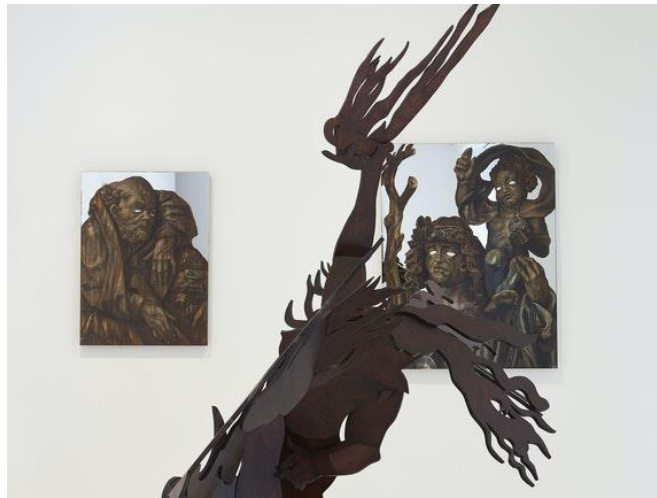


The Brooklyn Rail  
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GAGOSIAN  
**BROOKLYN RAIL**  
Rachel Feinstein: *Mirror*

Toby Kamps



Installation view: Rachel Feinstein: *Mirror*, Gagosian, London, 2022. © Rachel Feinstein. Courtesy Gagosian. Photo: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd.

In his book *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*, historian Ioan P. Couliano describes the importance of human eyes at the beginning of the sixteenth century. They were the portals through which the vaporous life-essence *pneuma* entered and exited the body, the receivers and transmitters of psychic forces. In *Mirror*, an exhibition of ten paintings on mirrors, plus one stained-wood sculpture (all 2021), Rachel Feinstein reconceives altarpieces and sculptures by German Renaissance sculptors Tilman Riemenschneider, Martin Kriechbaum, and Gregor Erhart in two dimensions and a drawing by Hans Baldung Grien in three. In the paintings, eyes—or rather a lack thereof—become a special focus.

Feinstein began reworking Northern European Renaissance imagery after 9/11, a tragedy she experienced firsthand in New York. She found solace in works like Matthias Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece* of 1512–16, which emphasized the physical pain of Jesus's crucifixion for audiences suffering from the plague. During the pandemic's lockdowns, she returned to the old masters as a means to process the uncertainty and mortality highlighted by COVID-19.

Working in soft limewood and sandstone, Riemenschneider and his contemporaries led a shift from the stylized, formal figuration of the Middle Ages to the more naturalistic styles of the

Renaissance. Dropping the classicizing grace notes of their Italian counterparts, they humanized their holy subjects. Their works, especially those in unpainted wood, combine virtuosic technique and spatial inventiveness with immediacy and warmth. To a world accustomed to flat religious scenes and cold stone sculptures, these artists' saintly subjects, rendered in flesh-colored wood, must have seemed startlingly accessible—as if they inhabited the same space and time as their viewers.

The sturdy, workpersonlike realism and somber grays and browns of Feinstein's new paintings is at odds with her usually-more exuberant and freeform approaches to realism. Here, she faithfully reproduces the forms and textures of her sculptural subjects in oil, urethane, and charcoal, while slightly exaggerating the endearing, everyday naturalism of their faces. In each case, however, the eyes and the spaces surrounding the figures are left as unpainted mirror.

*Last Supper*, a painting based on a detail of Riemenschneider's wooden *Holy Blood Altarpiece* of 1499–1505 in Rothenburg ob der Tauber, depicts Christ and eight of his disciples. Where the original used its subjects' overlapping gazes to build a narrative of faith, doubt, and betrayal, Feinstein uses mirrored voids to implicate the viewer in the momentous story. Depending on the angle from which they are viewed, the work's eyes are dead, blank zombie orbs, or alive, full of reflections of spectators and the busy street outside the gallery.



*Rachel Feinstein, Magdalene, 2021. Oil, acrylic urethane, and charcoal on mirror, 52 x 29 15/16 x 1 1/2 inches. © Rachel Feinstein. Courtesy Gagosian. Photo: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd.*

*Deposition* is a closeup of St. John the Evangelist cradling the dead Christ from another work by Riemenschneider, *The Lamentation* of ca. 1519–22 in Maulbronn. Here, the subjects' eyes, including the Saviour's, which are closed in the original, are open voids of mirror. Additionally, the wound in Christ's side is an unpainted slit. Shakespeare wrote that eyes are windows to the soul. Feinstein's work asks, is ours a God-forsaken world, or can we transcend its sorrows?

The exhibition's sole female figure, *Magdalene*, a painting based on Gregor Erhart's polychrome wood sculpture of Mary Magdalene as a naked ascetic from ca. 1515–20, has a pendant in *Metal Storm*, a freestanding sculpture made of intersecting, cut-out panels of stained wood. Unlike the paintings, which depict Biblical scenes, this sculpture is based on a 1514 drawing by Hans Baldung Grien depicting voluptuous witches intertwined in an ecstatic dance. The sculpture is a striking counterpart to the paintings' painstakingly rendered piety. It is a loose and schematic emblem of sex and female power, which the church continues to regulate, and which Feinstein has made a central focus of her career.

*Metal Storm*'s thin planes also have a formal echo in the edges of the painted images. The gap between the glass and reflective backing, in which it is possible to see a bit of the undersides of Feinstein's brushwork, creates the illusion that the paintings are rendered on floating panels of wood.

By painting on mirrors, Feinstein attempts an ambitious artistic feat: merging holy images made in an earlier time beset by plagues, famines, and wars with glimpses of our equally fraught, if more secular, moment. Gagosian's gallery text says Feinstein's reflective eyes create an "uncanny sense of becoming one with the painting" when the viewer gazes into it. This does not seem totally accurate, however, because the images fill up so much of their reflective supports, and a great deal of crouching or craning is required to align just one eye with its mirrored counterpart. These are not audience-incorporating tableaux like Michelangelo Pistoletto's paint-on-paper-on-mirror works. They are devotional images in which the spectator is reflected only incidentally in the periphery. It is difficult to catch a coherent glimpse of oneself in them, much less take an Instagram-worthy selfie.

In *Mirror*, Feinstein, who grew up with a Jewish father and Catholic mother and studied art, religion, and philosophy, may be attempting to reconcile her two cultural inheritances, one iconoclastic, the other iconodulic. In her paintings, she recreates important stories of faith but keeps them incomplete by leaving her protagonists' eyes as open passages of mirror. This act calls to mind the obliteration of eyes on billboards in contemporary Afghanistan and other places where fundamentalists seek to eliminate graven images. Yet it also leaves Feinstein's images open to an interpretive gaze, and the animating *pneuma* that passes between the viewer and the work of art.