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Rachel Feinstein Unveils the Darker Side of Fantasyland

With her first museum retrospective, the artist (and fashion muse) talks about confecting fanciful works with a core of steel.

Ruth La Ferla

The sculptor Rachel Feinstein at "Maiden, Mother, Crone," her exhibition at the Jewish Museum. Her works, including "Madonna" (2015) in the background, balance the fanciful and the grotesque.© Molly Matalon for The New York Times

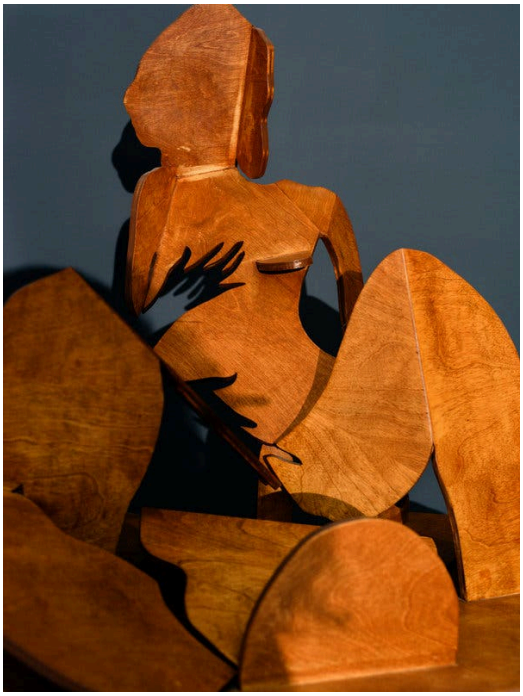
If Rachel Feinstein had a spirit guide, it would probably be Sleeping Beauty. For the artist — known for her extravagantly detailed fantasy sculptures, installations and paintings — the fairy tale princess may be the most relatable of the otherworldly creatures that animate her work. "When I was younger, I was asleep for a long time, my ideas kind of germinating," she said recently, as she steered a visitor through "Maiden, Mother, Crone," her exhibition at the Jewish Museum.

At Columbia University, where she studied religion and art, and during the early years of her marriage to the artist John Currin, "I was this really disorganized person who would lie in bed all day long," she recalled. "I had this notion that time was never ending. I would daydream; that's what I needed to make art."

Traces of that dreamy sensibility have filtered into the 30-year survey of Ms. Feinstein's work and her first American museum retrospective. But there is a discernible tension, as well, between clashing impulses: passive and active, ethereal and earthbound, polished but often unnervingly raw.

Ms. Feinstein's drawings, murals and towering sculptures — many of which are on view at the museum — are invested with elements of the supernatural and religious iconography. Some are interlaced with American pop cultural references, among them Sleeping Beauty and Victoria's Secret Angels, feminine mythology and the influence of 18th-century European craft, in particular the Meissen porcelain figurines she has reimagined in outsize form.

An erotic charge runs though her work, and alongside it, the specter of encroaching ruin. "If you look at Old Dutch still-life painting," she said, "all of these beautiful chalices, fruits and lobsters — these things are letting you know that their time is amazing right now but that all of this is going to decay."



A detail of "Madonna," 2015. Ms. Feinstein's sculptures are invested with religious iconography, feminine mythology and the influence of 18th-century European craft, including Meissen porcelain figurines.© Molly Matalon for The New York Times. A detail of "Alice," 2008, stained wood with a laminate pedestal. An erotic charge runs though her work.© Molly Matalon for The New York Times

Some of Ms. Feinstein's works included in "Maiden, Mother, Crone," from left: "Fat Friend," 2000; "Mr. Time," 2015; "The Walrus Is Paul," 2000; "Girl and Reindeer," 2010-2011; "Flower Girl," 2010-2011; "Northamptonshire," 2012 (on wall); "Punch and Family," 2009; and "Good Times," 2005.© Molly Matalon for The New York Times

Now 48 and the mother of three, Ms. Feinstein is feeling increasingly urgent about the passage of time. "You know that time is finite," she said, "so out of necessity you need to develop a laser focus. You need that to figure out what you're going to do next."

These are edited excerpts from the conversation.

"Maiden, Mother, Crone" is an evocative title. What exactly did you have in mind?

In each stage of your life, there is something great and something not. When you're a maiden, the whole world wants you. You're on fire. But you have no idea what you're doing at all. Now that I have three kids, I'm aware of what I'm doing. But I'm tired, and things are starting to shift in my body. I'm moving toward the crone stage, where what's going on is getting clearer and clearer. But by then, you're more tired.

What is the chief impulse that drives you?

It's always been a story or some type of out-of-body experience. That's why I'm interested in the fairy tale. I'm curious about why some ideas get cemented in story form as fact, and others do not. I think about Lilith. She was Adam's equal and she came before Eve. But Lilith complained too much, so she was written out of the story. I've always been fascinated by women who are loudmouthed, who have something to say, and how that's been a problem in history.

Are there moments when excess and aggression take over your imagination?

The way I think of it, the right hand of your body is the doer side; the left hand is the passive side. The right hand is phallic, pushing out into the world, and it's dry. The left side is moist, and it's the taking, the receptive side. You need both to become whole.

Your imagery can be fanciful, but there are also elements of the sinister and grotesque. Where did those come from?

My dad, who died in August, was very extreme. I absorbed his idea of a brutalistic life. His attitude was very much: “Toughen up, get over it.”

He was a dermatologist in the 1970s and 1980s. When I was growing up, there were all these issues of Cutis around the house — the skin cancer magazine. There would be images laid out of naked men with black bars over their eyes. Some of them also had syphilis in advanced stages, and I would see that as a child.

The artist with “Bleeding Shepherdess,” 2014.© Molly Matalon for The New York Times

What did growing up in Miami contribute to your outlook?

There is an aspect of Florida that’s a rotting jungle. Our house was on a landfill in Coral Gables. It was part of a mangrove forest that stank of festering weird stuff. Once, there was a trail of hundreds of ants crawling on walls. There were flying palmetto bugs eating the ants, and a lizard eating the palmetto bugs. Those things all spoke to me.

You’re not squeamish in your work about incorporating kitsch.

I used to go to Disney World in Orlando maybe 10 or 12 times a year to accompany my dad to medical conventions. We’d go every time to Cinderella’s castle. I learned later that the castle was based on an American concept of Neuschwanstein Castle in Germany, which was in itself a fantasy, a romantic interpretation of the Middle Ages. That’s what started my interest in the European baroque and rococo.

In 2000, I visited the Nymphenburg palace in Bavaria, and Amalienburg, a baroque hunting lodge in the Nymphenburg Park. Walking into those places changed my life. I became fixated on 18th-century European architecture, figurines and sculpture. It changed everything I thought about the rococo. I was seeing the real version, not the Liberace version.

What in your mind sets the real version apart?

It is the use of positive and negative space, the roundness, the curves and waves that are balanced by sharp points. That’s something I recreate on purpose in my art.

For you, the rococo has a frightening dimension. Why?

To me, it was an attempt to control nature, like eugenics; it made me think of Hitler. I had this really visceral horror at seeing something that was so beautiful and terrifying at the same time.

Mirrors figure prominently in your work. What is the relationship?

A mirror is a black hole. When you see your reflection, you're seeing time passing. I got interested in making ballerinas because they are very aware that their time is so limited. They're like racehorses. They've got a shelf life of 10 years.

A mirror and plaster sculpture called "Mirrored Ball," 1998.© Molly Matalon for The New York Times. "Model," 2000, is made of mirrors, wood, plaster and enamel.© Molly Matalon for The New York Times.

Do you think about your own shelf life?

Definitely. These things have to do partly with looking at the images of the paintings John has done of me over time. There is one of me in braids. I was maybe 25. In more recent paintings, I can see myself aging.

When did you first become aware of your sexuality?

I was probably a teenager. In Miami, I was friends with Bruce Weber. He was shooting Calvin Klein Obsession ads with all these male models. I went clubbing with those guys. I was 14, and I saw how amazing it was that they were very aware of their beauty and their image. I was shy until I was 18, and then I started to feel more confident.

How did you express that?

I would wear a see-through plastic skirt that I bought at Patricia Field, and I would stuff a black wig under it, a big pubic merkin. I would walk around New York City like that. I also had a T-shirt that was very tight, that I would wear with no bra. It said, “I’m a satisfier.”

How did people react?

No one messed with me. It was the ’90s, the time of third-wave feminism, and there was this idea of women taking control of their sexuality. I had barely had sex with anybody at that point. It was a facade. But it was a way for me to find my voice.

Marc Jacobs once dedicated a collection to you. You created a set for his show and were photographed for his advertising campaign. What draws you to the fashion world?

I have this great relationship with designers because they are so free and so fast. When Marc called me, he gave me two weeks to produce a set for his show. I was in the middle of doing this huge painting but I just said, let’s do it.

“The Shack,” 2001, is made from wood, cedar shingles, wire, mirror, gold leaf and paint.© Molly Matalon for The New York Times

What impact has that relationship had on a your stature in the art world?

You’re a wife, a mother, an artist, a fashion person. But you can’t be all those things. People don’t think of you as serious.

But you haven’t turned your back on fashion.

You can be excessive in fashion. You are not allowed to be excessive in contemporary art, and that’s been a real issue for me. The contemporary art world has gone so much toward minimalism that I actually have been embarrassed at certain times by what I’ve made. But I had to keep doing it.

Quite a few of your pieces are life size or larger. Do you feel more entitled as you mature to take up space?

Men — I'm thinking of Richard Serra — historically have been the ones to take up space. It's a version of man-spreading. But if you're a woman, you cross your legs.

As a female sculptor, it's strange to be pushing things out into the world, to be using that aggressive, punch-it-out phallic side. I worry that a piece may be too big, that it's going to cost too much to move it. I know Richard Serra doesn't think about that at all. He thinks, "I'm going to make this and make it as heavy as I possibly can, and it's going to cost millions of dollars to get it across the bridge, but I don't care. I'm a great artist."

Do you feel competitive with other artists, and with your husband in particular?

I would say yes. You feel competitive in a way where you want to blow people's minds. The feeling is, "I need to make the best thing I've ever made in my whole life."

My father worked hard. As a first-generation American, he worked his ass off. From him, I learned that I've got a limited time on this planet and I've got to do something. I can't be sleeping.