

HYPERALLERGIC

GALLERIES

The Troubling Delight of Feminine Monsters

Bonnie Lucas's exhibition at JTT features surreal gouaches and playful assemblages that mess with the social conventions of girl- and womanhood.

By Jillian Steinhauer
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Bonnie Lucas, "That Girl" (1987), gouache on paper, 17 x 13 in (43.18 x 33.02 cm) (all images courtesy the artist and JTT, New York)

In Bonnie Lucas's "That Girl" (1987), two little girls play innocently with a tea set. Their blond and brown hair offset with bows, their bodies shaped by white collars and flare skirts, they focus intently — as children do — on perfectly pouring out their tea. Yet there's something unusual about these girls, something far more sinister: they live inside the mouth of another girl — one who, although she's painted in pink and pale yellow and other delicate, pastel hues, looks like a monster rather than a paradigm of femininity. That girl's gouache hair is scraggly, not perfectly brushed, and short strands stand up like shorn blades of grass atop her head. The blue ribbon holding her hair in place culminates in a bow that pokes violently into that girl's right eye socket. That girl looks like the creation of a female Doctor Frankenstein who's far less concerned with chemistry than with patriarchy.

Lucas creates, in her own words, "feminine monsters." They're arrayed around the room at JTT, a gaggle of grotesque, funny, suggestive, sometimes violent creatures rendered largely in gold, white, and pink tones that pop against the gallery's black walls. Titled *Young Lady*, the exhibition features 16 works the artist made in the 1980s, eight of which haven't been shown in over 30 years.

It's a sad commentary on the continued policing of women in this country that all of them feel distinctly contemporary. It's also a reflection of an artistic lineage that posits Lucas as a predecessor for a number of younger artists working in the same vein, from Jessica Stoller to Allison Schulnik to Roxanne Jackson.

The gouaches on paper — which account for a little less than half of the show — have a distinctly surreal, almost nightmarish quality. The rest of the works are assemblages on fabric that radiate a sense of sometimes wicked play. These pieces are elaborate compositions featuring cheap, store-bought items — necklaces, dolls, doilies, plastic utensils — that have been sewn and stuck together to suggest crude bodies, or sometimes just their parts. In "Jane Baar" (1985), all sweater arms and stitched patterns lead to a child's pink jelly shoe that stands in for a vagina. In "White Rock" (1986), a face-down doll looks like it's tied up and ready for bondage, while a blond-haired cartoon girl looming above it gives the viewer a Betty Boop-like wink.

Lucas bought the items used in these artworks — "purchased objects," she calls them, as opposed to found ones — at



Bonnie Lucas, "White Rock" (1986), assemblage on fabric 49x 34 x 4 in, (124.46 x 86.36 x 10.16 cm)

stores around New York City. She went (and continues to go) looking for disposable items marketed towards women, the cheapest vestiges of patriarchy. At home, she broke them apart, twisted them around, inverted, and deconstructed them. Then she pieced them back together in ways that may look messy but in fact reflect incredible craft and care (the stitching in "And This Too Will Pass" and "Running Mother" [both 1983] is so meticulous it's baroque).

In that last step, Lucas seems to circumscribe her own work — her process is more rebellion than revolution. This could, in one view, be disappointing, but it also reflects a deep-rooted realism. "My best art is a little microcosm of what life is like," she says in the accompanying catalogue. There's some kind of comfort in that, in the way her works shift between the familiar and the strange. Lucas eschews utopianism for a very human amalgam of beauty, humor, and darkness.

Bonnie Lucas: Young Lady continues at JTT (191 Chrystie Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through February 26.