

ANAT EBGI

# ARTFORUM

Janet Werner: Arsenal Contemporary Art

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Janet Werner, *Untitled (harlequin)*, 2022, oil on canvas, 69 × 52".

“Crush,” featuring eighteen canvases made over the past two years, was a belated New York solo debut for prominent Montreal-based painter Janet Werner. Her earlier work often took the form of portraits—but imaginary ones, made without the use of real or photographic models. According to the artist, those paintings “actually came out of an investigation of abstraction.” Judging from reproductions, they certainly had nothing to do with realism, allowing painterliness its own impulses as it flirts with the grotesque. Later, she began mining fashion magazines for source material. That’s well-trod territory for contemporary art, of course: The production of desire, the performance of gender, and the slippage between commercial culture and fine art have been recurring concerns for decades, from 1960s Pop, through the appropriation and Pictures art of the ’80s, to the ’90s fangirl fantasies of Karen Kilimnik and Elizabeth Peyton, and beyond. But Werner approaches this material in her own way, which is surprisingly—refreshingly—free of both polemical criticality and twee indulgence. In many ways, she is a profoundly traditional painter, having as much in common with, say, Manet as with her contemporaries. Every inch of the pieces on view here suggested that, and despite her gimlet eye for mass-market manipulations of femininity, she is more fascinated with what can come of the act of manipulating paint—more intent on producing pleasure than interrogating it, though interrogation can evidently be part of the pleasure.

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In this exhibition, the apex of Werner's painterly bravura came in *Untitled (harlequin)*, 2022, whose imagery has been collaged, with deliberate imbalance, from two different sources. Most of the work's right side shows part of a woman's body, crouching toward the left. Her arms and head are out of the picture, and only one leg is visible. She wears a pink knee-high boot and a black dress with a rich floral pattern. She's situated in a nebulous greenish space, but one with some depth—we glimpse her shadow inside. The left side of the canvas and a portion of the bottom-right side present a fragment of someone standing, hand on hip, in a frilly, flouncy, long white gown, this time against a washy ochre ground with no implicit depth. Again, the head is outside the frame, and just one foot is seen. This section has been executed in an even looser manner than the right—it's wild, really. The acephalous painting refuses, as it were, to face the viewer, though the big ruffle at the shoulder of the frock seems to serve as a quasi-Surrealist substitute for the missing head of the woman in black. The image's parts slip in and out of relation to each other even as they illustrate different clothing styles and, through the models' stances—upright and stately versus dynamic and exuberant—contrasting ideals of being in the world. On the other hand, the two segments are painted not in contrasting ways but in two distinct variants of a flexible, fluid, and urgent pictorial handwriting that invests its consumerist subjects with immense energy while somehow also maintaining a certain neutrality toward them, at once earnest and sly. I can't help thinking of T. W. Adorno's famous remark that mass culture and high art are "torn halves of an integral freedom, to which, however, they do not add up." For Werner, perhaps, not adding up is the freedom available for now. The instability of the picture does not undermine, but conveys, its *promesse de bonheur*.