in me. Only when I moved far away—already in my thirties— and I began speaking a different language, I managed to really develop my voice—without excruciating back and forth. That is the reason I consider myself some kind of late bloomer.

Your process includes painting, drawing, animation and writing to construct multidimensional narratives. Let's take a closer look at your stop-motion animation. Can you elaborate on your process?

I had been always curious about stop motion animation. Attracted by the physicality of it. There is a strong theatrical component in this technique, and for a person like me, who fell

in love with *In Praise of Folly* – and its themes of self-deception, madness, human inconsistency— when still a teenager, stop motion animation means the possibility of working with the most basic existential theme: *A puppet comes to life and...*

I am not a 3D artist but stop motion animation allows me to work with 3D— to consider lighting, space, movements. Also, when you don't know well how to use something, you have to learn from your limits and rely on your inventiveness. For instance, the way I ended up using the background like a blackboard on which to write and draw, started thanks to my being a beginner. I had worked with animation in the past but with an easier, digital, short version of it. I know nothing about serious editing and postproduction. I know only how to consider movements in a frame-by-frame structure. When I was awarded with the Queens Arts Fund Grant in 2020, I could finally buy some of the materials to realize the work, but I still couldn't afford to hire someone to help with the editing. I had to choose how to invest the funds and I chose the music. Thus, I began thinking: how do I add a title, my name, some captions? The blackboard idea came to me thanks to that limit. And once the background was set, I began using it, and it turned out to be the most interesting, experimental part in the animation process.

I engaged with it not only to write but also to draw and to add some much more unpredictable elements to the project. To move the puppet, in a way that it would reenact certain recognizable movements, I had to keep being rational; but to add quotes and drawings on the background I could use my intuition more. I shot over 30 thousand frames, I ended up using around 20 thousand. Stop motion animation is difficult and it's time consuming, but I learned so much from it. I am glad I decided to develop the theme of the Hope Chest using this specific technique.



Studio setting to realize My Hope Chest, Long Island City 2020. Courtesy of the artist

Your narratives feature characters, which you say you consider as archetypes. What do they mean to you and what would you like the viewer to notice?

I have two major passions in my life: visual art and literature. I am obsessed with characters and with their power. A good character in a movie or a book can influence a whole generation of people and it is still something we don't consider enough. I like contaminations and I don't have many grounded answers about my work because the visual language proceeds with no words. But that being said, I am aware of what I am driven to, what attracts my attention, what makes me emotional.

That is why I talk about archetypes. We have spent so much time seeing through a male gaze. I grew up without even noticing that everything I was seeing, reading, learning was coming from a male-point of view. I thought that to be a good visual 'woman' artist I had to be a 'ballsy' one, imitate some kind of male behavior with its gestural narrative and a good dose of unapologetic confidence. Then, thanks to books and studies, I began asking

myself: “Does women’s imagination produce different archetypal images and cultural artifact than men?” (Ricki Stefanie Tannen). And of course, the answer is yes. Therefore, my archetypes/characters try to face this internal issue. There is so much unlearning to be done, so much vulnerability to be added.

My visual archetypes are, to me, shapeshifters and tricksters. They are not heroes, nor villains. They are the ones that carry an existential message with their ambiguity, their gender fluidity, their featureless faces, their belonging to a liminal space when things can change or are already changing. I look at them like humane archetypes that ‘wear’ their bewilderment on the outside. They are confused performers that underline our fragility—our endearing mysterious void.

We are used to a society with answers for everything. Even during this insane-pandemic year, I’ve noticed people talking with such certainty. What do we really know? Of course, it is too scary to say that we know nothing, but it is also very important to embrace the mysterious that we all live through, because once we embrace it, we are forced to shift priorities. So, I guess my shapeshifters-tricksters want to touch and represent the inconsistency— both endearing and dangerous— of our existential role. I don’t think I can choose what a person sees in my works, and I don’t want to. Images are never literal and are always multilayered, even the simplest ones. Sometimes, people indicate things about my work that I don’t see in it, and it makes me happy. My only role is making art until it seems urgent and unavoidable, until I have something to communicate. I always rely on my emotional intelligence not on notions and literal content.



My hope Chest. Stop animation and wall drawings. Spot Gallery. Katonah Museum of Art, New York. 2021. Courtesy of the KMA.

In the text for the exhibition, it says that the artwork links “a feeling of recognizability with surrealism.” Can you elaborate on that?

I work with opposites. We contain opposites, multitudes. My animation is built following this idea. The puppet is the element we can clearly recognize. The movements are familiar, the actions are basic, simplistic. But everything else isn't. The background with its lighting, its sentences and hand-drawings helped me to create a fracture between an almost naïve trickster-character and a more multifaceted message. I talk often about the liminal space, I underline that my work inhabits the “not longer and not yet”, because it is something I feel existentially and emotionally. I have been charmed by the concept of the Uncanny for many years now, and also by the duality of Apollyon and Dionysian.

Representing the parading of simple actions linked to the conventional-feminine role in a quarantined and suspended world helps me to underline the absurdity of human behaviors. It is never only a meaning; it is never an interpretation or a judgement; it is so much harder to explain. I see mysteries everywhere around me, on me. Those mysteries are in the visible, are in the outside of everything we do, we act on, we believe in. Familiar things are the real mystery to me. Our daily behaviors are surreal; our interactions, the way we develop/justify friendships, conflicts, love is such a bizarre thing. I see the world in a dreamlike light, and that evidently goes into my artmaking.

How do you see this body of work in context of your overall work?

I think it's definitely a chapter. Although, probably, the puppet in the animation will be the last actual 'figure' for a while. I enjoyed a lot working in the Spot Gallery at the KMA and making the wall drawings. That was a deeply important experience. It was the first time being able to transform a room. This exhibition was my first museum presentation. Both Michael Gitlitz (director) and Emily Handlin (curator) gave me a lot of freedom and they let me be peacefully in the space. I like the idea of making a work that is immersive, vast but also sustainable— without dealing with expensive insurance, transportation, production fees. In the contemporary art world, that aspect got out of hand in a disturbing way; and I also think it is part of that consumeristic mentality we should fight against. So, the idea that I can transform an entire room in two days of work, with only brushes, paints, pastels and a good ladder it is particularly satisfying to me.

About the topic instead, I have focused my latest painting on “leftover” of identities. I paint composition of hair, wigs, garments, objects. There is a connection with the animation where the character reenacts certain actions banally connected to the role of women. In one of the actions, the puppet combs her hair with repetitive, disturbing gestures. It’s a way to deal with the conventional idea of female beauty; hair is such a big part of it. It has been considered an element of power, of sensuality, of chastity sometimes.

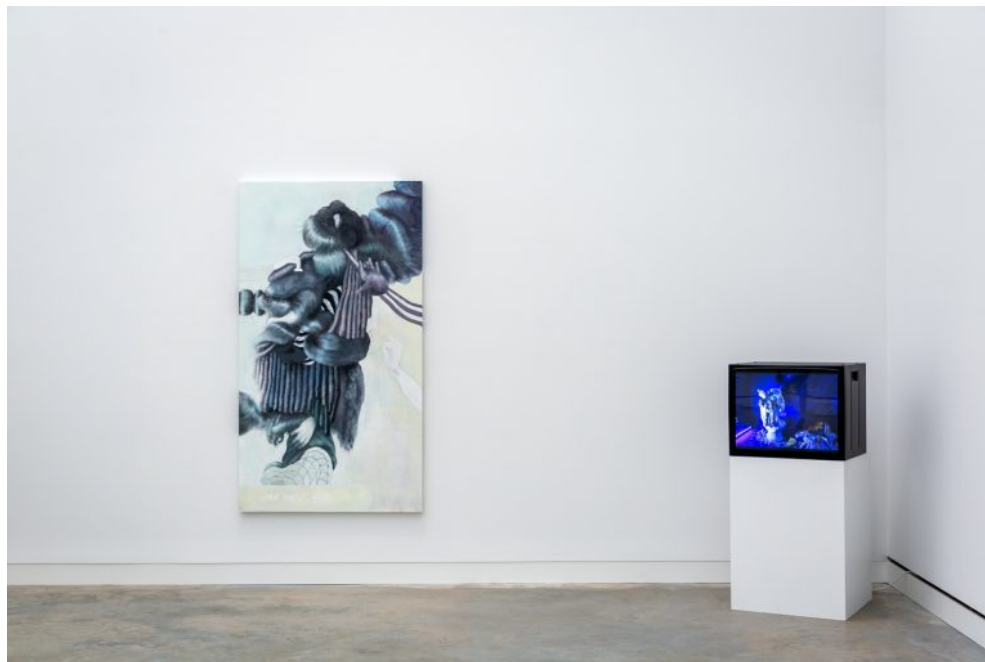


Long Island City, studio view with recently realized paintings. Courtesy of the artist.

As the puppet tries to undermine the visual connection of “combing a woman’s hair” with a calming and sensual one, in my latest paintings’ compositions I try to undermine the idea that an almost classical hairdo means something pretty, organized, and clear. My work has had a similar core since I began showing it in 2010: the performative parade of genders, roles, classes, humans. I find at times loveable at times disconcerting how strongly we entrust our ‘security blankets’—which go from garments and objects to traditions and legacy. Since I began studying art and observing the world, I have always been curious about the strength of symbols. I am interested in what we build around us to protect us.

I grew up in a catholic reality where rituals were very important: going to mass on Sundays, covering your head, dressing up and behaving in a certain way, wearing black for the rest of your life if you had lost your husband. And then there were the carnivals, the masks, some residues of *Commedia dell'Arte* all around me, even some Paganism. Apollonian and Dionysian in every aspect. Plus, a huge amount of sexism and domestic violence that were so common and extended to the point of becoming natural.

The conflict between empty beautiful rituals and the nature behind those certitudes made an impact on me. What drives me in my artmaking process is trying to grasp the fluid, inconsistent, scared and animalistic self that is behind all our apparently strong structures. I'd also like to add that if you asked me the same questions in a month, I would probably give you some different answers. Words to explain visual art are never too coherent. It is important to have a conversation about it, but it is what it is: just a conversation.



Homemade, gallery view. Magazzino Italian Art, Cold Spring. New York, 2020 Courtesy of Magazzino Italian Art.

My Hope Chest at Katonah Museum of Art 134 Jay Street – Route 22, Katonah, NY 10536 Through June 27th, 2021

Etty Yaniv works on her art, art writing and curatorial projects in Brooklyn. She founded Art Spiel as a platform for highlighting the work of contemporary artists, including art reviews, studio visits, interviews with artists, curators, and gallerists. For more details contact by Email: artspielblog@gmail.com

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