

ELIZA DOUGLAS



AIR DE PARIS

ELIZA DOUGLAS

Born in 1984 in New York.

Lives and works in Berlin and New York.

Eliza Douglas' paintings are deployed in various series — disembodied hands and feet, male models in minimalist interiors, birds, pack of cigarettes inside shirt's pockets, exhibition views of Josh Smith's shows, crumpled t-shirts, amongst others —that seem to give birth to inexhaustible variations and reconfigurations. While her pictorial vocabulary recalls aspects of Pop Art, Abstract Expressionism or Hyperrealism, her paintings also interrogate the status of the image, its construction, its circulation and fluidity. This results in an ensemble of new yet recognizable images that are sensual yet cold, laced with cool humour, and that are sometimes tainted with gothic romanticism, yet immediately photogenic and consumable.

She has had numerous solo exhibitions at the Jewish Museum , New York (2018); Schinkel Pavillon, Berlin (2017); Nassauischer Kunstverein, Wiesbaden (2017); Folkwang Museum, Essen (2017). She has also participated in several group shows at Kunstpalast, Dusseldorf (2023); Contemporary Fine Arts, Berlin (2023); CAPC, Bordeaux (2022); Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2022); Palais de Tokyo (2021); Castello di Rivoli (2020); The Art Institute of Chicago (2019); Tate Modern (2019).

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

Gift

Contemporary Fine Arts, Berlin, Germany

26.04 — 01.06.2024

Machine learning algorithms gained the ability to now not only identify objects in images but also to describe them using natural language. Researchers later flipped the process, attempting to do image-to-text, something that led to a shift in the art world. When looking at today's use of artificial intelligence in art I feel like a distinction can be made between three types of artists who make use of it.

The first type uses AI as an inspiration and idea generator. The second type incorporates AI into the art to educate viewers about AI, while the third type uses AI in a satirical way.

This last category got me thinking as I wandered through the rooms of the Contemporary Fine Arts Gallery. The space is showing an exhibition called "Gift" by Eliza Douglas. The New York City-born artist studied at Bard College in New York and at Städelschule in Frankfurt and is known for her realistic paintings which often challenge the way paintings are interpreted and consumed as well as for her performative work alongside her partner Anne Imhof.

Upon entering the CFA Gallery, I immediately noticed the amount of subjects Eliza Douglas' paintings seem to cover. They display cats, the sea, a person smiling, a person crying, fairy tale landscapes, oh and the one and only Jesus Christ. Each of these images is painted in a realistic style – except for one crucial detail: they are not real. As the Gallery says, they are all created with the help of AI and later painted on the canvases.

So what makes these paintings seem satirical and provocative to me, is the fact that they look like the most typical AI images, but just like we know AI, yet simultaneously like the most random images one can think of. Don't ask me how, I'm just a human, not a machine. But if one were to guess, the use of AI could definitely show in the choice of bright colors and the somewhat blurry, almost Facetune-like effect within these artworks. Douglas' AI-generated paintings also appear to bring back painting motifs that are centered on a singular scenario within the heart of the artwork.

However, Eliza Douglas also seems to strive for more, as the canvases are further adorned with majestic bows, varying in their colors and motifs and making the pictures look like, well the exhibition's title says it – gifts. After visiting several other contemporary art exhibitions earlier that day, I was surprised to find that the title of this one resonated with me instantly. The artist abandons prestigious aesthetics and stages her works as in a department store presentation. Like previous stagings of her paintings, this one seems to question the art market while always reflecting the advances of our time.

— Lily Kröger, Les Nouveaux Riches, 2024



Exhibition views

Gift

Contemporary Fine Arts, Berlin, Germany

2024

Photo : © Nick Ash



Exhibition views

Gift

Contemporary Fine Arts, Berlin, Germany

2024

Photo : © Nick Ash



Exhibition views

Gift

Contemporary Fine Arts, Berlin, Germany

2024

Photo : © Nick Ash

Parole: Eliza Douglas | Lily van der Stokker

Air de Paris, Romainville, France

10.09 — 21.10.2023

Eliza Douglas is presenting four new trompe-l'œil — crumpled or distorted — paintings. Each one of them utters an onomatopoeia, a foley rhythm — SHHHH, WOW, BOOM, HAHAHA — and conveys random emotions: an exclamation, admiration, amazement, annoyance or inappropriate laughter. They are levitating in space, the message of one referring to the other as hyperlinks. They could also be the response to a Joke Painting by Richard Prince, a hyperpop version of Velimer Khlebnikov's Incantation by Laughter (1910), or of Raoul Hausmann's Hurra, Hurra, Hurra (1921). Clicking on Eliza Douglas's pieces is like drifting onto Sturtevant's repetitions, which in turn are evocative of Andy Warhol's repeated flower patterns. They are images of images, automatic paintings generating atavistic and standardised emotions. Her process consists in crystallising uncontrolled feelings, formalising what comes before speech, signifying — in the manner of concrete poetry — statements that are seemingly inappropriate to name (...).

Eliza Douglas and Lily van der Stokker have embraced the commodification of pop, grunge and post-pop — their misguided candour and their ad merchandising full of indulgence and deceitful detachment. Just think of the posters that feature cosy spots and painless character to sell medication or carbonated water with digestive properties. CLIP! CRAP! BANG! ZIP! PSSST! that accompany our fears about accidents, private health insurance and sore throats.

More indirectly, their aesthetic process comment on the obsession with contemporary language's virality. The announcement prevails over facts, the buzzword over demonstration, the headline over dialectic. All that matters is the fluidity of the message, its reiteration, its ability to take up space at the expense of compactness. It can then become tyrannical, its radiant wave shattering the time needed for reflection and doubt. Words and signs, driven by their kinetic power, favour masses and the multitude over individuals, whom they annihilate.

By implying that their work is aimed at the widest possible audience, Eliza Douglas and Lily van der Stokker produce corrupt flattery, mischievous nonsense and hard candy for presumably innocent adults. By taking slippery paths, travelling through interference — delegation, appropriation, reproduction and deflation —, the two artists contravene their initial naive, sweet and zesty appearance.

— Pierre-Alexandre Mateos and Charles Teyssou
Translated by Callisto McNulty



Exhibition views

Parole: Eliza Douglas | Lily van der Stokker

Air de Paris, Romainville, France

2013

Photo : © Marc Domage

The Whitney Biennial

VI, VII, Oslo, Norway

10.03 — 04.23.2022

For her solo exhibition at VI, VII, Douglas presents six new paintings set against a vinyl/pvc backdrop picturing the interior of The Whitney Museum in New York.

This ironically titled exhibition is the second occasion in which the artist has used banners to transform a gallery into a larger public institution. For “Notre Mort,”⁽¹⁾ an exhibition at Neue Alte Brücke in Frankfurt, Douglas draped the gallery in backdrops picturing the interior of Palais de Tokyo with all the works erased. Referencing Anne Imhof’s 2021 Palais de Tokyo exhibition “Natures Mortes,” a large-scale multimedia exhibition in which Douglas was heavily involved as a lead performer, composer and artist, with several of her works included—the backdrop presented Douglas’ works as the only ones on view.

Here at VI, VII she merges two primary experiences: the magical world of Disney, with its mesmerizing cast of characters, and an her first encounters with the larger art scene. Douglas has never participated in The Whitney Biennial, but she has attended them. As one of the largest surveys of American art, it is one of the first larger artworld events that young artists in New York become keenly aware of and it opens up a set of possibilities and a view onto the international scene.

In terms of visual motifs, Douglas’ paintings in the exhibition distort the magic of Disney: a larger-than life cultural giant, that like looking back on first contact with the artworld and its happenings, evokes nostalgia.

Surreal perspective lines and the clash between her paintings and a transplanted interior, bring the show into dialogue with larger conversations about the transient aspect of installation views throughout much of art history. Traditionally, paintings shed their installation, the views being lost to time, quite often less frequently reproduced. Here the reverse happens and they form a confounding viewscape of a show that both is and never was.

THE WHITNEY BIENNIAL is the first solo presentation of Douglas’ work in Scandinavia and overlaps with the actual Whitney Biennial which opens in New York on April 6th. Using titles to mislead and cause confusion follows other gestures of appropriation by the artist, most notably when she reproduced an artist’s entire oeuvre from web documentation for her 2019 exhibition “Josh Smith,”⁽²⁾ but also extending to her recent use of graphic t-shirts for inspiration.

Since 2019, when she presented the sculpture “Pile” a mountain of cotton t-shirts printed as merch for rock concerts, political campaigns and other causes at Tate Modern, the artist has been working with and drawing inspiration from graphic t-shirts most recently creating hyperreal images in oil on canvas from photographs of T-shirts crumpled on the floor. Agents of commercialized popular culture and underground ephemera, cartoons and band logos are abstracted, amplifying the paintings’ existence as a commodities. In continuation of this series, which reanimates the static surface of the t-shirt, Disney’s cast of characters swirl forming a center point of enchantment, a hypotonic, added element of seduction.



Exhibition views

The Whitney Biennial

VI, VII, Oslo, Norway

2022

Photo: © Christian Tunge



Exhibition views

The Whitney Biennial

VI, VII, Oslo, Norway

2022

Photo: © Christian Tunge

Lord of the Fucking Wasteland

Air de Paris, Romainville, France

20.06 — 30.07.2020

Presuming that the Lord in question is to be taken as an alter ego of the artist herself, the «subjects» she rules over are the fictive inhabitants of this derelict territory: the subjects of paintings based on cropped photos of tees printed with zombies, vampires and superheroes. These paintings aren't «hers» in the sense of being pure products of her imagination, but rather in the sense of the garments being her personal property. The resultant paintings are a kind of sampling of her sculpture *Pile* (2019), recently shown at the Tate to accompany Anne Imhof's performance *Sex*: an enormous heap of T-shirts on the floor, with motifs including Kiss, kittens, Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders.

In these new paintings the image is conditioned by the format, giving the impression that the shirts have been deliberately crumpled to make them match the frame. The measurements (210 x 160 cm) are very close to the traditional 4:3 photographic ratio – which is also the default setting on the iPhone camera Douglas uses for the pictures that serve as her source. This fit with the world of photography makes these proportions painting's new, secret geometry, with application of the ratio enabling symbolic incorporation into the picture of its current means of circulation and publicity in the form of digital photographs. Today the paintings go public on the social networks before being exhibited; as digital vignettes they are shown and swapped among amateurs and/or professionals before the opportunity arises for any physical encounter with their viewers (as is the case at present).

The style of the paintings is clear and sharp, in contrast with the actual image, which is distorted by the creases. The image gains in volume through the crumpling, but is then flattened (or ironed out) by the paint. The subject is an image on fabric, which is also the case of the painting – an image applied to canvas. In its own way the illustrated T-shirt is a portrait you wear, a way of projecting an intended self-image. This ground rule has been thoroughly integrated by the people in charge of clothes advertising and its habitual promise of an intimate connection between personal identity and product: «This garment is you», the ads endlessly encourage us to believe. Through a kind of metonymy clothing comes to represent the wearer.

Clothes are often spoken of as a seductive illusion, a kind of mask intended to create a good impression. But they can also – as is the case here – conjure up a shield, or a suit of armour. The image conveyed by the visual thematics of these paintings is one of harshness, but also of abnormality, of a monstrosity that functions as a defence, a repellent – the antithesis, for example, of the T-shirt sporting a picture of a kitten more likely to trigger empathy. Another figure in one of the paintings is manga heroine Sailor Moon, equally monstrous in her embodiment of a supranatural humanity.

(...) Back in the old days the painting repertoire was all but immutable, but since the advent of modernism artists have broadened their horizons with new subjects. Paradoxically, what is expected of art now is the unexpected. And what we're getting here is fucking unexpected. That a Death Metal group's T-shirt should find its way into a painting is as improbable now as the Impressionist apparition in the traditional art world of a concert in the Tuileries or a train pulling into a station.



Exhibition views

Lord of the Fucking Wasteland

Air de Paris, Romainville, France

2020

Photo : © Marc Damage



Exhibition views

Lord of the Fucking Wasteland

Air de Paris, Romainville, France

2020

Photo : © Marc Damage

My Gleaming Soul / I am a Fireball

Nassauischer Kunstverein, Wiesbaden, Germany

20.05 — 02.07.2017

Douglas doesn't locate her paintings in contemporary discourses that rely on visual tropes such as digital technology. What is special about Eliza Douglas' art is that she creates works that appear fresh without following current trends. To this end, she develops a vocabulary that on the one hand takes up the history of the medium without dismissing painting as a historical problem. This balancing act is more difficult to achieve than one might imagine.

The My Gleaming Soul series depicts headless figures, which are actually a complete reversal of what one expects from the painted body rather than actual figures: the focus is not on the physicality, strength and dimensions of bodies, but only on the limbs - hands, and sometimes feet. In these works, Eliza Douglas does not seek formal coherence. The paintings are no more figurative than they are abstract, no more gestural than they are processual. In fact, Douglas is careful to ensure that all compositional elements cancel each other out, so that her works cannot be identified.

The figurative components, for example - the hands and feet - stage a kind of subtraction on a formal level: they do not allow for a clearly abstract reading and cause the lines to oscillate between figurative and decorative legibility.

This technique is continued in the series of portraits entitled I am a Fireball. The subjects, young men with bare upper bodies, look directly at the viewer, but with an expressionless expression. They are in rooms that lack any personal detail, but at the same time are too tastefully furnished to appear bureaucratic. What makes this series of portraits so unique is that Douglas paints people without being interested in the identity of those portrayed. Instead, in some works, the traditional grammar of portraiture is reversed: a houseplant occupies the foreground of a room, while the portrait of the young man appears in the background as a mural - it appears flat even in the imaginary space of the painting. One is inclined to say that Eliza Douglas, in rendering these various figures, outlines the conditions of a much more impersonal event, a kind of pre-transitive space in which subjectivity develops as just one quality among many.

The Stoics were concerned with ataraxia, a kind of serenity and calm that is achieved by avoiding everything unnecessary. This concept comes closest to the feeling of the technique she uses. She paints without being preachy or falling into conceptual arrogance. Instead, she communicates with the viewer through the frugality of a small selection of formal elements. In fact, her work seems almost solemn as she leaves the historical burden of painting behind - but full of humor and verve.



Exhibition views

My Gleaming Soul / I am a Fireball

Nassauischer Kunstverein, Wiesbaden, Germany

2017

Photo : © Christian Lauer



Exhibition views

My Gleaming Soul / I am a Fireball

Nassauischer Kunstverein, Wiesbaden, Germany

2017

Photo : © Christian Lauer



Exhibition views

My Gleaming Soul / I am a Fireball

Nassauischer Kunstverein, Wiesbaden, Germany

2017

Photo : © Christian Lauer

SELECTED ARTWORKS



No Refunds
2024
Mixed media on canvas
190 x 140 cm
Unique



Untitled
2023
Oil on canvas
210 x 160 cm
Unique



Untitled
 2023
 Oil on canvas
 210 x 160 cm
 Unique



Untitled
 2023
 Oil on canvas
 210 x 160 cm
 Unique



Untitled
 2022
 Oil on canvas
 210 x 160 cm
 Unique



Untitled
2020
Oil on canvas
210 x 160 cm
Unique



Distance
2019
Oil on canvas
114 x 89 cm
Unique



Aqua
 2018
 Oil on canvas
 210 x 180 cm
 Unique



Josh Smith
2018
Oil on gessoboard
40,6 x 50,8 cm
Unique



Just Us
 2018
 Oil on canvas
 210 x 180 cm
 Unique



Steam
2018
Oil on canvas
210 x 180 cm
Unique



So Close
2017
Oil on canvas
210 x 180 cm
Unique



No Pain at All
 2016
 Oil on canvas
 210 x 170 cm
 Unique



I Am the Horse you Should Bet On (VIII)
 2017
 Oil on canvas
 170 x 170 cm
 Unique



I Am the Horse you Should Bet On (F)
 2017
 Oil on canvas
 170 x 170 cm
 Unique



I am a Fireball
2017
Oil on canvas
160 x 160 cm
Unique



The Foxes of the Morning
 2017
 Oil on canvas
 175 x 200 cm
 Unique



I Wander, an Animal
 2016
 Oil on canvas
 120 x 175 cm
 Unique