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Rachel Feinstein dissects notions of beauty at New York's Jewish Museum

The sculptor explores myth, fun and fear in a seductive retrospective

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Caption (TNR 9 Italicized)

Rachel Feinstein's sculptures summon the marvels of childhood — fairy tales, jigsaw puzzles, comics and bright, ballooning shapes — only to mar them with horrors. Cartoon heroines morph into monsters, cute animals into grotesque predators, picturesque cityscapes into nightmare settings. But all is not glum: her work occupies the space where myth, fun and fear intersect. A retrospective at New York's Jewish Museum seduces viewers into Feinstein's effervescently weird way of looking at the world.

Near the show's entrance, we meet a sculptural odd couple, "Model" and "Fat Friend". The first is a pale and lanky creature whose wood-and-plaster limbs all sprout mirrors, like a narcissistic octopus. Each of its parts gazes on itself, forming a symphony of self-admiration. Its companion is a more bizarre presence, with rabbit ears as big as wings, horns like branches, and a slimy

appendage that mimics a snail. A central hollow hides a cache of eggs, and a set of coiled viscera emerges from the figure's head.

'Fat Friend' (2000) © Rachel Feinstein/courtesy Gagosian . 'Model' (2000) © Rachel Feinstein/courtesy Gagosian

The pair of works refers to Feinstein's youthful stint as a fashion model. In a just-published monograph, she recalls how teenaged beauties (like her) surrounded themselves with more ordinary-looking girls. "On the surface one would think it was better to be the model, based on the fact that she would be the centre of attention. But in the end, the model was boring and vapid, and the fat friend was the person you would actually want to talk to. They both needed each other as a symbiotic relationship, like moss on a tree." Feinstein's "Model", too, draws strength from its pendant: the mirrored sculpture projects an obsession with its own sags and imperfections, and doesn't seem to care much whether you look at it looking at itself. "Fat Friend", an abstract, hybrid animal that looks pieced together from some wild anatomy kit, turns on the inter-species charm. Like one of those 16th-century allegories of life's transience, the two sculptures together make the bracing point that vanity equals death.

'Eileen With Gloves' (2009) © Rachel Feinstein/courtesy Marianne Boesky

Feinstein's work overflows with allusions, some obvious, others more recondite. Certain deconstructed figures recall Picasso's synthetic cubism. A few evoke the Italian street theatre tradition of *commedia dell'arte*, a perennial theme that links her both to Picasso and Antoine Watteau, who embodied the 18th-century rococo. Watteau painted several Pierrots, each one an island of melancholy set off against an atmospheric landscape, red curtains, and the rest of his blithe troupe. Picasso's 1915 "Harlequin" is an alienated freak, with jagged edges and a ghastly smile. Feinstein toggles between the two painters' sensibilities.

In her 2009 "Punch and Family", she celebrates another stock character, Pulcinella, aka Punchinello. She freezes the clown in mid-transformation as he morphs from frog into prince (or maybe it's the other way around). His tricorn hat melts into an amphibian's gullet, his long, muscular leg bends, as if poised to leap out of one era and into another.

'Mirrored Ball' 1998 © Rachel Feinstein

Feinstein grew up in Miami, where she inhaled an atmosphere of sumptuous decay: fading pastels, ageing art deco glories and half-remembered luxury. It was as if Watteau's world had sprung to life, only to blur again, its decorative arabesques now shot through with modern darkness. She recalls a childhood of surreally vivid nature. Her home, in a smelly mangrove forest, was a gathering spot for all kinds of fauna. Ants raced up the walls, unless they were eaten by palmetto bugs, which in turn served as food for the lizards. Alligators colonised swimming pools. Flesh-eating monkeys trespassed into the backyard.

She supplemented this bedtime-story jungle with regular trips to Disney World and obligatory stops at Cinderella Castle, a relatively muted cousin to the gleefully kitschy neo-medieval castle of Neuschwanstein in Germany. In 2000, she took her simmering stew of influences on a trip to Bavaria, where she tossed in a visit to the Nymphenburg Palace, a fantastical combination of classical grace and baroque invention.

"I became fixated on 18th-century European architecture, figurines and sculpture," she recounts. "It changed everything I thought about the rococo. I was seeing the real version, not the Liberace version." And yet authenticity proved to be just one ingredient in Feinstein's work, along with flamboyant knock-offs, desperate showiness and the sheer joy of excess.

'The Bleeding Shepherdess' (2014) © Rachel Feinstein/courtesy Gagosian

In “The Shack” (2001) a woman in classical garb pauses at the top of a curving polychrome staircase. She inhabits a pavilion (though it might be a shrine): a shingled roof, and an amoeboid, gilt-framed mirror supported by a single column. A thick veil, like hardened lava, hides her head, both from our eyes and from the looking glass. It’s the folly she stands in — fanciful, curvaceous, a little silly — that draws the eye. The faceless goddess may think she’s the star of the piece, but she’s really just an ornament for the decor, which could be a set for a production of *Snow White* (“Mirror, mirror on the wall”) or a dazzling baroque altar. The whole concoction, flagrantly theatrical and artfully false, mixes affection and critique, like Diane Arbus’s 1962 photograph “A Castle in Disneyland, California”, which endows the gossamer icon with the gravitas of an ancestral manse. Disney may be commercial, shallow, glitzy and made-up, but it’s still part of America’s national patrimony. Feinstein is a maven of utopias gone to seed, and no vista is richer with overtones of empire and Eden, death and glory, glamour and decay, than what’s left of ancient Rome.

The show concludes with a room she wallpapered with a vast Roman panorama of her own design. The Colosseum, Castel Sant’Angelo, and the wreckage of various temples array themselves into a backdrop for a drama of debauchery. A Cinderella-style carriage has crashed, leaving a crumpled husk. An aristocratic shepherdess cradles a puppy instead of a sheep. Like Marie Antoinette playing milkmaid, she ambles heedlessly towards death, a great gash blooming out of her hip. Placed there by an artist who merges ancient empire, ancien régime and contemporary America into one decadent layer cake, the shepherdess stands for all those who sleepwalk toward ruin in a haze of self-indulgence.