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Vanessa Prager: Soft Serve Painting – Interview Paul Carter Robinson

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'Soft Serve' is the title of American artist Vanessa Prager's first London solo show at Kristin Hjellegjerde. The artist dishes up a series of sculptural portraits and figures as colourful, dripping, melting realities, oozing with thick sculptural paint. Pushing the boundaries of painting, Vanessa's work references images of food, art history and pop culture. This is one of those talents that you see once every few years. Artlyst unveils her first UK interview.

"I wanted to dwell on things that bring pleasure and eventually, while I studied them, I wondered what would it be like to morph into them"
— VP

The resulting works resemble sweet sticky desserts with their frosting texture and pastel colours; people often comment on how they want to touch or eat it. "This isn't an unhappy series, says Prager. Welcome to Soft Serve.

PCR: In your own words, how do you describe your practice? Please include Medium, method and metrics

VP: I am an all out, maximalist oil painter, taking the medium to its limits. I use colour and texture to warp the figures and objects I paint into a swirling, melting abstraction. I use oil paint from the tin mostly, by the pint, and knives, brushes, fingers, anything to manipulate it into peaks, mounds, piles and globs. Usually, my work is abstract up close and a scene or portrait from a distance. In the great tradition of painting, I try to capture

ideas, thoughts, energy and other things that aren't necessarily tangible within those painted scenes.

PCR: Who and what do you sight as your main artistic influences?

VP: DeKooning, Pollock, Manet, Picasso, but also food, flowers, mountains, rock formations, clothing patterns, etc. I like looking to junkyards and decayed buildings as much as wildflowers in the countryside.

PCR: You have energised figurative painting with a new approach and palette what drives you to paint which is quite a traditional medium?

VP: I have always loved painting and am most drawn to the medium. I agree it is quite traditional and in some ways, there is nothing left to be done there. But I don't really believe that and I think there is a very now voice to be had. I try to paint energetically and with movement and I think I sort of turn paint against itself in a way by overusing and wasting the material quite a lot of the time. I tend to think there are no mistakes to be made and if something isn't working it only hasn't been taken far enough yet. Some of my canvases are up to 50 or 60 pounds and those I may have struggled the most with or may have gone through the most transformations. But I like transformation and I try to show each stage along the way if only in the depth of the paint as I think it is all a learning process to get to the final outcome and they are valuable as such. That being said, I do think "overworked" is a very real thing and I try to keep my paint fresh through gestures and bright colours. You can have a past and a rich history without it making the present dark, bleak or tired.

PCR: Has the use of social media helped in accelerating your career?

VP: Social media has allowed me to share my work directly with the world or whoever is looking and that really didn't exist before. People find me and can follow from a distance along my work and studio and see what I'm making. If you follow an artist for a while on social media you can see how they progress and often how they get from one series or body of work to another. I like that about it. You don't necessarily see that in another format. Also, the directness is amazing. People can message me and I always try to write back. I love hearing what people think about the work I make and I like to be included in their lives if only through a picture they send if they own my work.

PCR: Being put on the cover of the NY Times Sunday magazine is a game changer How have you been dealing with your new found celebrity.



Vanessa Prager 'Huddle'

VP: Well, I'm opening this show for one which is great, I love making and showing work, especially in new cities as London is for me! I loved working on the NYT Mag cover piece. You really notice how large of a reach they have even after all these years and with media changing, still, there are some things that everyone notices and that is one of them. It was an honour to work on.



Vanessa Prager 'Luncheon On The Grass'

PCR: I enjoyed the sculptural aspect of your NY Times video do you think you may turn to sculpture as a medium in the future?

VP: Yes definitely, that is a question I get asked a lot due to the sculptural aspect of my paintings and it really interests me. I have been working on some prototypes but it just hasn't been the right time to share yet. I also have enjoyed the aspect of the two dimensional (as in painting) trying to be or become three dimensional, it lends a sort of awkwardness and a sense that the thing isn't only what it appears to be. It reminds me of one walking around with heavy thoughts or something else that is actually weightless but there is another element sitting there too.

But I will definitely be sharing my sculpture soon, probably in 2019!

PCR: Your brother Alex is also a successful artist is there any sibling rivalry between you and have you been an influence on each other?

VP: This is funny to me because my brother is actually my sister but a lot of people think she is a man due to her name. I wonder how it makes people view her work differently, if at all? We are very close and are super supportive of each other. I am sure we have influenced each other over the years. I also have been in many of her photographs as one of her most used models which I am proud of!

PCR: Oops don't know how I got that wrong... as my sister in law is also an Alex....

PCR: How did you devise the name for your new show at Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery 'Soft Serve' and are you a lover of ice cream?

VP: The texture of the figures I paint are like ice cream and often my work is reminiscent of desserts so I felt it was fitting. The paintings are all of nude women but their skin is excessively done and almost consumes them, the groups melt into puddles in the centre and the singular figures have to fight to be seen beyond their skin. I wasn't sure if people called it soft serve here, to be honest!

And of course, I do love ice cream!

PCR: What do you have upcoming in the next twelve month?

VP: I am working on a new series for Los Angeles and New York that will be hopefully open around the same time. Ideally, it will include the sculptures and the paintings in this next iteration as a way to expand on the story in the paintings I am showing.

PCR: Wildcard – Please make up a question that you wish journalists would ask but never do

VP: Maybe which part of the process do I enjoy the most? I enjoy the beginning of a new piece a lot. Some people think the blank canvas is too open but I usually start with huge swaths of paint and cover the whole thing in colour within some minutes. I enjoy this unthinking stage as a starting step for whatever is to come later. It often changes from the initial layer many times over but that is the fun of it. I find it easier to change what is already there than to have nothing to start with.

Vanessa Prager (b. 1984) is an American artist, born and raised in Los Angeles, CA. Known mainly for her large-scale, abstract oil paintings, Prager's main subject is the female figure. Thick, loose, heavily impastoed bodies melt in and out of their form and what we consider beauty and identity is often a central theme to her work. Her work was featured on the cover of the New York Times Sunday Magazine (September 2018).

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“Soft Serve” VANESSA PRAGER 12 October – 11 November 2018 Kristin Hjellegjerde London, 533 Old York Rd

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