

# JUXTAPOZ

Art & Culture

Dauber, Annie, "Review: Koak's "Letter to Myself (when the world is on fire)" is a Personal Triumph," *Juxtapoz*, February 2, 2023

## Review: Koak's "Letter to Myself (when the world is on fire)" is a Personal Triumph

February 02, 2023 | in Painting



# ALTMAN SIEGEL

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***Letter to Myself (when the world is on fire), on view through February 25th, is a joyous panacea for contemporary woes.***

Prehensile toes and wiggly nipples are littered throughout the artist [Koak's](#) second solo exhibition at [Altman Siegel](#). Spawning from the artist's musings on overexposure to constant, casual-ized disaster, the show infuses levity and humor into doomy scenes. Koak's tender figures, bodies at once delicate and bulging, and confident and precise linework are at their height in her most recent show.

As the title suggests, the show serves as Koak's letter to herself, a sort of time capsule of images and emotions emblematic of the modern moment. The artist remarks, "We get our news interspersed with kitten videos and go from California fires to California sunsets in the span of minutes. The line between danger and safety, calamity and calm, feels unmitigated—we move too quickly between the two to remember when to laugh or how to cry." In this exhibition, Koak is able to bring levity to these cyclical spurts of hyperactive worry and sedation.



A vein of tenderness and fragility courses through Koak's new paintings. Images of drowning tulips and women craned over to examine their genitalia pull the viewer's focus. A cracking vase comes up in a couple of works; in *Self Portrait w/ Flowers* the artist paints her own likeness upon the fractured ceramic. There is a feeling of imminence, a sense of solidity that is just about to burst. The vase, like many of us, is barely holding it together.

Imagery that could, in other circumstances, come across trite (as the imminent destruction of the world can unfortunately seem), is reinvigorated by Koak with vibrancy and coyness. In *Doomscroll* we find such an instance, in which two images line the wall to the left

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of the primary figure. The lower frame holds a mushroom cloud, an explosion in an otherwise edenic environment, and the upper one depicts cartoonified male genitalia. These images, a hilarious one-two punch, are washed over in the blue of the painting as the figure examines her own body with an empty stare, caresses her calf, ignoring the eye-catching features behind her. The paintings on the wall seem like memories she has fixated upon, formative traumas in her past that now float around her mind like nothing. She is emblematic of many of us, numb to shock, “doomscrolling.”

The focal triptych of the exhibition fills an entire gallery wall, each painting an expanse of biblical importance. The three scenes portray three windows lining a single external facade of a house. According to the gallery’s [press release](#), these paintings can be seen to represent, in sequence, “inquisition, awe, and fear.”

*Promenade* is perhaps the only painting in the show that gives a sense of franticness. There is an outward energy rather than an introspection that drives the work as the bird loses feathers in the wind and flesh colored nipples blow in the breeze. In the nest of eggs at the right of the canvas, we find an image of birth and the inquisition that comes with youth.

In *Facade*, a figure having just awoken greets the yellow day, peering out from drapes dotted with phallic floral shapes. A fire burns below, but the shadow on the figure’s neck comes from a downwardly-shining light source, the implication of sun. The light from the fire is intentionally eschewed in the rendering of this image, absent from the eyes, casting no shadow. The figure displays ambivalence as her hand droops to point toward the hell below. What may have once been “awe” is only an echo of such a feeling. We see here observance without reaction, acknowledgement with feigned sympathy. As Koak states, “everything starts to feel like a mix of amplified emotion with the catatonic state of burnout blasé.”

In *En Garde*, the figure grasps the bars of a window like a cross repelling a vampiric force. Around this fiery interior, the scene is entirely pleasant — colonial moldings around a window wooded in by peonies suggest a quaint neighborhood environment. The crimson figure and drapes feel fiery, in contrast to *Facade* where the fire burns outdoors. This creates a sort of “the call is coming from inside the house” tonality underlining the scene, an apt metaphor for our current climate situation, or really, our current everything situation.

Koak also flirts with texture in many of the new works. Her flat washes of color are deceptive in creating a 2D feel, but much of the linework actually protrudes from the surface. In these elevated strokes, there is a sandy sediment visible in the pigment, allowing gestures with different weights to fade into the canvas or emerge out of it. It is fascinating to observe Koak’s smooth, driving lines up close and find this unexpected crunchiness.

Perhaps one of the most grabbing paintings in the room is *California Landscape #1*. The imagery is intense and full of motion, but it is Koak’s use of charcoal from the California fires to create the underpainting sketch for this work that yields such a powerful piece. Here, she physically achieves what she seeks to do metaphorically — disaster coated in beauty, heaviness layered with levity.

She lays pigment over natural elements, thus creating a palimpsest of color and dynamism over destruction. It is a cacophony of hues both natural and supernatural: a sea foam green sun, a blue Seussian tree dissolving into flames, pinks and magentas abstracting the inky smoke. Koak’s foray into the landscape is a potent reminder of the toxic sublime. In the same way a beautiful sunset reminds one of the pollution required to create it, we are sucked in by the burning horizon, staring wide-eyed and numb.

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Koak's "letter to herself" beautifully juxtaposes the internal and external aspects of modernity; the sensory and emotional aspects of existing as a human being and the unfortunate humor of being subsumed by never-ending panic. The paintings are stunning concoctions of color and texture, lightness and darkness, laughing and crying. Koak's freaky figures are a joy to behold.

*Text by Annie Dauber*

**Nob Hill** *Gazette*

Frost, Claire, "Artist Koak's New Show is a Study in Contrasts," *Nob Hill Gazette*, February 2023

## ***Artist Koak's New Show is a Study in Contrasts***

BY CLAIRE FROST **Jan 26, 2023**



Artist Koak at work in her studio in San Francisco's Dogpatch neighborhood.

COURTESY OF KOAK AND ALTMAN SIEGEL GALLERY

It is a blandly overcast December day in the Dogpatch neighborhood when I arrive at **Koak's** studio. Opposite the entrance, a wall of windows blankets the industrial space with cool winter light, illuminating the rich colors and textures of the paintings and drawings. She is deep into finishing the work for her show at Altman Siegel gallery, which opened last month to coincide with Fog Design+Art fair and runs through February 25. While her previous exhibitions dealt with the perils of domesticity and the nuances of touch — particularly prescient when *Return to Feeling* debuted at

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Altman Siegel in March 2020 — for the current one, *Letter to Myself (when the world is on fire)*, Koak focused on a persistent sense of free-floating anxiety in relation to our precarious built and natural worlds. “It feels strangely detached to not make work about that right now — when everyone I know and the world around us feels locked in a loop of anxieties,” she says.

Koak describes how her bodies of work tend to coalesce around ideas that initially emerged on the fringes of previous projects but gain form and momentum when placed in relation to each other. A conceptual anchor of the Altman Siegel show is a bronze sculpture of a flower being bathed because “it’s so futile, and also aspirational,” she says, adding that it feels like an apt representation of “the struggle of delicacy vs. strength, and subtlety vs. invincibility, in our relationship to nature.”

Such perceived dichotomies are central to Koak’s practice. Born in Michigan and raised in Santa Cruz, Koak came to San Francisco to study at California College of the Arts, ultimately receiving an MFA in comics. Her work — in painting, drawing and sculpture — retains the graphic sensibility and an emphasis on figure-based narratives of the medium she was trained in. The paintings and drawings mainly center around femme figures that are composed of gorgeously swooping and tapering lines who sit, recline and crawl through lushly colored (often domestic) spaces to create scenes that are both tender and incisive in their consideration of human behavior.



“Facade” is among Koak’s new works, on view at Altman Siegel gallery through February 25, in the artist’s solo show, *Letter to Myself (when the world is on fire)*.

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“En Garde” is among Koak’s new works, on view at Altman Siegel gallery through February 25, in the artist’s solo show, *Letter to Myself (when the world is on fire)*.

COURTESY OF KOAK AND ALTMAN SIEGEL GALLERY

multiple rounds of drawings. Painted black lines are built up with discarded pencil shavings so that they appear richer and fuller. And what could be considered white negative space in the largest of the paintings was built up in layers — using over five gallons of white paint — to achieve a texture that looks like drywall rather than paint on canvas.

Thus, for Koak, the playfulness and absurdity of washing a flower brings a “Let’s laugh so we don’t cry” feeling that is crucial to thinking about something as stressful as, well, stress. With this work, it allowed her to diverge from the “piercing with tension” version of what art about something uncomfortable might look like, she notes. Instead she created “a room of paintings, presented in varying tones — whether it’s style or color or how the paint is handled — that feels more authentically like a sense of anxiety.”

Taking this approach, the fresh paintings that lean against the walls of her studio vary from small to towering, representing deep blue nudes, billowing landscapes, and even a still life held together by the distinctive style and care that Koak brings to each painting. Each composition is carefully planned through

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“California Landscape” is among Koak’s new works on view at Altman Siegel gallery through February 25, in the exhibition *Letter to Myself (when the world is on fire)*.

COURTESY OF KOAK AND ALTMAN SIEGEL GALLERY

The meticulous attention that is necessary to conjure these effects is the result of obsessive repetition that forms something greater than each material layer, and it evokes a sense of calm and control that is as much of an illusion as the surface it creates. Similarly, by the time I write this, the chilly clouds of a few weeks ago have turned into what feels like a perpetual rainstorm that reveals the vulnerability of structures — both natural and constructed — to withstand such continual pressure from anything, even something as essential and desirable as water in our drought-ridden state. This profoundly disorienting reality is when her work takes shape: “[When] my brain is too tired to pinpoint nuance, it opts for the complexity that juxtaposed images excel at,” she says, further explaining, “I don’t know how to talk about the stress ... so in that way, the show is an homage to its own creation. An act of what can be created through stress to reflect it.”





Bravo, Tony, “San Francisco’s ‘unofficial art week’ returns. Here are 12 highlights not to miss,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, January 22, 2023

# San Francisco’s ‘unofficial art week’ returns. Here are 12 highlights not to miss

Tony Bravo January 18, 2023 Updated: January 22, 2023, 11:58 am

Over the past decade, the third week of January has become an unofficial art week in San Francisco. Anchored by the [Fog Design + Art fair](#) at the Fort Mason Center for Arts & Culture, the multiday showcase has grown since the first fair in 2013 to now include scores of gallery openings, events and pop-ups taking advantage of the international crowd who come to the city.

While the fair itself attracts art lovers to the Marina District venue, the Dogpatch neighborhood will be a major draw for activations and events at the Minnesota Street Project as well as the new [Institute of Contemporary Art San Francisco](#), which opened in October. Galleries and art spaces downtown and South of Market Street will also be opening new shows.

The festivities officially kick-off Wednesday, Jan. 18, with the Fog preview gala benefiting the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, with events through Sunday, Jan. 22. Here’s a guide to the Fog Design + Art fair, plus other shows and happenings throughout the city.

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Koak, "California Landscape #1," 2023.

Photo: Koak and Altman Siegel, San Francisco

## 'Koak: Letter to Myself (when the world is on fire)'

Koak's second solo exhibition at Altman Siegel includes new paintings, drawings and sculptures by the San Francisco artist. The body of work explores concepts of disaster, panic and failure, specifically through images of landscapes and figures in turmoil.

*10 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesday-Friday; 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday. Through Feb. 25. Free. Altman Siegel, 1150 25th St., S.F. 415-576-9300. [www.altmansiegel.com](http://www.altmansiegel.com)*

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Pritikin, Renny, "Beth Van Hoesen and Koak @ Altman Siegel," *Square Cylinder*, January 20, 2023

## Beth Van Hoesen and Koak @ Altman Siegel

JANUARY 20, 2023

by Renny Pritikin

If humor operates by introducing unexpected twists of thought, so, too, does curatorial practice, particularly when it involves juxtaposing disparate bodies of work. Claudia Altman-Siegel achieves this with her gallery's current pair of buoyant shows in which the drawings of Beth Van Hoesen (1926-2010) appear alongside those of an artist who goes by the name Koak. From Van Hoesen's estate, Siegel selected a set of portrait drawings of San Francisco street characters called *Punks and Sisters*; Koak is represented by mannered portraits of young women who I suspect are much like herself. Though occupying opposite ends of the spectrum—from the imaginary to the documentary—the two shows find common ground in portraiture created through the exercise of interpretive freedom.

Van Hoesen lived in the Castro district of San Francisco for almost 50 years; she was part of a circle of post-WWII Bay Area artists that, while not part of the Beats, nevertheless included many equally talented, if lesser-known, figures: her husband Mark Adams, Theophilus Brown, Gordon Cook, Wayne Thiebaud and others who, for decades, held a weekly drawing workshop. Though largely unfamiliar today, Van Hoesen was, in her time, regarded as a master printmaker, with works in dozens of major museum collections, many monographs and two retrospectives. While a quick online search reveals photorealistic depictions of animals, the current show focuses on images made late in Van Hoesen's life, when her drawing group would invite interesting-looking people off the street to pose for them. Culled from her immediate environs, they evince an abundance of queer style, taken to extremes in portraits of



Beth Van Hoesen, *Sister Zsa Zsa Glamour*, 1997, watercolor, colored pencil, graphite on paper, 20 1/8 x 16 inches

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several members of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a drag activist group famous for donning nun's habits.



Beth Van Hoesen, *Self Portrait*, 1980, graphite, gouache, ink on paper  
11 1/4 x 11 1/4 inches

A 1980 self-portrait, one of 18 small-to-medium-sized works, a stunner in graphite, gouache and ink, steals the show. Measuring just 11 x 11 inches, it shows the artist from the shoulders up, looking to the left. Her straight black hair is severely cut at the jawline, making a dramatic swoop across a picture dominated by black and sepia, contrasting sharply with the subject's pale skin. Most of the other drawings were made between 1982 and 1994. However, two outliers from 1972 stand out. *Pat* and *Pat Drawing II* show the subject in a hippie-style outfit with a large torus of frizzy red hair. Her face, rendered in a simple colored pencil line, resembles that of ladies in Elizabethan paintings.

*Bill* (1984) shows a face in profile, a long nose prominent over a slightly protruding jaw; he looks pretty, young and vain. Van Hoesen

captures his well-coiffed hair in precise detail, swept back on the side, brush cut on top with a lick falling onto the forehead. *Wayde* (1988) depicts a young man in profile from the shoulders up, dressed in a black leather jacket. The contrast between the two images is a study in the semiotics of dress: nude vulnerability versus icy rough trade.

# # #

Koak, an artist new to me, seems destined for a notable career. Her exhibition, *Letter to Myself (when the world is on fire)*, somehow manages to whip together the title's sense of emergency with the aesthetics of Art Nouveau (elongated and curling flora and fauna) and a touch of mid-century pop a la Disney to create a rousing style all her own. *California Landscape #1*, measuring 6.5 x 10.5 feet, dominates the gallery.

Describing it as a burning panorama doesn't do it justice; an entire natural system writhes and suffers. The artist sketched the image with charcoal gathered after a California wildfire and then filled out the piece with flashe (a heavy opaque paint) and acrylic.

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California Landscape #1, 2023, flashe and acrylic (with underpainting sketch in charcoal from the California fires) on linen, 79 x 118 1/2'

A suite of three 9 x 7-foot paintings meditates on the nature of windows, that is, the process of looking at the world, framed literally by architecture and metaphorically by consciousness. They're also about the modernist debate over the character of representation: are paintings (or photographs) windows or surfaces? In all three, abstracted female nudes peer out of (or try to) climb through a window. In *En Garde*, painted orange-red, she gets one leg out, possibly fleeing a fire. *Façade*, done in lemon-yellow, shows the subject blithely watching an approaching blaze. *Promenade*, executed in pale blue and without incendiary elements, has her sitting on a window sill, cruelly grabbing at a passing bird, its egg-laden nest visible in a nearby tree.

*Self Portrait w/Flowers* proffers the self as a cracked vase of flowers, leaking from every crevice in elegant, comedic arcs of water. Like a life at midspan — Koak's — the flowers are unfinished, and the details of her face are subordinated to keeping a leaking "ship" of self afloat. *Bather* and *Sun Dour*, two tabletop bronzes, refine some of Koak's ongoing motifs: the stylized nude female form and mannered depictions of flowers.

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L to R: Promenade, Facade, En Garde, all 2022, oil, acrylic, flashe, and graphite on canvas, 108 1/2 x 84 inches each

Other reoccurring images, such as crocks and cats, further knit the show together. One such feline figures dramatically in one of the most unusual and effective works on view: *Parenthesis*, a small graphite-and-casein drawing in which a baby sleeps on a chaise longue with a predatory cat-like demon peering down at it. For this artist, human vulnerability and the threats posed by our degradation of nature are facts of life.

# # #

Beth Van Hoesen: "Punks and Sisters" and Koak: "Letter to Myself (when the world is on fire)" @ [Altman Siegel Gallery](#) through February 25, 2023.

Cover image: Koak: *The Parenthesis*, 2022, graphite and casein on fawn rag paper, 8 x 10 inches.

**About the author:** Renny Pritikin was the chief curator at The Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco from 2014 to 2018. Before that, he was the director of the Richard Nelson Gallery at UC Davis and the founding chief curator at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts beginning in 1992. For 11 years, he was also a senior adjunct professor at California College of the Arts, where he taught in the graduate program in Curatorial Practice. Pritikin has given lecture tours in museums in Japan as a guest of the State Department, and in New Zealand as a Fulbright Scholar, and visited Israel as a Koret Israel Prize winner. The Prelinger Library published his most recent book of poems, *Westerns and Dramas*, in 2020. He is the United States correspondent for *Umbigo* magazine in Lisbon, Portugal.



Blue, Max, "January gallery guide," *San Francisco Examiner*, January 6, 2023

SPOTLIGHT

Visual Arts

# January gallery guide

By Max Blue | Special to The Examiner | [Jan 6, 2023](#) Updated [Jan 10, 2023](#)



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The San Francisco art world wastes no time when it comes to kicking off the new year. The third week of January, colloquially referred to as “Art Week,” features dozens of gallery openings and events coinciding with FOG, The City’s annual art and design fair. If you’re looking for something to complement your trip to FOG or tide you over between now and then, here’s a guide to the best art on view in The City this month.

## **Koak: ‘Letter to Myself (when the world is on fire)’**

Painter and sculptor Koak returns with her second solo exhibition of paintings, drawings and sculptures at Altman Siegel opening Jan. 17. Where her first exhibition with the gallery at the start of the pandemic in May 2020 was marked by a sense of isolation, incongruously showcasing work rooted in a time when human touch was taken for granted, her newest body of work reveals the product of that isolation — a turn toward landscape painting and representations of lonely figures. The artist’s gestural renderings of the human form and appealing color palettes offer an inviting basis for her dissonant exploration of how one copes in a culture of disaster narratives. *Altman Siegel, 1150 25th St., S.F. Free. [altmansiegel.com](http://altmansiegel.com)*





Lok, Kate, “My Biggest Inspiration Is Just How Incredibly Immense The Act of Living Is”: In Conversation With Koak,” *Cobo Social*, July 11, 2022

# “My Biggest Inspiration Is Just How Incredibly Immense The Act Of Living Is”: In Conversation With Koak

TEXT: Kate Lok

IMAGES: Courtesy of the artist, Perrotin, and Altman Siegel, San Francisco

The expression of emotions is central in the works of San Francisco-based artist Koak, characterised by intense colours and figures in deliberately constructed lines, loaded with psychological and physical tension. We recently spoke to the artist, who opened

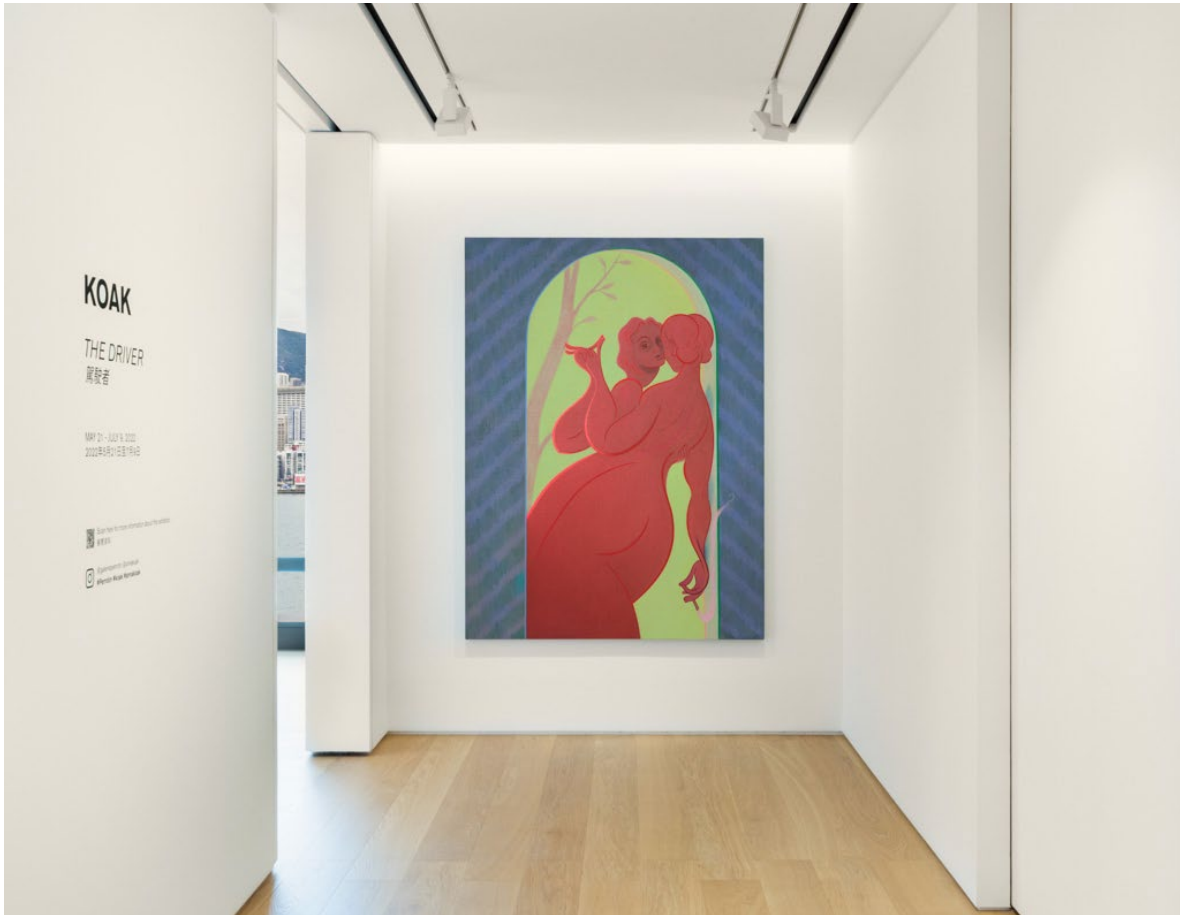
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her first show in Asia with Perrotin Hong Kong, diving into her artistic practice, her experimental techniques and her influences.



View of Koak's exhibition "The Driver" at Perrotin Hong Kong, 2022. Photo by Ringo Cheung. Image courtesy of the artist, Perrotin, and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

One of the greatest pleasures of viewing art in person is the chance to engage in conversations without words. I have always found it an incredibly intimate

experience to explore an artwork through its personal narrative, to see the artist's vulnerability materialise into visual manifestations through deliberate choices of mediums, materials and colours.

Coming across the works of San Francisco-based artist, who goes by the moniker Koak, does exactly that. Her new body of work, which are currently taking up the walls of Perrotin's gallery space in Hong Kong, speak to the universal angst that we have all come to be so familiar (even comfortable) with over the past couple of years. In bold, curvaceous lines and saturated tones, the subjects of Koak's canvases—namely feminine figures and felines—look as if they're trapped in a world of their own. While their jewelled tones and meandering bodies appear almost calming to the eyes at first sight, it does not take a genius to pick up on their ominous undercurrent—limbs twisted in unnatural angles, eyes swept with weariness wandering off aimlessly. The intensity of their psychological state juxtaposes the domestic spaces they take up, recalling the sense of pressurised space and isolation that is shared among the collective consciousness.

Her paintings involve a painstakingly lengthy labour of love that, in the case of larger work, begins with a pencil sketch which then gets redrawn, often up to 20 times or more, through a cycle of scanning, drawing, projecting and digital editing. Responding to specific moments that weave together the collective experience, it is not surprising to find out that Koak had conceived this body of work entirely during the pandemic, as a sort of "stand-in for the fear we might all be having about the outside world", says the artist in a recent interview with *Hi-Fructose*

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*Magazine*. Apart from tapping into themes of loneliness and dread from long-periods of cocooning indoors, the deliberate use of neon orange as a backdrop in some of the paintings recalls the blazing fires that swept through the northwest of San Francisco in the early autumn days of 2020.



View of Koak's exhibition "The Driver" at Perrotin Hong Kong, 2022. Photo by Ringo Cheung. Image courtesy of the artist, Perrotin, and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.



View of Koak's exhibition "The Driver" at Perrotin Hong Kong, 2022. Photo by Ringo Cheung. Image courtesy of the artist, Perrotin, and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

In fact, the title of this exhibition, "The Driver", which is taken from the headline work of the show, points to the conglomeration of different "personas" we take on that constitutes our identity through internalising different aspects of the surrounding world—and how we take control of the various identities on a daily basis. While developing this exhibition, Koak read cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter's *I Am a Strange Loop* (2007), in which he discusses how the self becomes a feedback "loop", or a subjective construction of disparate experiences that fold back and reflect on our psyches and thus impact the formation of the self. The book eventually inspired the only sculptural work that is displayed in the

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show, *Strange Loop* (2021), a large-scale bronze sculpture comprising three elongated feline figures, each with a distinctive character, whose bodies coil and curve to complement one another in a visually endless loop.

It's easy to find resonance in Koak's latest body of work, and perhaps that is the exact quality that makes them so captivating. We recently got in touch with the artist via email, and asked her to share more about the process of her art-making, and where she hopes her art will take her in the future.



Koak, *Strange Loop*, 2021, ferric nitrate patina on bronze, three figures; overall (approximate): 180 x 160 x 130 cm, Grumpy Cat: 95 x 72 x 134 cm, Happy Cat: 78 x

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192 x 62 cm, Sleepy Cat: 180 x 60 x 110 cm. Photos by Ringo Cheung. Images courtesy of the artist, Perrotin, and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

## **What are some of your earliest memories of art making?**

I've been told by my mother that it was always a part of my life—like so many children who grow up to be artists, it was just something that existed and never really went away. So in that sense, there isn't anything I can pinpoint...just a wash of memories—felt marker sketches on endless reams of perforated paper; an early version of a digital tablet designed in the 80's by both my parents so I could draw on the computer screen; the first experiences of sharing work through hanging drawings in the basement during my dad's band practices to get the group's critique. There were really so many forms of making art that permeated my early life.

## **How has your artistic practice evolved since and how do you see it evolving in the near future?**

Well, I think it snowballed, as it would for any child who loved creating and continued to do so into adulthood. But maybe the biggest shift came when I forced myself to stop and question why I thought it was an important thing to do, or essentially, what my purpose was in doing it. I think it's very easy when we're

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tumbling forward in life—acting like little snowballs, collecting bits as we go along—to forget what sort of trail we’re leaving behind and where exactly we’re heading. And both of those are incredibly important questions.

My answer was very clear. I’ve always wanted to make work in order to communicate with others visually what felt difficult to say through words. Even looking back to when I first started exhibiting, it was always about using art as a form of dialogue. And once I was able to name that as the essential part of why I make, it felt like a weight was lifted off of needing to prove myself. Like in those moments when I felt lost with a piece, I was able to ask myself if it achieved that goal, and if it had, I’d done my job. Which was quite liberating because it allowed me to get the seriousness out of the way and to open up to being a bit more explorative and playful.

As far as the near future, or whatever futures lie beyond that, all I can hope is that I continue to fulfill that purpose with a sort of increasing strength.



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Koak, *The Driver*, 2022, flashe and acrylic on canvas, 177.8 x 264.2 cm. Photo by Chris Grunder. Image courtesy of the artist, Perrotin, and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

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(Left) Koak, *Safely*, 2022, flashe, acrylic and graphite on linen mounted to panel, 168.9 x 140.3 cm; (Right) Koak, *My Teeth*, 2022, flashe, acrylic, chalk, and graphite on canvas, 149.9 x 115.6 cm. Photos by Chris Grunder. Images courtesy of the artist, Perrotin, and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

## **Who or what is your biggest inspiration? And how do they inspire you?**

Unfortunately I don't think I can fully answer that question. The idea of having a single big inspiration has always been a little problematic for me. There's something about it that entails a certain form of idolization that glosses over how fallible everything (and everyone) inherently is. I tend to find myself more inspired by random small moments...the little glimpses that run the gamut of life. Brave moments when I've seen my friends steady themselves through a difficult time; the

tender way two figures touch in a painting, the curl of a smiling lip in a sculpture; a line in a poem, or the colour of the sky as it meets the ocean...Maybe I would say my biggest inspiration is just how incredibly immense the act of living is, to be able to take in all of the things we are, to magpie the moments around us that move us, to hold them, and to build new things out of all we soak up.

**You are experimental in the use of mediums, techniques and tools. Do you have a favourite?**

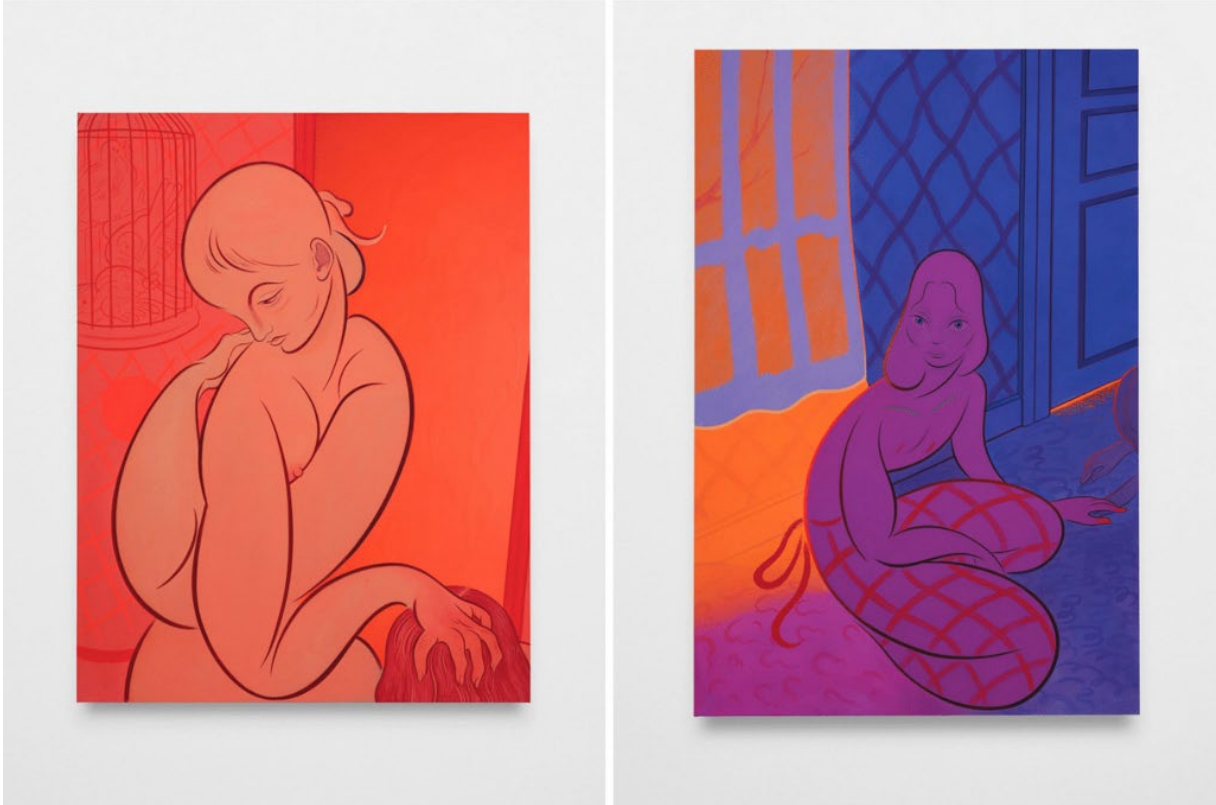
I would say right now that it's the system I've built for filtrating my paint water, which in some strange way falls under all three of those categories. Essentially, I collect my acrylic waste water and then use a chemical process to flocculate out the paint, which allows me to throw the cleaned grey water down the drain without releasing plastics back into the environment. The process leaves me with a kind of paint sludge, which then dries out into a chalk in a range of colours, depending on what was currently being worked on in studio. I've been storing this chalk with the hope of incorporating it back into cast sculptures in the future.

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(Left) Koak, *My Cage*, 2021-2022, flashe, acrylic, and graphite on linen mounted to panel, 149.9 x 115.6 cm; (Right) Koak, *The Cocoon*, 2021-2022, acrylic, Flashe, oil, chalk, pastel, graphite, and casein on canvas, 243.8 x 162.6 cm. Photos by Chris Grunder. Images courtesy of the artist, Perrotin, and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

## How do you view the role of colour in your art?

For me, colour is the quickest form of achieving emotional resonance. It's generally immediately read and instantly felt, and because of that, it's a bit like the first impression—giving the viewer the first note or mood before the content of the piece is taken in, and in turn hopefully can then enrich or challenge the tone or narrative of the painting.

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Koak at work in her studio. Image courtesy of the artist, Perrotin, and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

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Koak working on *The Cocoon*, 2021–2022. Image courtesy of the artist, Perrotin, and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

**What are some of the most indispensable items in your studio?**

Possibly my pencil sharpener? Which beyond its intended purpose, also plays a major role in creating a bin filled with shavings that I sift in order to create my own graphite powder, which I then make paint with. I do this, rather than using store-bought graphite powder, because I like to keep small fragments of shaved pencil wood in the mix, by using a particular flour sifter, which then adds a bit more body to the paint.

**How did female and feline figures become the main protagonists in your artworks?**

It's what I know, femininity and cats. Those two things have been a steady part of my life for as long as I can remember, and in that way they are a sort of framework for how I view the world. I would say, however, that I generally don't see my figures as distinctly female; it's more that they're a discussion about femininity, which is something that is not inherently tied to gender.

**If you could travel back to any time in art history, which period would you choose and why?**

I would stay here in this moment. Part of the beauty in looking back at historical periods in art is that we're looking back at them through the context of our current time. The work from those eras is changed by our experience of living now—romanticized from a sort of longing across distance—and I think that longing does a great deal to inspire us and push us into new ways of seeing. So I would rather

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stay here, in our fresh moment of the unknown, looking back at past movements with an eagerness to explore what's next.



Koak at work in her studio. Image courtesy of the artist, Perrotin, and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

## **"Koak: The Driver"**

21 May – 30 July 2022

Perrotin, Hong Kong



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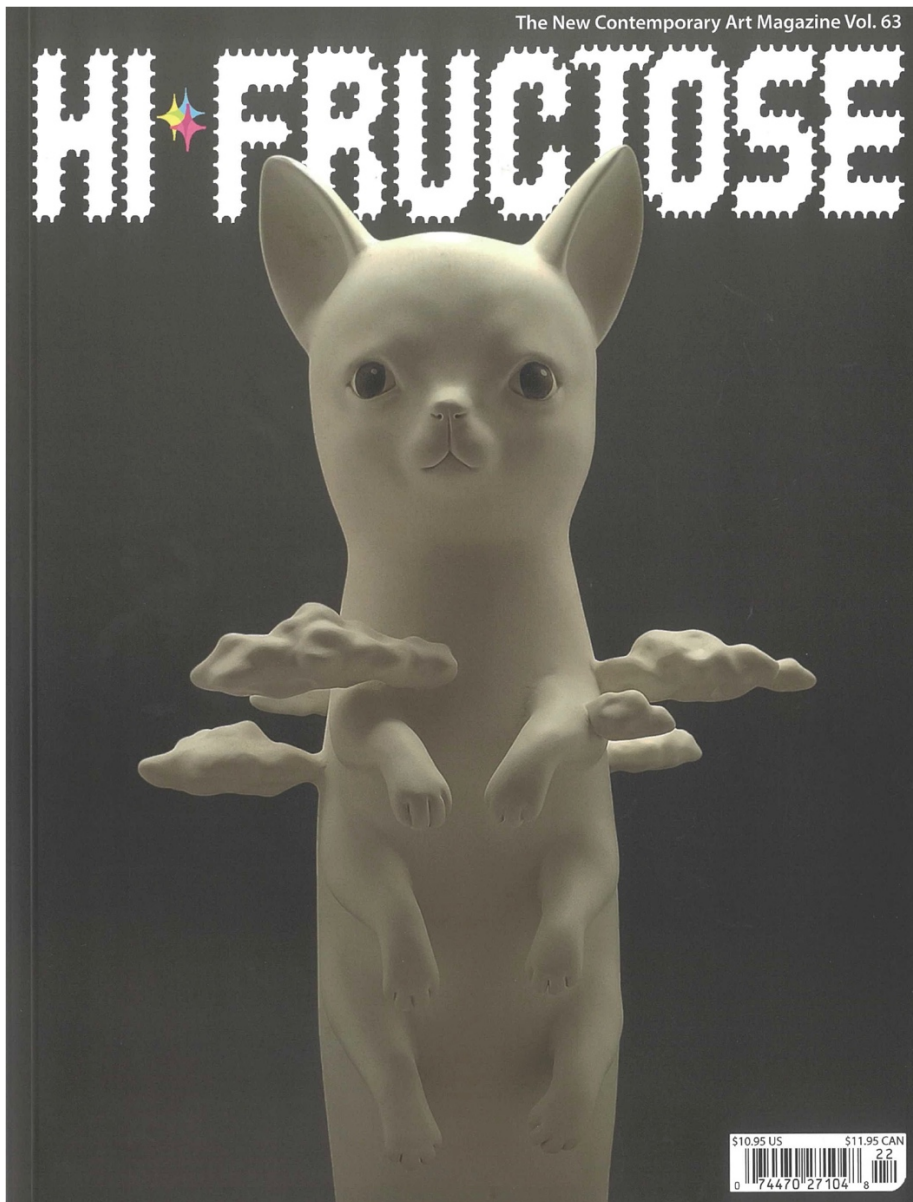
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# HI-FRUCTOSE

Schuster, Clayton, "A Return to Feeling: The Dynamic and Emotion-infused Art of Koak," *Hi-Fructose*, June, 2022



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*A Return  
To Feeling  
the dynamic  
and emotion-infused  
art of  
Hoak*

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OPPOSITE:

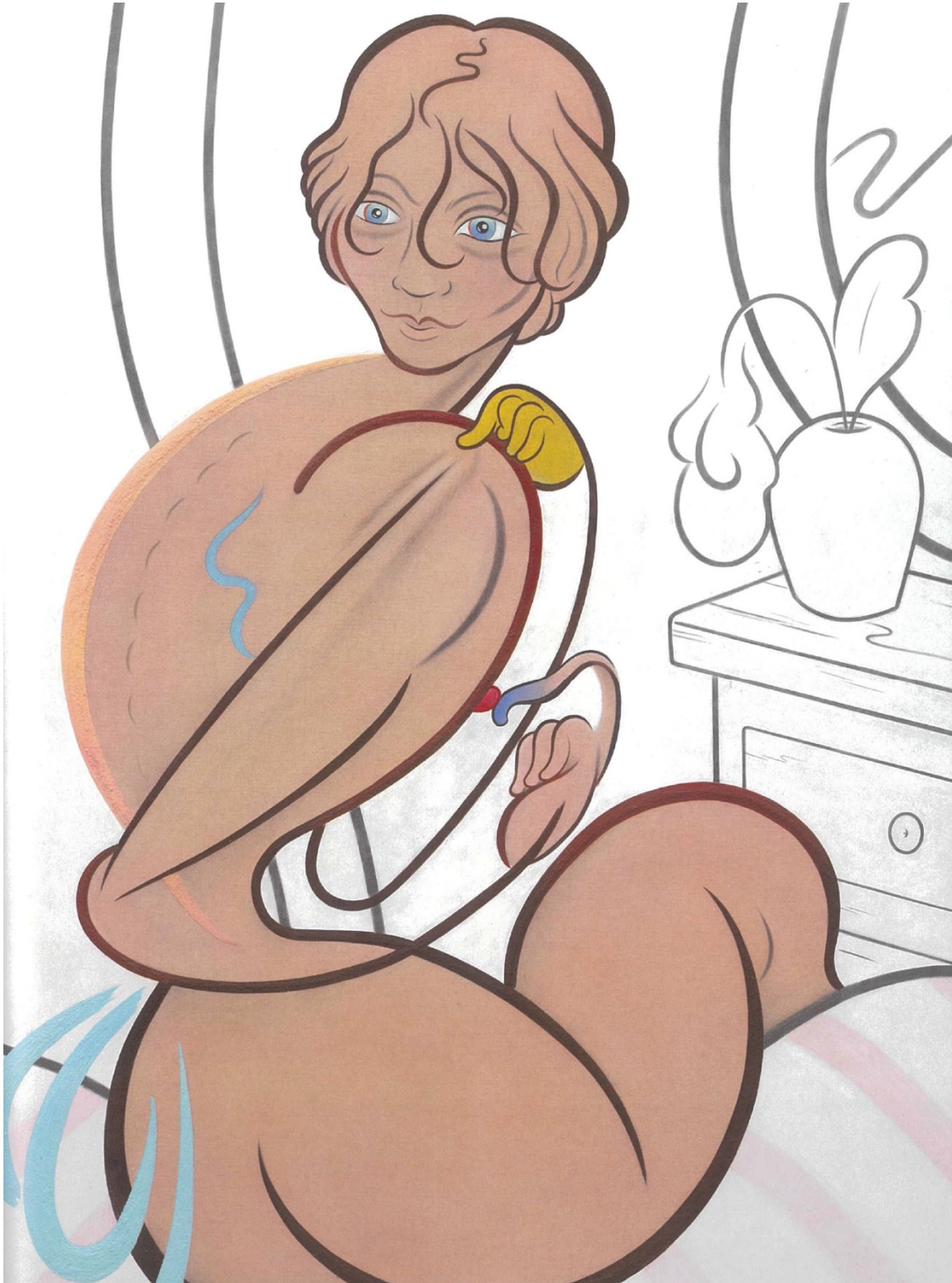
"Bridge", acrylic, graphite, chalk, pastel, pigment, and  
oil on linen, 77 1/2" x 62", 2020

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By Clayton Schuster

Images courtesy of Altman Siegel, Perrotin, Union Pacific galleries, and the artist

"Color for me is very much about that initial emotional impact; it is almost like a precursor to the mood of a painting," says Koak. She says this while reflecting on her latest set of works for a show called *The Driver*, which will be on view between May 21 and July 9 at Perrotin Hong Kong. "It was important," she continues, "that the colors for those works felt like too much, like the volume was up too loud on too many different thoughts, but at the same time all this incongruity managed to create a new sort of strange harmony."

The colors in question mix neons with jewel tones in a way that evokes something partway between an acid flashback of '80s graphics and haute couture jewel tones—the meeting point of high fashion and trashy fun. "I wanted to see if there was a way to push the color beyond that, into something almost calming," Koak says. This pursuit began after Koak's first post-lockdown forays into the outside world, driving up and down the California coast. It was a re-discovering. Koak was born and raised in Michigan, but California has been her home for more than two decades. Yet, after "cocooning" for nearly a year due to COVID; after seeing the sky bloom a Mars-grade orange due to wildfires; after seeing our social fabric teased by the gut check of civic unrest—there was something new again about experiencing the brightness of the coast she chooses to call home.

The colors of her latest works (which will debut in person at Perrotin) are all the distrustful characters that have burrowed into our collective psyche over the last year and refuse to be evicted. And that color is also the pink of the flowers on the ice plants that line the purlieu between highway and beach—that stare worshipping and hopeful to the sun.

"I have always thought color feels like the closest thing visual artists have to sound, because it creates an immediate emotional

"IT WAS IMPORTANT THAT THE COLORS FOR THOSE WORKS FELT LIKE TOO MUCH, LIKE THE VOLUME WAS UP TOO LOUD ON TOO MANY DIFFERENT THOUGHTS, BUT AT THE SAME TIME ALL THIS INCONGRUOUSNESS MANAGED TO CREATE A NEW SORT OF STRANGE HARMONY."

OPPOSITE: "Trimmed", oil, acrylic, and graphite on muslin, 15" x 12", 2020

ABOVE: Koak in her studio, photo courtesy of the artist and Perrotin

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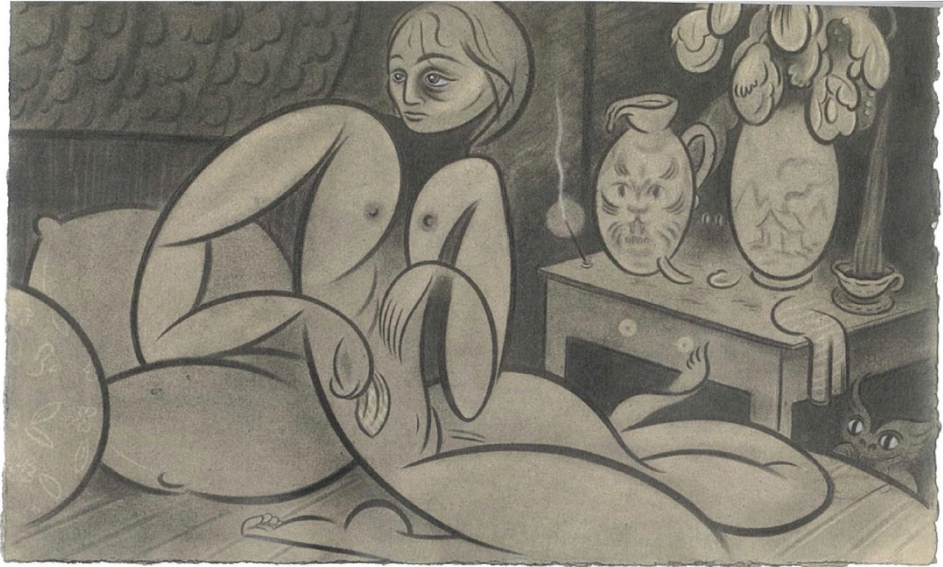


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*"IT IS OFTEN IMPORTANT TO ME TO PUT THINGS TOGETHER THAT WOULDN'T INITIALLY FEEL HARMONIOUS, OR OF THE SAME TONALITY."*

resonance," says Koak. "It is often important to me to put things together that wouldn't initially feel harmonious, or of the same tonality." Her thinking surrounding harmony, tonality, dissonance, and sound alludes to the vital role of music in her process.

Music is first a sweet reminder of home. Koak's family is highly musical, but she counts herself uniquely tone deaf among her parents and cousins and aunts and grandmother. So keeping the speakers in her studio blasting with the likes of Brian Eno, PJ Harvey, and more recent troubadours like Billie Eilish, helps her get out of her head as a painter and sculptor. It is a way to tune into the vibration of creating instead of getting stuck in the rote act of making one mark, then another, and filling in some color between the two.

"Since so much of my work centers on these sort of heightened emotional moments," she says, "it is often necessary to channel feelings or emotions while I am painting, in hopes that I pass it into the work. There are times when it is difficult to get there, and music helps."

In addition to music, improvisation is another key to Koak's process. Small works and drawings are generally completed immediately on the canvas or paper or wherever she is working. Often they will start as loose scribbles that eventually coalesce into an unforeseen whole. Something in the volutes and whorls reveals itself and she pursues, as an augur

draws the future from the flight path of an eagle or a vulture.

Larger pieces are explored through drafts and meticulous notetaking before Koak finds their final form. This process can be seen on her Instagram, where she not-infrequently posts images of her works with annotations for more colors in one spot, or her thought for how to create contrast between one area of the image and another.

The results in either case—whether wholly extemporaneous or more planned—are always a mix of surprises, challenges, and failures.

"And I am thankful for them, even when they're frustrating," she says. "I tend to like to work with techniques that I haven't tried before, and there's a lot of experimenting and testing, and regrouping that happens along the way. Many of the experiments, when they go well, get adopted into my practice and then snowball into new experiments and applications down the line."

The works that Koak puts through drafts can be redrawn twenty times or more. Her lifecycle of drafting can include drawing, scanning, projecting, and digitally editing the image projected at scale. That last is one of the most important steps for her larger works, since the impact of changes reads so much differently at the intended size.

PREVIOUS SPREAD, LEFT: "Axis", graphite and casein on pearl gray rag paper with found hand made paper inlay, 15 1/8" x 11 1/4", 2020  
PREVIOUS SPREAD, RIGHT: "California"

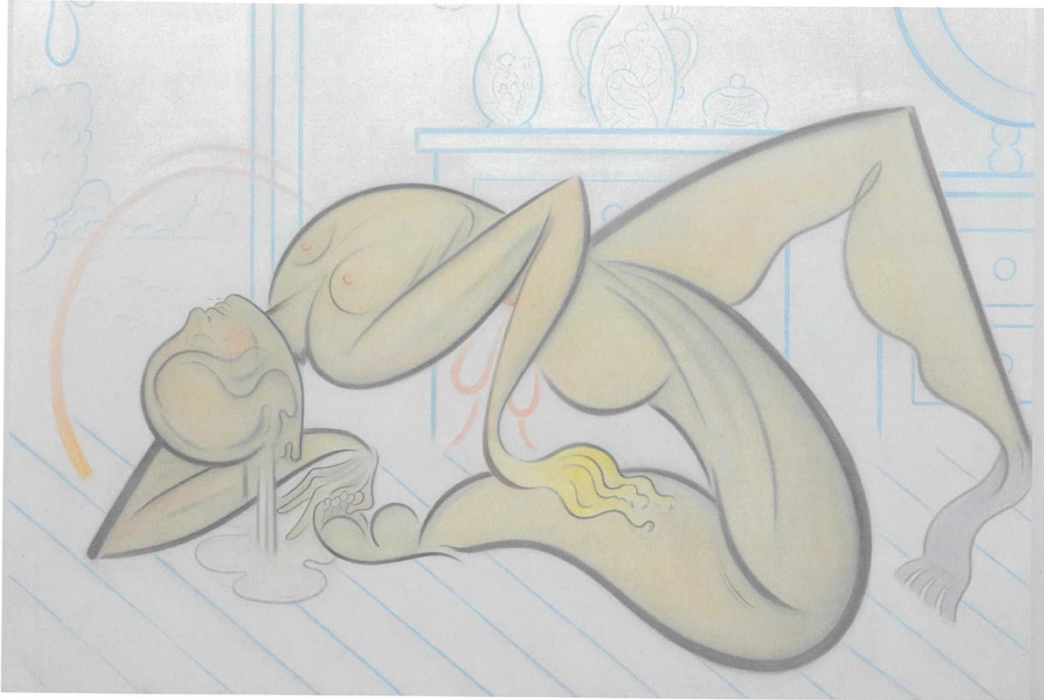
OPPOSITE: "Moat", acrylic, graphite, pastel, pigment, and oil on linen mounted to panel, 77 1/2" x 62", 2020  
ABOVE: "The Nest", graphite, ink, and casein on fawn rag paper, 10 x 15 1/4", 2020

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Then she might start some digital color studies, adjusting the whole image to a non-photo blue that will allow her to print out the work, draw over it, and rescan the new draft. The non-photo blue technique comes from Koak's background in comics (she received her MFA in the medium from the California College of the Arts) and allows for annotations in a pale shade of blue that scanners and printers can be set to ignore.

"I don't entirely believe that there's a single state of finished. It's usually more of a series of waves peaking," says Koak. "If the tension of striving after perfection is a sort of holding of your breath, then it's important to include a loose moment of exhale—a shaky pattern, a splatter of drips, something that my initial instinct wants to write off as lazy. It's important to me not to push things so far that they are infallible because they never could be, it's a sort of therapy to an anxious brain that wants to control everything."

This question of control is major theme underlying the recent work that will go on display at *The Driver*. Some of the

work is downright menacing. One shows a female figure in the foreground with her hair combed by a looming, dark, anonymous, figure in the background. The tension in the hair, the discomfort in the foregrounded figure's eyes. The stark ruby and sapphire color palette. And whose hand is it that caresses the foregrounded figure's forearm?

Koak has a penchant—she is *well known* even—for the playful way she addresses the human body. Limbs stretch and collide and curl and appear immense and weightless at the same time. It is just as believable in her world, as in the painting referenced above, that this hand on the forearm is the foregrounded figure's own, in an act of self-love, of that it belongs to someone outside the frame, belongs to us, belongs to someone that makes treats this wide-eyed person so full of distrust and disquiet and distress, as less a person with agency than an object to be fondled at whim.

"In a lot of ways, it's part of the same conversations of my earlier works. I have noticed that almost all of my exhibitions tend toward centering on ideas of duality, both in conscious and

'...DUALITY  
VERY OFTEN  
HAS TO DO  
WITH THE  
DISTINCTION  
BETWEEN  
OURSELVES  
AND OTHERS.'

ABOVE: "Having Feelings", acrylic, charcoal, chalk, graphite, and pastel on canvas, 84" x 108 1/2", 2020

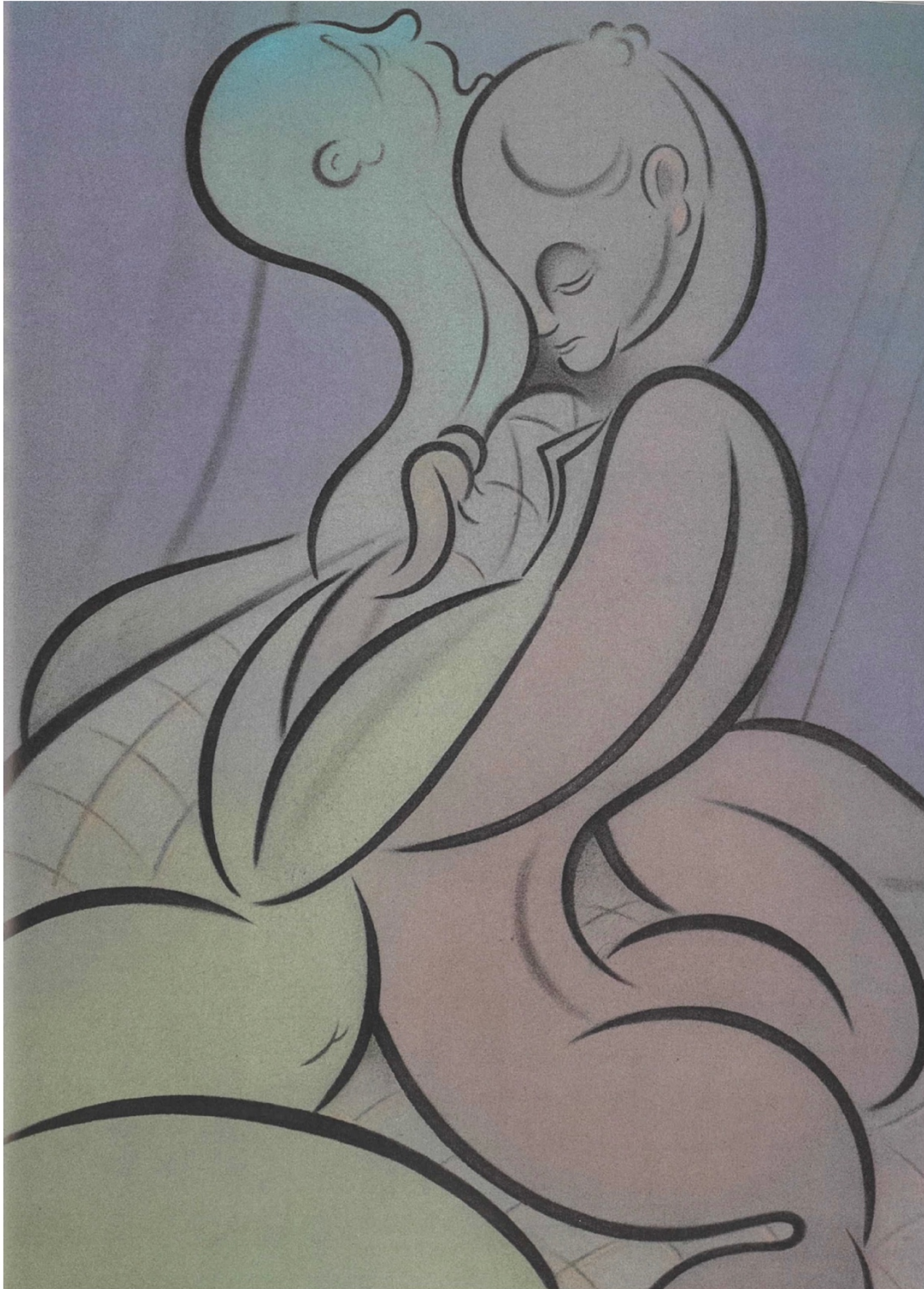
OPPOSITE: "To The Core", acrylic and graphite on muslin, 15" x 12", 2020

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'ESSENTIALLY,  
WE'RE IN THESE  
LITTLE FEEDBACK  
LOOPS WITH THE  
WORLD AROUND  
US, MAGPIE-ING  
THE BITS OF LIFE  
THAT SUIT US,  
UNTIL  
WE ARE US.'

OPPOSITE: "Nestled", 2021, flashe, acrylic,  
and pencil shavings on canvas,  
77" 1/2 x 62", 2021

LEFT: "Strange Loop", bronze,  
64" x 50" x 74"

unconscious ways—and that duality very often has to do with the distinction between ourselves and others," says Koak. "But for this show it is more about merging that duality, looking at the places where those parts get muddled, where we subtly absorb one another only to become more of ourselves."

In another painting, a woman lays restfully reposed along the floor while a cigarette burns in an ashtray and a cat watches her from a chair. Cats play an interesting role in her work: as gargoyles protecting, as sources of comfort and play. "Sometimes I think I've mythicized them a bit, turned them into dragons, or warped them into something that feels like a translation of a cat," she says. They watch and interact and play tricks.

In Koak's works, cats are the record of our daily lives that bears witness but cannot understand. They are a stone tablet in the desert. A record only that a record was made—of what? Unknown. There is no knowledge left in all the world that can teach us how to read their minds. And our inability to read the cats only casts starker relief on our inability to read other human figures, let alone read ourselves.

Below the cat's gaze and beside the reclined figure, there are sundry pieces of paper clipped and snipped next to a pair of scissors. Her hands are clasped, and she looks off-frame. Are the hands held in longing? Are they held in fear? Does she stare at the past? At the future? At someone who has just entered the door?

Koak says, "I've been thinking a lot about the self—or,

more specifically, how the self isn't really this lone single thing that we idealize it to be. To be a person often feels like being a conglomeration of different identities that get tangled together. And those identities are often constructed through internalizing aspects or personas of the surrounding world—a fiction, a part of a friend or loved one, a stand-in for broader societal role, a historical trope, or an archetype reimagined. Essentially, we're in these little feedback loops with the world around us, magpie-ing the bits of life that suit us, until we are us."

While *The Driver* is set to premier in just a few weeks, Koak has many other projects at the ready to take its place. She is, for instance, learning how to flocculate the acrylic from her post-painting wastewater, which will be good for the environment and reward her with a bunch of acrylic paint that can be dried out and used on sculpture. Another project will span multiple galleries and center on the idea of heat and nature, which will include new paintings as well as bronzes and furniture.

More immediately, there's her residency at the Tamarind Institute in New Mexico, as well as large paintings to finish for upcoming shows in San Francisco and London. And, of course, her publication project *Penalty Club*.

"I think the most interesting projects to me are always the ones that present a puzzle," Koak reflects. "I like being challenged and I get incredibly bored if I'm not learning something new, so areas where different mediums clash together tend to be the places that I'm most interested in working." †

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# San Francisco magazine

“State of the Arts,” *San Francisco Magazine*, May 16, 2022

MODERN LUXURY

# San Francisco

+

SF Artist Kate Tova's  
New Fashion Line

## State OF THE ARTS

THE BAY AREA'S HOTTEST ARTISTS,  
GALLERIES & EXHIBITS

*"All the Flowers Are for Me" by  
Anila Quayyum Agha at the  
Exploratorium Through Jan. 29*

SANFRAN.COM

# december/january

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Now more than ever, the dialogues of the day play out through the visual arts. Here, the artists who lead the cultural conversation and ask the important questions that push us all forward.

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Louis Vuitton ambassador, model and equestrian Eve Jobs gracefully navigates life in and out of the ring—adding her own twist to it all.



ON THE COVER  
"All the Flowers Are for Me" by Anila Quayyum Agha at the Exploratorium through Jan. 29  
Photographed by Drew Baron, courtesy of The Columbia Museum of Art

## editor's note



Give yourself the gift of time (and a gorgeous closet) this holiday season with a subscription to ModLux.Rent.

and Jessica Martin, and learn about their latest projects. Their work continues to inspire new fans as they deliver beauty and meaning to our world.

Speaking of beauty, we're thrilled to announce the launch of ModLux.Rent—just in time for the holiday social season. It's a chic clothing subscription service with countless options for looking great during the holidays and beyond. And yes, the women in our office (and my wife) are buzzing about this platform, because it frees up time to spend with family and friends during the busiest time of the year. Here are a few of the looks that my colleagues and I loved immediately.

I wish you and your family the best for the holidays—filled with art and inspiration.

## Art City

It always makes me smile when people try to put a number on what fine art means to a community. Discussions arise about how much foot traffic galleries and museums bring to a city. And there's the impossible task of trying to measure what artists and creatives mean to all of us on a local, national and international scale.

We know artists are vitally important, and we know they make our cities, especially San Francisco, better places to live. Something even more tangible: Artists deliver joy daily, and that, of course, can never be discounted.

I always love putting together this issue, because my team and I get to review hundreds of Instagram feeds, visit terrific galleries and meet and speak with artists about their work. I had the



pleasure of interviewing Koak for our national artist showcase ("State of the Arts"). The artist, who will have a major show—*Letter to Myself (when the world's on fire)*—in January at Altman Siegel Gallery ([altmansiegel.com](http://altmansiegel.com)) to coincide with the renowned FOG Design+Art fair ([fogfair.com](http://fogfair.com)), told me her current work reflects the collective tension we've all felt the past few years.

"I've been envisioning the show I'm currently working on as a sort of letter to myself about that anxiety—a collection of paintings, drawings and installations that focuses on natural and environmental disasters, while also exploring the sense of surreal detachment, humor and even lightness that can accompany these darker experiences," says Koak.

In our story "Ways of Seeing," we catch up with more San Francisco artists, including Erin Hupp, fnnch, Tiffany Shlain



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PHOTOGRAPH BY MOJIB ZUBMAN; FASHION: PHOTOS COURTESY OF MODLUXURE RENT AND BRANDS



## Koak

Tightrope walking is something we've all done. Well, metaphorically. That's the feeling San Francisco-based artist Koak (@annakoak) embraces every day with her work. Her pieces are at once familiar and surreal. In other words, they reveal the human condition. "I don't particularly like to feel safe. I'm a bit addicted to not always knowing what I'm doing, and the unexpected hurdles that entails," she says. "So, challenging myself with new techniques, materials, processes or concepts is a key part to how I work. An example of this would be the way I incorporate the sifted pencil shavings from my drawings into my paintings. I can't recall when this started, but it's become a staple in the studio for building up my line work in paintings. Over the years, it's morphed, created new challenges, informed other works like sculpture or drawing."

Koak, who will have a major show—*Letter to Myself (when the world's on fire)*—in January at Altman Siegel Gallery (altmansiegel.com) to coincide with the renowned FOG Design+Art Fair (fogfair.com), has been lauded this year by *The*

San Francisco  
artist koak



PHOTO BY MARIA KANEVSKAYA

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Clockwise from top: 'Little Tuber' (2022, flashe and graphite on canvas) 61 inches by 48 inches; 'Dark Comdor' (2022, acrylic, graphite, flashe and chalk on linen) 79 inches by 59 inches; 'Strange Loop' (2021, bronze) 64 inches by 50 inches by 74 inches.

the general bombardment of anxiety that can sometimes border on the absurd. I've been envisioning the show I'm currently working on as a sort of letter to myself about that anxiety—a collection of paintings, drawings and installations that focuses on natural and environmental disasters, while also exploring the sense of surreal detachment, humor and even lightness that can accompany these darker experiences."

The artist, who also has upcoming shows in London's Union Pacific ([unionpacific.co.uk](http://unionpacific.co.uk))

and Seoul's Perrotin ([perrotin.com](http://perrotin.com)), says she's forever fine-tuning her work (the hue of a painting, the curve of a sculpture, the angle of a smile) until the notes feel right. "I keep nudging those small elements until they don't feel simple, bland or expected," she says. "It's not a work that feels happy or sad—but something at odds with itself, with depth and complexity. All of this is in the hope that the work resonates with what it's like to be human enough so that viewers can see a bit of themselves within it."



*New York Times* and *Galerie* magazine, and for good reason: Her work reflects our collective mood in an uncertain world. Call it an artistic barometer for the ages. "My current inspiration has been the sense of tension we've all been living through," she says. "The fear of fires and floods, worries about the future or just



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND ALTMAN SIEGEL, SAN FRANCISCO; THE ARTIST, ALTMAN SIEGEL, SAN FRANCISCO AND PERROTIN; THE ARTIST, ALTMAN SIEGEL, SAN FRANCISCO AND PERROTIN

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## JUXTAPOZ

Art & Culture

Pricco, Evan, "Koak is 'The Driver' Now," *Juxtapoz*, May 16, 2022



Dark Corridor, 2021-2022. All images Courtesy of the artist, Perrotin, and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

**When I was reading the press release for Koak's newest solo show, *The Driver*, her first show with Perrotin and opening at their Hong Kong space on May 21st, one line stood out: "shouldn't really go together." It was a comment made in regards to color choices, trying to blend colors that didn't really work together normally but created a new hue and balance. I love that insight about Koak because whether you see the works in person or on the screen, her colors are, indeed, new. Her characters of course are a hybrid and "about archetypes of self that we have that are developed throughout our life or are internalized by experience," as she has said in the past. And her colors are a hybrid as well.**

As the pandemic and our life in isolation has raged on, Koak's work has been a completely stunning metaphor of the times, whether a contemplative analysis of self or of looking out the proverbial window at others and their own personal sacrifices and feelings. "I can find myself in any of the pieces," Koak has said. "Some fragment of myself. A skewed mirror. A version that I felt once. But at the same time I can see each one entirely not as me. A fiction, a part of a friend or loved one, a stand-in for broader society, a historical trope, or an archetype reimagined."

*Text by Evan Pricco*

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# The New York Times

Loos, Ted, "Frieze Pulls Out All the Stops," *The New York Times*, October 9, 2021

## Frieze Pulls Out All the Stops

It's hard to miss the art being shown in the London fairs this fall. It's in the park, online and even in a gallery in Mayfair.



The painter who goes by Koak in her San Francisco studio with several works that will be at the London fairs. From left, "Nestled," "Away," "Into" and "California." Jim Wilson/*The New York Times*

SAN FRANCISCO — At [Frieze London and Frieze Masters](#), the twin art fairs taking place in the Regent’s Park from Thursday to Sunday, the booth-lined aisles will be filled with thousands of works of every imaginable variety.

Much of that art started in a studio like the one where the painter who goes by [Koak](#) was working for months on a tight deadline in the Dogpatch neighborhood here.

Koak’s work is being shown at Frieze London by [Union Pacific](#), a British gallery, and she wanted to be sure they had enough strong material. Frieze has nearly 160 dealers at its fair, which focuses on contemporary art.

“Deadlines are important,” Koak said as she stood on a paint-splattered tarp in front of five large canvases that would be offered at Frieze. “They crystallize things.” She is also presenting two bronze sculptures of cats.

The Frieze fairs did not happen in person last year, save for a few select events, but were replaced by digital versions. Though the shows have now returned to the Regent’s Park, with Covid [precautions](#) in place in the two tent-like structures, they won’t snap back to their exact 2019 forms.

“We’re going in two directions,” said Eva Langret, the artistic director of Frieze London. “We’re expanding the [digital footprint](#), but also thinking about physical shows.”

Frieze’s online viewing rooms, like those for other fairs, are expected to be regular features from now on. What’s more surprising is that Frieze has also opened a physical gallery in London, [No. 9 Cork Street](#), named for its Mayfair address.

It will have three rotating shows put on by galleries from all over the world. The first shows, on view now, come from the dealers James Cohan, Commonwealth and Council and Proyectos Ultravioleta.

“We want to support galleries year-round,” Ms. Langret said. “It’s premium space in London, which isn’t affordable for most dealers.”

The fair itself has many participants from New York, including Matthew Marks Gallery, Venus Over Manhattan and Casey Kaplan. Among the local London galleries, Timothy Taylor will show several sports-themed paintings of Black figures by Honor Titus, including two tennis pictures.

In the Union Pacific booth, Koak's paintings all have her signature style: Intensely colored, they suggest female figures, but don't fill in all the details. As Koak, 39, described it, "figurative, but playing with abstraction."

Her influences include Matisse — felt in the strongly delineated curves of the bodies in her pictures — as well as comic books. The paintings are the last step in a lengthy process that starts with a pencil sketch and involves scanning and reworking the compositions many times.

Koak said she thought of the fair as a "collapsed show," meaning that works normally on view for months in a gallery were seen for only a few days, but by many more people. And she said she did not tailor her art to appeal to a fair audience — but that in the selection of work, she was conscious of the intense competition for attention.

For instance, at Art Basel Miami Beach in 2019, "I had a sense that there would be a lot of colorful works," she said. "So I showed noncolorful drawings."

She added, "You can think about the context a little."

She has also decided to give away a few hundred limited edition prints of her work at the fair, with a few set aside for sale.

Union Pacific is part of the Focus section, for younger galleries, and Frieze also has new sections this year. One of those, [Unworlding](#), is being curated by Cédric Fauq and will look at social change, featuring works by Nora Turato, Ndayé Kouagou and Natacha Donzé, among others.

Also new is the Editions section, for works like prints, which tend to be less expensive than unique artworks.

“We want to encourage young collectors, and we’re thinking about affordability,” Ms. Langret said.

One of the galleries in Editions, [Cristea Roberts](#) of London, will be showing works by Michael Craig-Martin, Yinka Shonibare and Paula Rego, among others.

The price range is roughly \$1,500 to \$25,000, “which for an art fair is cheap,” said the gallery’s founder, Alan Cristea.

Mr. Cristea, who does seven or eight fairs a year, said that the pandemic had been a little easier to survive for print dealers.

“It’s hard to imagine someone spending \$20 million on a painting they haven’t seen in person, but with prints, as long as the client is familiar with the artist, they will spend money without seeing it in the flesh,” he said, noting that 2020 was a record year for the gallery “despite being closed half the time.”



Across the park, [Frieze Masters](#) has more than 130 galleries presenting older art. (Between the two fairs, dealers from 39 countries are represented.)

Mr. Cristea, who has shown at both fairs, said that art in Masters dated to the start of time — “from God onwards” — and noted that softer lighting and wider aisles meant that the experience was more leisurely.

“You can take time, and there’s less frenzy,” he added.

The New York photography dealer Bruce Silverstein will be exploring seriality in his booth. Among the artists featured with several images each are Alfred Stieglitz and Bill Cunningham; a photographic triptych circa 1980 by the German artists Bernd and Hilla Becher depicts the industrial landscapes they became known for.

Frieze Masters has a new feature, too: Stand Out, a section curated by Luke Syson, the director of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, England.

Nathan Clements-Gillespie, the artistic director of the fair, said the intent was to “show decorative art in a different light — taking the decorative out of the decorative arts,” focusing on sculptural skill and conceptual ingenuity.

Galleries in the section include London's Prahlad Bubbar, Alessandra Di Castro of Rome and Gisèle Croës of Brussels.

Ms. Croës has been an art dealer since the 1970s, with a specialty in archaic Chinese bronzes. "It's the first ages, the first dynasties, of Chinese art," she said.

She will show around 60 pieces, most of them small, with the earliest dating to the sixth century B.C. They include a bronze belt plaque, a tinned-bronze goat plaque and a bronze dagger. Perhaps most appealing is a large earthenware polychrome camel and rider made during China's Tang dynasty.

"I've always been interested in rituals, and these bronze works are part of rituals," Ms. Croës said. She added that some of the objects, made by tribes on the steppes of what is now Mongolia, are "things that you can wear, since nomads didn't have houses."

The Frieze brand is probably more associated with work like Koak's, given that it publishes a contemporary art magazine, with eight issues a year, and pursues projects like No. 9 Cork Street.

But Ms. Croës said that she relished having her ancient objects associated with cutting-edge works.

"The combination is what makes it interesting," she said. "Modern art and ancient art, it shows that we have continuity."

Ms. Croës added, "I believe the past is mixed with the future."

Terrebone, Jacqueline, "Next Big Things: Koak," *Galerie*, December 18, 2020

# NEXT BIG THINGS

The extraordinary breadth of talent in the world of contemporary art grows exponentially each year. Poised for stardom, these 22 emerging artists have been nominated by a panel of esteemed curators, museum directors, gallerists, and designers for their inspiring, singular visions. Now in its second edition, *Galerie's* annual list showcases the creatives shaping the future

BY LUCY REES AND JACQUELINE TERREBONNE

## KOAK

Although the work of San Francisco-based Koak may be influenced by comics, her vision brings a depth and beauty that go far beyond fanboy fodder. Her moody lines swirl and sway until they reveal a woman's voluptuous figure. Sometimes vulnerable, other times flirtatious, her painting style conjures emotion through seemingly simple strokes that compel one to linger. **PERSONAL STYLE:** "My work stems from a desire to examine human interactions and connections," she says. **UP NEXT:** Following last March's "Return to Feeling" exhibition at Altman Siegel in San Francisco, Koak's work is on display in "100 Drawings from Now" at the Drawing Center in New York through January 17, 2021. She's also planning a small solo presentation in early 2021 and will be included in a group exhibit at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. [altmansiegel.com](http://altmansiegel.com)

**"The women in Koak's paintings transmit to me different states of emotion. They are fun and playful, and at the same time very deep."** Zélika García, founder, Zona Maco

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Artist Koak with  
her work *Blind  
New World* (2017).

# C MAGAZINE

Chandler, Elizabeth Khuri, "The Unmissable List," *C Magazine*, 2018



## The Unmissable List

Seven must-see art happenings to mark on your calendar this winter

**I** At her studio in the Mission District of San Francisco, the artist known as **Koak** sits surrounded by her pastel color-washed works depicting curvilinear women: women chopping, women dancing, women gnawing on things. It's all from her upcoming show at Ghebaly Gallery in Los Angeles, for which Koak thought about a woman in the home, imagining that place as a heat trap, where "all this energy is building up and her spirit breaks that apart," she says. The artist spent her teens in Santa Cruz and graduated from California College of the Arts with an MFA in comics. Picked up by dealer Claudia Altman-Siegel, the oeuvre of the artist—who is a recipient of the Liquitex Research Residency at Minnesota Street Project—incorporates an illustrative sensibility with painterly, Picasso-like compositions. "Every time I make a piece, I always try to convey a mix of emotions: happiness, fear, guilt, tenderness...connection," she says. "Koak," Dec. 15-Jan. 19, 2245 E. Washington Blvd., L.A., 323-282-5187, [ghebaly.com](http://ghebaly.com).

Written by **ELIZABETH KHURI CHANDLER**

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## ART MAZE Mag

Nafziger, Christina, "Learning to be Comfortable on Uncertain Ground," *ArtMaze Magazine*, September 4, 2018

Koak's bold and defining lines create curves that outline twisted bodies, expressing a range of raw emotions. It is easy to get lost in the flowing curves of her figures, as each winding limb can at once create such wild movements and tranquil poses. Like that of the cubist masters, Koak's paintings and drawings abstract the figure; bodies are simplified, features are broken down. Hands become circles and limbs become a series of ovals, reducing the body to simple shapes, forming a beautiful universality within the narrative of her work. The subjects in the artist's compositions appear to be part graphic novel, part art historical allegory, giving birth to an altogether new expression that resonates loudly in a contemporary world. As Koak explains that being an artist is part of who she is, art has become her language, her voice. In her case, a picture is unmistakably worth a thousand words, as each of her compositions contains insurmountable emotion, with each figure embodying joy, anger, sadness.

Join us in conversation as we delve deep into Koak's artistic practice, discussing the influence of blues music in her work, the significance of art in communities, and the possibilities of an unexpected narrative.

## *Koak: learning to be comfortable on uncertain ground*

[www.koak.net](http://www.koak.net)

Text and interview by Christina Nafziger

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"...those moments of discomfort and failure are part of the process. You have to show up and sit through them — you have to realize that failure is recurring, that being blocked is part of the process, that those moments are necessary and meant to be waded through but never escaped. I can never get out of the moments of being blocked, but that's what gets me through. "

- Koak



**AMM: What inspired your interest in creating art? Were you brought up in a creative environment?**

Koak: Creativity was an inseparable part of life growing up. From the time I could hold a crayon I loved to draw, and, in that way, it became a natural form of expression. Both my mom and stepfather, on top of having intense careers, celebrated their creativity in different ways — through music, art, and dancing. I think growing up in a house filled with band practices and art supplies definitely gave me the support to start making artwork at a very early age, but it's difficult to pinpoint my desire to make art as existing after a moment of inspiration. There was never any question of becoming anything else — it was just who I was.

**AMM: Tell us about your journey forming your incredibly unique and compelling style. What were some ups and downs you experienced along the way?**

Koak: The core of my work has always been about language — about how to utilize imagery as communication. In that way, the style of my work feels to me like the sound of my voice — something difficult to focus on when you're in the thick of talking. I've had different things to say at different points in my life, and each time the intonation of my work has shifted to fit the narrative. It has involved a process of re-learning how to speak in order to tell the story. In that way, there haven't been ups or downs to the formation of my voice, as it's more something that was grown out of necessity. There were times, however, when I said embarrassing things.

**AMM: The winding and twisted shapes of your figures are highly expressive, creating what seems to be an inner turmoil in the subjects. Can you speak to this mood present in your work?**

Koak: There have been many instances in life where, despite having my own vivid experiences, I am distrustful of my narrative. There's that little voice that sneaks in and questions my perspective, shades happiness, discredits the validity of anger — I think this is a common thing for people, and in particular for many of the women I know. It's this experience of going through life, learning to be comfortable on uncertain ground, that has made the grey areas, the tumultuous, or the sense of opposing forces, important aspects in my work. I am more interested in the areas that seem uncertain, not only because they feel more realistic, but also because they allow space for mystery and diversity — by that I mean more than one point of view or a singular way of being.

**AMM: Your figures and compositions have a modernist flavour to them, with qualities that bring to mind Frances Bacon or perhaps the work of artists working in cubism. What artists inspire you stylistically?**

Koak: I pull a great deal from music, from thinking about pacing, rhythm, repetition, and

tone. For a while, my comics looked up to the great blues musicians, Skip James or Lottie Kimbrough. Now, my paintings and drawings pull from music as well. It is very common for me to listen to a single album, or handful of albums, repeatedly while creating a show. As far as visual artists, everything I can get my eyes on. There are elements in nearly any era of art that I can, or have, found inspiring. Francis Bacon for his ability to turn figuration into raw emotion, Bruegel for his wickedness, Käthe Kollwitz for her politics, Charles Burchfield for his ability to bring a canvas to life — I think every form of art holds some form of inspiration.

**AMM: Although your figures do not depict realistic features of a person, do you use real human subjects as your reference? If you draw from life, do you use live models?**

Koak: I don't. The work is very rarely about an individual as much as it's about the universal. Just as it isn't about nudity, as much as using the naked form as the quickest way to tap into expressions of emotion and the physicality of being human. The bodies I'm drawing are not dependent on physical realism as much as they are rooted in symbolism and the emotive connections tied to those symbols.

There's portraiture, like Alice Neel or David Hockney, where I'm in awe of their ability to capture their subjects candidly in an amalgam of moments that could never be achieved without the process between artist and model. Someday, I think I might like to attempt portraiture like that, but I think in the wake of a history of the clothed artist musing over a naked model, it's too soon. I can't do it. Maybe in the context of a life drawing class, but for the purposes of making work, I can't imagine looking at someone naked and having to think the sort of thoughts that are necessary for me to make the work. The process is too personal, and I would end up feeling like I was the naked one. It works much better for me to close my eyes, grit my teeth, and put my brain down into those parts I'm trying to draw on the page.

**AMM: How do you choose which mediums you will finish a piece with? Do you think certain compositions lend themselves better to specific mediums, or does it depend more on what materials you are in the mood to use?**

Koak: I always know whether a piece will be a painting, drawing, or sculpture before I start. It's inherent to the work. From the moment that the thought of the piece exists, it is tied to its medium. It feels very unbreakable to me to imagine changing it.

**AMM: You have an MFA in Comics from California College of the Arts. Tell us about your experience in this program. As comics often form a narrative, do you feel your paintings and drawings do this as well?**

Koak: The program was founded (and is

chaired) by my very dear friend and editor Matt Silady. My experience was sleepless, grueling, and incredibly good. It is a whirlwind of change and you don't come out the same. When I went to the program I needed that, to be pushed out of retreat and back into the world of deadlines and being challenged — back into the world of interacting with insanely talented and passionate humans.

As far as narratives in my art...I think everything forms a narrative, especially the things that do not force that narrative onto us. You see a slip of folded paper lying on the sidewalk, and, because you don't already know the path that brought that scrap to that point, a narrative of possibilities is formed. It is not just some mundane slip that should've ended up in the bin after you went for groceries; it has the infinite possibility of being a love note, a first poem, a critical plan—it becomes possibility. Finding that line between offering possibilities and not forcing them is one of the most critical balances that I'm pushing for in my work.

**AMM: When it comes to your process of creating a single piece, what have you discovered to be your biggest challenge as an artist?**

Koak: It's a toss-up between my mind and my body — I'm not sure which one wins as far as getting in the way. My body hurts, gets stiff, or feels frustrated by the amount that I ask it to work. A part of my brain constantly needs to be reminded that there is a purpose to this — that somehow it helps — that I am pushing myself — that being an artist isn't selfish. That last part is the most difficult. Growing up in a country that does very little to support the arts, that sees art classes as the first things to be cut from public schooling, that knows too well the confusion that spreads across non-artists' faces when you tell them your profession — even though I deeply know the importance and power of art in communities, there is still that ingrained stigma that tells you it is trivial.

**AMM: Having lived in San Francisco for many years, how would you describe the art scene there? How has your experience living there impacted your practice?**

Koak: People here are thinking and caring and making. They show up for one another. They push themselves. They work hard to keep the communities alive, but we need more support from the communities around us. We need more arts writers and patrons. We need someone to step in and contextualize what's happening here. The hardest thing to come to terms with — outside the fact that we've lost too many brilliant artists and galleries due to the cost of living — is the knowledge that even if you survive and put your heart into it, the chances of being recognized by our community is low. It's not that there isn't anything important happening here, but there needs to be more support.

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It's impacted my practice in that it's made me feel a part of something. When I first started making and showing the sort of work I'm doing now, I was terrified that I wouldn't have a place in the art community. Instead, they made me feel incredibly welcomed and at home.

**AMM:** *Do you ever experience creative blocks? If so, what never fails to get you out of them?*

**Koak:** There is a difference between getting through versus getting out. I was sick a lot as a child, and one of the few things that got me through the moments of discomfort and loneliness was the ability to project my thoughts to the time when I would inevitably be better. That thought, that this would pass, was the one thing that quelled that skin-crawling feeling of not having agency over my body. But it was also, in a way, the knowledge that I would be sick again. That being ill wasn't a singular moment of discomfort that could be escaped, but an ebb in the process of living that would return, that would need to be gone through again.

Making art is like that. There are blocks when you can't work, there are blocks when you are trying to start again after a long time off, there are blocks when you're just at the finish line and you feel so defeated that you want to tear everything up and start over, or maybe just give up and lie on a beach somewhere pretty. It's unbearably uncomfortable sometimes, especially in the moments when you think it should be easy — but those moments of discomfort and failure are part of the process. You have to show up and sit through them — you have to realize that failure is recurring, that being blocked is part of the process, that those moments are necessary and meant to be waded through but never escaped. I can never get out of the moments of being blocked, but that's what gets me through.

**AMM:** *Do you have any projects in the works right now that you would like to share with us?*

**Koak:** I'll be in a few group shows this summer, but mostly I'm focusing on a solo exhibition with Ghebaly Gallery (in Los Angeles) that opens in December. After that I'll have a solo with Union Pacific early next year in London.



Image (p. 18):  
Koak  
*The Film*  
graphite, watercolor ink, and casein on pearl grey rag paper  
16 x 13 inches

Photo: Copyright The Artist  
Courtesy of American Medium

Image (p. 16):  
Koak  
*All Her Darlings*  
graphite, acrylic ink, watercolor, and casein on white rag paper  
84 x 68 inches

Photo: Copyright The Artist  
Courtesy of Walden Gallery

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“Koak Interview,” *Periodico*, June 27, 2018

Maña Ind.  
MINDAG **PERIÒDICO** & COLAB.  
PUBLICACIÓN CASUAL DE PROYECTOS, PERSONAS Y COSAS

## Koak

### Interview

**I think your drawings speaks by themselves, but I would like to know the person behind those drawings.**

**How would you describe the path from comics to your current work?**

I don't think it's necessarily that I've come to my current work from comics—fine art and comics have equally been a part of my practice since I started making work publicly as a teen.

To me, the two things—exhibitions/fine art and comics—share a very synonymous language.

Many of the same forms of articulation or modes of conveying information can be applied to both. At their most basic level, they are both dependent on how the eye follows a narrative across space—be it the page of a comic, the surface of a painting, or a physical installation.

Both of these practices will always be a part of my life—they will continue to inform one another, and their presence in culture around me, both historically and contemporarily, will continue to influence my practice.



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**I find opposites in your drawings: dark/shining colours, naked/not erotic, suffer/abstracts, Am I wrong? Or what can you say about this opposites?**

Opposition plays a very large part of my work. I am always interested in creating moments of tension, because those little conflicts in an image are what bring a sense of life to the work. Paintings—like a good novel, film, or song—are made dynamic and compelling through tension. It's duality, tension, and conflict that drive the story forward, create mystery, or add the depth of perspective.



It is also very important to me—especially now as an artist living and working in the current hyper-polarized political climate of the US—to strive to make work that exists in the spaces beyond extreme polarities. There is nothing in this world, as far as I know, that exists simply or just as it's seen, so it is very important for me to create work that reflects that sort of complexity, that goes beyond the surface extremities. Even if the work I'm making just contains a single figure, ensuring that figure has a sense internal opposition is an essential element to my process.



**How did you started drawing? At what age?**

Art was always something that was present in my life, even as a very young child. My family was very supportive. Both of my parents played music and my mother always encouraged me to draw. When I was a teen, it became a more regular, and public, aspect of my life. I started making comics at around 15 years old and showing my paintings at local coffee shops and dive bars. There was a certain aspect of complication to my teenage years, and making art was the lifeline that I needed to communicate and connect to others.

**What did you find in the formal education?**

I think the biggest transformation I had was learning how to not close myself off to the amazing wealth of artwork we have available to us at the moment.

There is a tendency that I think a lot of artists have, where, when you are still in the process of forming your own voice, you shut down to taking anything new in. You don't want to look at work you don't like because you are judgmental of it, and you don't want to look at the work you aspire to, because, quite honestly, it's physically painful.

That changed for me when I got my undergrad. I pulled out of myself and started looking at work that challenged my view point of what art was. I let myself be uncomfortable. It became important to be very open about what others' conception of art was, what "good" was, and to look at everything with the intention of how I could learn from it.

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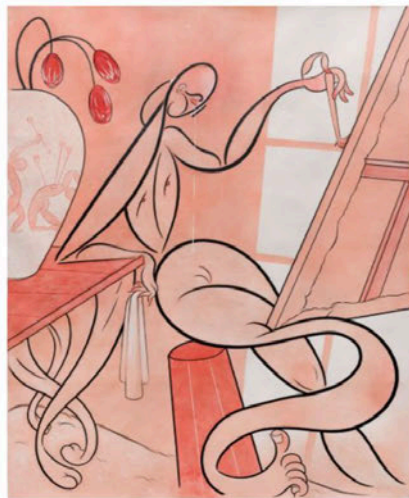
## Do you have a work routine? Where does the drawings are born?

I think my work routine is to always work, which is something I've been slowly trying to dismantle. The last two years have been very busy, which has been wonderful in the sense that I love to work, but also very destructive to the ideal of living.

I'm woken up by the thoughts of everything that I feel I need to do during the day. There is generally a sense of urgency to everything that, in my heart, I know isn't really urgent in the scope of life.

Maybe this is myself being overly honest, but it is an aspect of living in a world that feels as if it moves faster than you are able to breathe. I jump straight into working—whether that's means going to the studio, where I work on larger pieces, generally with an assistant, or from home, where I work on smaller drawings and I am able to spend time with my cat and partner.

In a way the concept of having a work routine, to me, is an irrelevant thing. Routines are flexible ideas that mold themselves to your deadlines—they are driven by the urgency of vision and time.



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## What feelings are present when you draw?

Whatever the piece I'm working on asks for. So much of the work is about bringing emotions to life in the work, so it's very important for me to kindle an emotional resonance with the intention of the piece—to create a spark of the feelings that are needed by the work, and then to give them over to the page, or the canvas, or the clay.

## What are you looking for in the spectator?

A human.



## How did you find this line, this kind of expression?

A line is a very powerful tool. It is the simplest of things, yet can be used to convey all the intensity of life that language cannot contain. Any sort of flex or bend in its curve, any change in the tone of how it's applied (wavering, bold, hesitant), will change its expression and the resulting emotion in how we experience it.

Because my work is about communication—and communication very often needs to be clear yet nuanced—the line must be the champion of my work. It is always the thing that I put first in order to push the narrative forward.

## What are you working on now?

Right now I've just finished up a body of work for a solo show at Walden gallery in Buenos Aires, which will be running until June 19th. The series, called *Seed For Planting*, is based on a quote by Kathe Kollwitz; "The seed for planting must not be ground." Kollwitz's quote refers directly to losing her son who fought in World War I; in it she refers to him as the *sowing* and her the *cultivator*.

## What can you tell me about your influences, music, books, movies, ordinary life?

I've been listening repeatedly to Brian Eno's song *Dead Finks Don't Talk* from his album *Here Come the Warm Jets*. There is something about it that feels like the musical version of what I desire from art exhibitions.

Here's this song with so many parts that feel disparate, almost like characters in a play, each with their own accompanying musical sets. But everything, all these different tones, come together to make something that is lush and incomparable. I think that it is the perfect song for what I would hope an exhibition to be, especially during this moment in time, when so much of the art being made is a collage of elements from the past, a remix of history.

I am influenced by a lot of things, but at the moment, that is what I've been inspired by the most.



I've thought a lot about this quote in life—not only as how it pertains to mothers and caregivers—but also how it pertains to women as creators. I don't know what it's like to be a man making art, but I know from my own experience, and from communicating with women around me, that the process of making art for many women is one of cultivation. There is something in it that requires growing a life, and then putting that life out into the world and trusting that it will exist on its own—that it will find a path beyond you, have its own sense of existence, and continue to grow beyond your hopes.

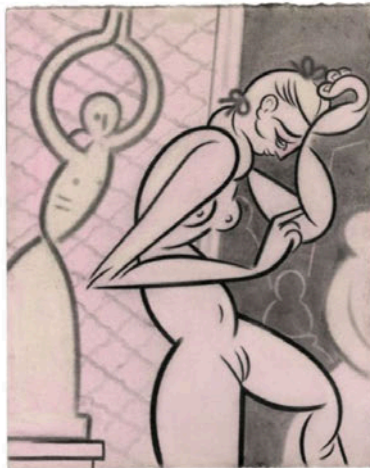
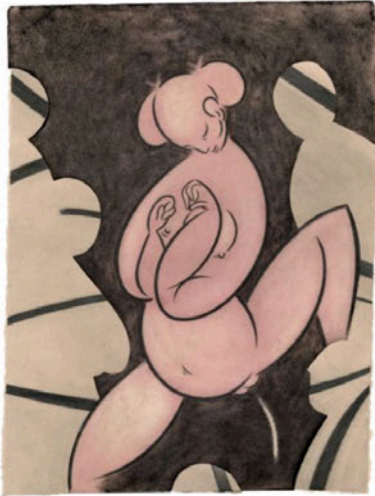
To me, her quote speaks to the fact that we cannot destroy what is needed for the future in order to survive the present. The work in the show focuses on women as both maternal and artistic creators, as well as the sometimes tumultuous path of navigating how to survive and sustain through the more trying aspects of those livelihoods.

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**What do you think about the welcome the art industry has received your work with?**

I think as an artist, there is always some intention behind how we want our work to be perceived. For me, it is most important that the work communicates with people, that there is some form of resonance with them. I would make the work regardless—there is always that need to keep creating—but at the same time I don't make the work for myself. It is very much an undertaking with the intention of communication with others at its heart.

In that way I feel very thankful. Somehow, in moments of isolation within my studio, I've been able to make work that people with very different lives than my own can connect to. I don't want to say that in a way that sounds as if I'm bragging or naive; it's what I strive to do. So I'm very happy that it has happened, but it also really illustrates the power of art to me—why it is such a vital and irreplaceable aspect of human culture and communication.



Koak currently lives in San Francisco, California. She is 36.

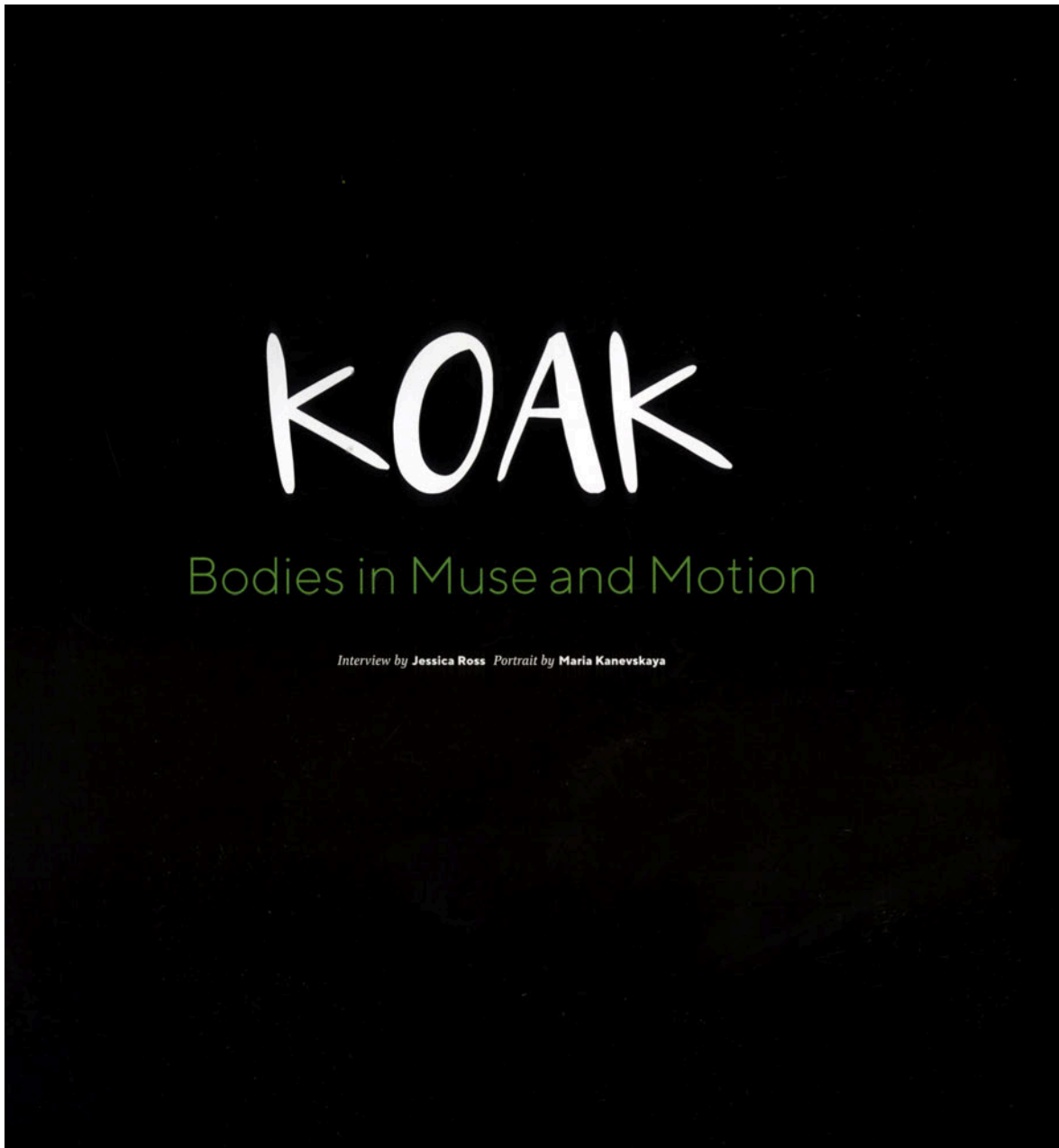
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Ross, Jessica, "Bodies in Muse and Motion," *Juxtapoz*, 2018





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**I'll be honest, the whole "artist and muse" relationship is a little irksome.** Wander the halls of any museum and you find countless classical portraits of women: women bathing, women dancing, women reclining—all demure and stylized, just as the artist intended. Created by men, for men. It's these idealized depictions of female-ness that are antagonizing, making me resentful of this historical weight. San Francisco-based artist KOAK, with her MFA in comics, liberates her women.

Working in a range of mediums, KOAK's paintings of women vibrate with hyper-presence, even in an abstracted, amorphous state. Reclaiming agency one brush stroke at a time, KOAK portrays women through a more thoughtful, honest lens. In her paintings, she fleshes out her ideas and feelings, and with each twisting limb and irregular feature, communicates raw vulnerability and engages her

viewers in what it means to be human. Following some killer shows and projects this last year, we sat down for a frank conversation about the inherent power play that exists between artist and subject, the ever-present stigma associated with comics, and the therapeutic nature of creating.

**Jessica Ross: What are some of your earliest memories creating? Do you have a defining moment in your life when something clicked, or was it a more gradual process?**

KOAK: I was sick a lot as a kid and remember staying home from school and drawing from comics. The women of *X-Men* were my favorite, especially Storm. Looking back, there was probably a connection between the lack of power I felt at the time and what these women symbolized.

When I was a teen, I started making zines that I sold at Caffè Pergolesi, a coffee shop in Santa

Cruz that was a sort of safe haven for local artists and musicians. It's also where I had my first exhibition. There was something about the act of making work and then sharing it with others that gave purpose to what I was doing. I had always had an incredibly hard time communicating with people, and suddenly I had found this language where not only was I able to express myself, but people could understand, and, more importantly, they could connect. As a young girl, I didn't really feel like I had any power over my life, so finding a voice that empowered both myself and others was a sort of magic in its own way.

**True connection is so vital when you're growing up. Is there anything you want to say to your teen self now that you're a bit older and wiser?**

I wouldn't say anything to myself as a teen. I have regrets, but that's how we learn—navigating those difficulties is part of what shapes us.

**I always get a tinge of uneasiness when I see your work. There's a tension that seems to linger, something about the figures' awkward physicality—beautiful but challenging. Was this an intentional move on your part, or am I just a weirdo?**

I am always trying to create moments of tension in my work, because without conflict, it would be one-note. To me, it is extremely important that the figures do not exist in a single state of emotion, as I find that to be very rare in life. Most things are not easily defined or boxed neatly into their own distinct categories, so to make work without tension would be to make something that I feel would be very alienating and dishonest to life.

Sometimes I like to think of it as if we all contain a host of necessary archetypes within ourselves. Specialized roles, developed specifically for us, that bubble up to the surface when necessary. I think this sort of duality coming to light through a single figure is in part what creates that form of tension in my work.

But, luckily for you, you're probably also partially a weirdo.

**Providing agency to female subjects is a driving theme in your work. Since smashing the patriarchy is not an overnight affair, why do you think it's important to shift the way women are depicted in art?**

I don't know if I would say it's as necessary to shift the way women are depicted in art as much as it is to shift the narratives that are being told. When the overwhelming voice of stories comes from a small pool of individuals, we are getting only a very limited experience through art of what it is to be human.

Historical portraiture of women has overwhelmingly been framed by the male



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Above: *The Infinite Loop*, Graphite and casein on rag paper, 11" x 15", 2017

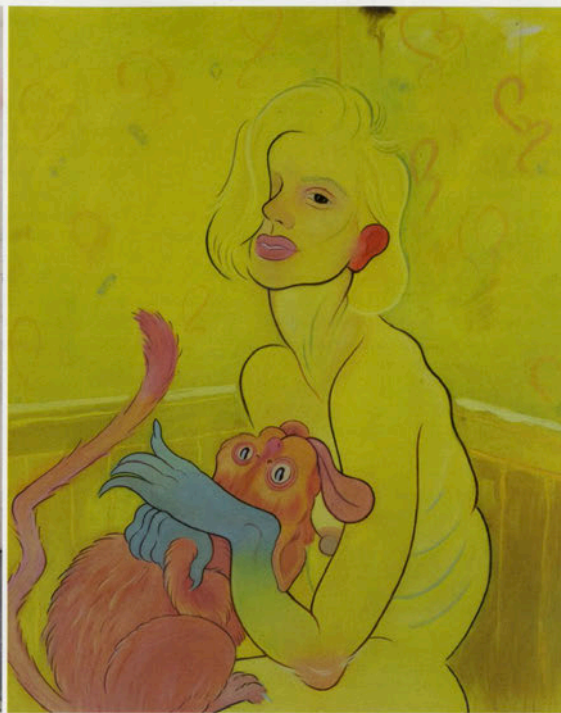
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conception of what it is to be female, the same voice that for centuries has treated those muses as property or lesser citizens. Providing agency to the women in my work is important, not only because it gives them purpose and a sense of life on the page, but also because, without agency, I would not be able to be a creator. There's a kinship between me and the women I'm drawing because I am not an outside figure looking in at them.

**Are there any other women or non-binary artists who really inspire you at the moment?**

I've been very lucky to meet and work with some amazing women through the gallery that my partner ran: Brook Hsu, Mattea Perrotta, Alexandra Tarver, Mindy Rose Schwartz, to name a few. My friend from college, Nicole Miller, just opened a show at CAAM in LA that I'm excited to see.

**What is it about creating work that you find to be therapeutic? There's definitely a lot of raw emotion revealed in your drawings and paintings. Is there a methodology or approach you take when fleshing out your own experiences?**

**"Some of my favorite comments were from people who got really mad about the work."**

When I was younger, my work was very much drawn from my own experiences, and that was an act of therapy. In those early zines and exhibitions, I was dealing with unpacking all the difficulties of being a teenager. Some of my closest friends were struggling with addiction and I felt helpless in giving them support. I was also unraveling the buried pain of having been abused by my biological father, who had been in my life only as a distant figure since I was two. Creating work that grappled with things that felt insurmountably painful, often with a layer of comic humor, gave me an outlet for this sort of pressure that otherwise may have caused me to explode.

Since then, my work and interests have shifted, evolving into something more detached from

my own experiences. Recently, my focus is on universal narratives and archetypes that encapsulate the feminine—experiences heard from friends or caught through the news. There is still an act of therapy in creating the work, I have to be very present and allow myself the space to create the emotion needed to give over to the page. The method, I think, is to feel and tap into states of being, which can be very taxing sometimes. Our culture has strict, unspoken rules about when, where, and in what context emotions are appropriate, but I would not be able to make these things if I did not give myself the space to feel them. It's funny—I think I would be a terrible actor. I have the worst stage fright, but I am very good at sitting alone in a room and conjuring up a flurry of emotions from my past.

**What do you listen to in the studio? Is it podcasts or playlists for you?**

Today, Victoria Spivey. Yesterday, Brian Eno. Tomorrow, maybe Shilpa Ray.

**Since you and your partner, Kevin Krueger, opened the now-closed Alter Space in 2011, can you describe what it was like starting a gallery? And how might it have influenced your own practice?**

Rough. Running an art space properly, supporting the artists you're working with, takes everything you have. At the time, I was not exhibiting or sharing my work, so putting all of my energy into doing things for other artists that I wasn't able to do for myself was difficult. But we went into it always knowing that I would leave and Kevin would take over. He's the one with an eye for finding brilliant people to work with and curating great exhibitions. Watching him work, from behind the scenes, has given me so much appreciation for how galleries run and the dedication that it takes to make them work.

It's influenced me in that I've really gotten to see all the ways that different types of artists

approach their work and problem solving. It's made me hyper-aware of the ways I work, and taught me that some of my ingrained habits are useless. I've always been very interested in the ways different brains work, so watching how artists I admire think has been very influential.

**You seem to utilize almost every medium (pastel, charcoal, oil, etc.) At the moment, what's a favorite in your toolbox?**

Tombow's sanding eraser. It can cure anything.

**I've asked this question before, but it's worth repeating. I'm sure, as a female artist, you get a range of idiotic and downright misogynist comments surrounding the provocative and sexual nature of your work. What's your response to those people, or perhaps other female artists working in similar subject matter?**

Part of sharing your work publicly is relinquishing its narrative. During my first exhibition at Pergolesi, I built a comment box and put it out with the invitation for people to respond. Some of my favorite comments were from people who got really mad about the work, where it just got under their skin and they

couldn't let it go. I don't say that from a place of cruelty—I didn't make the work to distress people. But it meant that they were thinking, that there was something about the work that took them, however momentarily, out of their comfort zone, and in that way, it was a compliment.

I know this is a little different than dealing with creeps and misogynists online, and I don't mean in any way to make light of some of the horrifying things female artists have to deal with. But for me, the best thing to do with people like that has been to give them nothing, because honestly, their opinion to me is nothing. Whatever anger or frustration I feel from their interaction with me, I put aside and save for the next time I want to make a piece that needs that anger. Using my voice to shout down some internet vortex is pointless; using it to make work that talks to other humans who have been through the same thing is the reason I make work.

**You've been in the Bay Area for quite some time now, and the ubiquitous question is about how the tech scene displaced the art scene in SF. Instead, I'd rather know what cool new things**



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**you have seen pop up in the last few years. What's happening creatively in the Bay right now?**

There's been so many wonderful artist-run spaces that have opened up over the last few years, ones that address the difficulties of running a space in a city with such high overhead. Cloaca Projects, which my friend Charlie Leese runs out of a shipping container behind his studio, and Nook Gallery, which is run by Lukaza Branfman-Verissimo out of her kitchen, to name a few. Kevin is also moving on from Alter Space to partner with Et al., an amazing SF-based gallery that has two spaces in the city.

**Your drawings read as comics, in that you can follow each line and arrive at different narratives. It's very approachable and understandable for the viewer. Obviously your MFA in comics, I'm sure, has something to do with it. Why do you love comics so much? What about them just pulls you in?**

I've always been drawn to the underdog, or the thing that has the grit of being an outsider. There are certain constructs in society that are just so perplexingly "off" that they pull me in, like a math equation of social norms that doesn't fit. The U.S., with its strange relationship to comics, is one of these. Here's an art form that combines visual art and literature—two of the highest forms of art—and yet somehow, through that combination, it becomes less. This conundrum is fascinating to me, and even as comics are now becoming more of a staple, part of my love for them will always be their ugly duckling status.

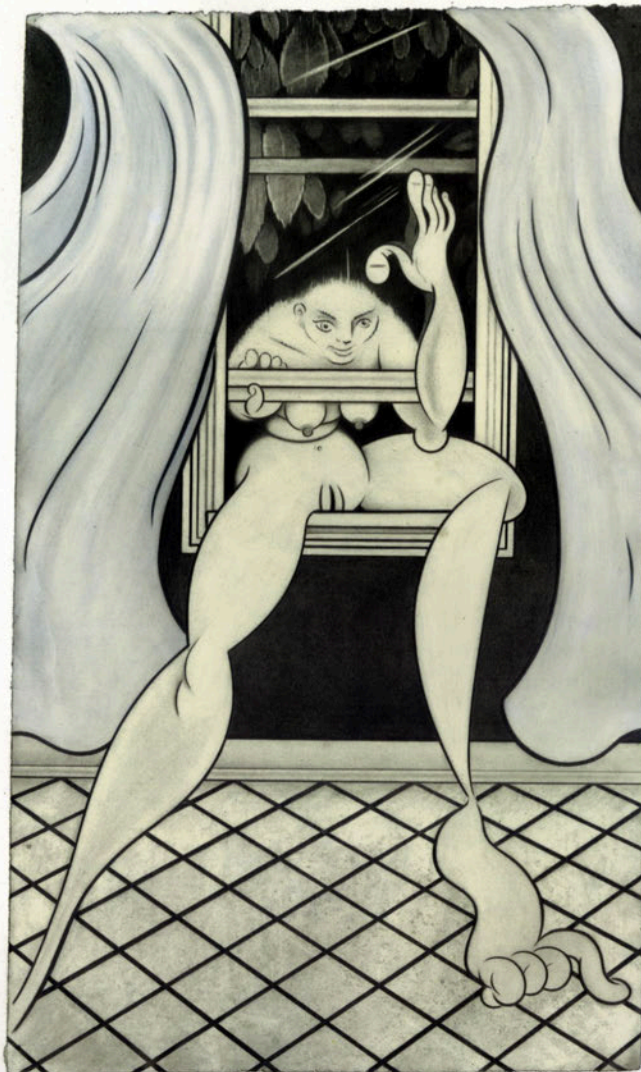
There's also the added pull that, at its heart, comics are the act of telling stories through a visual language, and storytelling is one of the most powerful tools we have to connect to others. They are entirely about how we convey narrative and emotion through the use of static lines, shapes, and tones—and their meaning shifts depending on those visual elements. Comics are a fascinating puzzle about the use of space and static imagery to create language.

**What are some of your all-time favorite comics or graphic novels?**

*Bottomless Bellybutton* and *BodyWorld* by Dash Shaw. *Today is the Last Day of the Rest of Your Life* by Ulli Lust.

**You've said in the past that you're not necessarily flattered by being compared to Picasso. Can you elaborate on that a bit?**

Yes, I think Picasso's work is great, but I don't believe that something in the realm of figurative abstraction should be necessarily lumped under his totem. There are too many brilliant artists that were just as talented, had just as significant voices. To look at figurative work that plays with abstraction and just see Picasso is a simplification of the world and a disregard of nuance. It also generally tends to come from men, and from men



that only look at the surface of things, who are focused on style over substance.

To some extent, the term *salt in the wound* comes to mind. Here's a man who told his lover that women were either "goddesses or doormats," who referred to us as "machines for suffering." I've read so many articles where his friends or family recount his obsession with submissive women, and this

ability to take the life from those around him in order to feed his work. That's the opposite of what I am trying to do. When I work, it is my intention to make something that sparks the feeling of life in the viewer, to empower women, not to capture and suppress them for my own gain. To give back something that maybe this world has taken away. ■

[koak.net](http://koak.net)

Moro, Humberto, "Seed for Planting," Terremoto, 2018



June 13, 2018

## Seed for Planting

Koak

**Walden**

Buenos Aires, Argentina

05/19/2018 - 06/19/2018



Koak. View of the *Seed for planting* exhibition in Walden, Buenos Aires, Argentina, 2018. Courtesy of Walden

The drawings and paintings that Koak produces are commonly related to the artist's own story with the comic and the comic book format in general. However, the artist has managed to transcend the territories of the caricature, its narrative limitations and has opted for much more complex compositions, with a capacity for synthesis far superior to that of a humorous vignette. The works of Koak instead, through a symbolism that the artist has distilled in recent years to reveal social complexities, personal, economic, and emotional concerns about systematized



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inequalities. If Koak makes paintings that start from the comic, or comics that transcend the painting is irrelevant.

The figures he portrays are stylized, with smooth lines and unstable, sometimes unconnected surfaces that articulate in tense vertices, joining trembling, or bulging segments. Some are clearly distinguished from the background in more or less recognizable environments that point most of the time to a domestic context. Sometimes these environments start from a specific element *a priori*, that is, the papers are dyed with inks of some soft color. The characters he portrays look directly at the visitor, while at other times, it is the visitor who bursts silently-perhaps even recklessly-at a critical moment for the problem in question.



Koak. View of the *Seed for planting* exhibition in Walden, Buenos Aires, Argentina, 2018. Courtesy of Walden

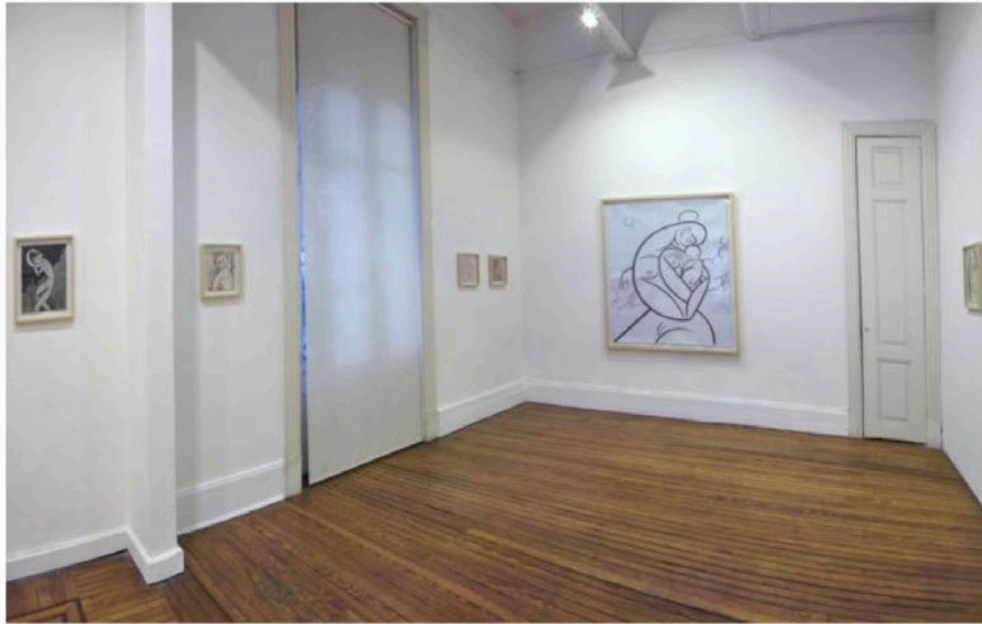
The visual references are clear and immediate, Aubrey Beardsley, Paul Cézanne, Mary Cassatt, Marius de Zayas: a sophistication of the line that moves through the paper in an almost orgasmic way, the volumes open and close, there are references to harmonies geometric through compositions that seem to come from an overdeveloped intuition. The gradations of usually subtle colors saturate and blur with a virtuosity that immediately refers to the mastery of the authors of the early twentieth century, whose search then was very different in every way. However, these presences are not convened to read the artist's work through stoic masculine glances, but perhaps, in a much more operative way that forces perception to grasp something known.

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Koak. View of the *Seed for planting* exhibition in Walden, Buenos Aires, Argentina, 2018. Courtesy of Walden

The intimacy and intimate spaces that Koak portrays are spaces that have undergone vertiginous changes in the last decades. Let's say that (in the best of cases) there is a higher awareness of the complexities within the politics of intimacy, specifically around the recognition of the abuse, violence and exploitation of women in the XX and XXI century. It has changed not only the space but also the body. The post-human body that is now understood as dismembered, constantly colonized by new and unknown entities, infected, abused and subdued, but above all, turned into a machine of accumulation. Koak portrays the body as a series of unstable surfaces, sometimes unconnected, that articulate in tense vertices, joining trembling segments, or bulging, with flat and elongated surfaces. What does not mean that conditions have or continue to change, and that is where not only the work, but the way in which the artist herself positions herself with respect to the work are vitally important. Koak does not pretend ownership of these scenes, but an accompaniment of these figures through generosity and empathy, and above all, through the claim of visual territory and the visibility of bodies and affections.

With some haggard figures, mothers breastfeeding, babies spinning in the air, Koak manages to connect with the viewer in deep places; the difficulty of the upbringing, the social and economic limitations in which we sail daily as mothers, fathers, children, workers or professionals. Koak's

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work recalls the fragility of skin and bones in the vague memory of the tiny body trying to hold on to the mother's body at all times. In pieces like *The Moon, Feed, or Walk in the Park*, the figure of a grieving mother, smoking a cigarette while breastfeeding a child almost automatically, in the middle of a space where survival seems more a luxury than a destination .

It has been said that drawing, more specifically, a collection of drawings, can function as a "tertiary space between the absolutely private - the study, but also the daily dialogue between the hand, the brain and the paper - and the entirely public, where infinite studies on the self occur in relation to the world ". [2] *Seed for Planting* [ *Seed for planting*] offers the figure of the seed, as a bridge between its own concerns, with the resonances it finds in its most immediate circle, and with what it hopes to provoke in the visitor. It suggests thinking about the materiality of the seed, its tiny, resilient qualities, and the potential of its technology to become something much larger and more productive, in an entity that functions within a system that has reached a level of reciprocity. For example, in *Kill Your Darlings*, and *(My Baby Makes) Good Sculptures, Grace, Room of Her Own*, and *PhD*, the characters seem to be in an internal struggle with the artistic activities, and thinking about the position of the visitor, and making these scenes become a kind of dioramas where the problem can be perceived by the body language of the main character, as well as also by the contextual elements.

The seed is the translation of this tertiary space, considered as a speculative terrain where the visualization or imagination of this potential is already the first step into it. This is a fundamental bet in reference to the darkness of the times in which we live; In other words, this is not about Koak as the executor of the work, nor about the interpretations that it may have, but rather about an art-centric model that focuses on the agency and power of the work of art in order to continue considering the drawing as an immaterial place, apart from any contingency, with the ability to conjure a more expanded conception of the relationship between work, creation and life.

*Humberto Moro*

Carrigan, Margaret, "Being in the Moment," *Elephant*, April 3, 2018

## ELEPHANT

3 Apr 2018

### Koak: Being In The Moment

"This idea that a woman is either sexual or maternal is something that I'm actively trying to unravel right now." Koak's sensual drawings and paintings depict women, twisted, contorted and seemingly completely comfortable in their flesh. But, as Margaret Carrigan discovers, their allure has more to do with being present within their bodies than any obvious sexuality.



The Plan

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I first encountered Koak's comic-inspired works on paper last fall in an exhibition called NSFW: The Female Gaze at New York's Museum of Sex. Despite the warning of profanity implicit in the show's title, her starkly penciled line drawings didn't strike me as licentious—a naked woman bathing, nursing a baby, playing with a cat—but there was something undeniably sexy about them. Was it because I was looking at naked ladies and have been conditioned by the male gaze to perceive the female figure in repose as inherently arousing? I hoped not.

It was the curvilinear forms of the women, their backs arched and rounded; fingers, toes, nipples, lips, and vaginas all just slightly exaggerated; limbs at odd angles, that enticed me so. They certainly didn't look like they were in ecstasy or even much at ease, sometimes they even looked sad. But they also seemed resolute, rooted, and in no real rush to untangle themselves despite their compositional confoundedness. What was turning me on wasn't their bodies, per se, but their apparent comfortableness with being uncomfortable. It wasn't that I wanted them, but instead I wanted to embody that sensation myself.



The Conspiracy

I am not the only person to have misconstrued my emotional desire with physical lust after looking at her drawings, according to Koak, when we spoke after I ran into her work again in January, this time in San Francisco, the city the thirty-six year-old artist calls home. "I've had people tell me that I make work about people having sex and I honestly don't think I've ever made a work like that," she says. Yet that's what they see when they look at these intertwined bodies and exaggerated limbs. "Don't get me wrong, I love erotic art. But I find it perplexing that people will look at a drawing of a nude woman and the main thing they see is a sex object. That probably has more to do with the way we view the female body than with the way I draw them."

*"For me nudity, no matter how prominent, is not linked to sex. It's not enough for there to be nudity; it has to be linked with action or intent"*

Instead, Koak views her work as sensual more than sexual, a distinction that is often lost in the media's pornographic exploitation of the female form. "A knee can be a sexual part of the body, depending on how it's used or how it's touched. And just as easily, breasts, and nipples, and vaginas can be sources of pain or sickness or shame, or have all manner of non-sexual identities," she explains. "So for me nudity, no matter how prominent, is not linked to sex. It's not enough for there to be nudity; it has to be linked with action or intent."



Edén

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In her drawings of nude women, she says she's attempting to amplify being in the moment, noting that this sense of female presentness is stupefyingly lacking in historical depictions of women by male artists. Instead, they have long revolved around the pleasurable act of looking at the female figure, rather than being part of their reality as depicted in the scene. I mused on the most memorable moments of presentness I have experienced, or potentially will one day. The moments when the physicality of my own body will supercede the chitter chatter in my brain: orgasms, childbirth, pain and sickness, death. I couldn't think of a single historical painting or drawing of a woman in such states off the top of my head, but all of these themes come out to play in Koak's drawings.



My Tiger  
Midnight



Which, I tell her, is the reason I found her women so fascinating. Their limbs are splayed or upturned or bent in unnatural ways. They express a hyper-present moment by suggesting there's a confluence of planes of existence, one that doesn't allow for a simple, holistic representation of a person. She agrees. "As much as I am trying to create moments that feel awkward or uncomfortable in my work, it's more often a moment of recognition of just being alive. It's the moments [where] we are fully present

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in our bodies," she says. "But there is something to the moments in which we are fully present in our body where we are also, at the same time, the most outside of ourselves."

*"It sucks always being compared to really creepy old dead guys with that kind of reputation. I don't want to make work that's a part of that legacy, I want to make work that's empowering for women!"*

Koak knows a thing or two about the dislocating power of pleasure and pain, having started sketching these women as part of an autobiographical comic book project chronicling her own experience of Pelvic Inflammatory Disease—a condition that affects millions of women, causing intense pain, discomfort, and sometimes infertility—throughout her twenties. "You know when you watch cartoons and there's that moment where someone gets hit on the head? The physical response is always the most intense that it could be. Their head immediately swells up to the size of grapefruit or something. That's the kind of feeling I was trying to express," she says.



Lookie Look



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Her interest in cartoons makes a lot of sense since her artistic training was in comics at the California College of Arts. The angular faces and discombobulated limbs of her ladies indeed look darkly comical, but they also draw associations of cubism; reportedly someone once said her work was a blend of Popeye and Picasso. "I don't really feel that influenced by him," she notes, when I ask if the inimitable painter-and-philanderer influenced her style. "It sucks always being compared to really creepy old dead guys with that kind of reputation. I don't want to make work that's a part of that legacy, I want to make work that's empowering for women!"



Girlfriends

Perhaps the most empowering part of Koak's oeuvre is the everyday, rather than fetishized femininity that she presents, which ranges from depictions of women doing house chores to rearing children; lounging masturbatorially on couches to comforting

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and cuddling partners. "When I was younger I had a very clear impression that, as a woman you were either a mother or wife, or, essentially, sexually up for grabs. You could not exist in a state of being both—or none—of those things."



Feed

While her oeuvre has largely revolved around drawing, she's now expanding to larger-scale painting as part of her new venture at San Francisco's Minnesota Street Project, where she's currently one of four Liquitex artists-in-residence, a medium that brings added historical weight to female experience that has been historically underserved. "This idea that a woman is either sexual or maternal is something that I'm actively trying to unravel right now," Koak tells me. "I find that anything where we are trying to box something, or someone, into an easily categorized state, to be perplexingly off." But her women, in their multiplanar existence, certainly can't be boxed in.

OBSERVER

Carrigan, Margaret, "Koak's Emotive Comics Illustrate Sexuality and Sickness," *NY Observer*,  
February 6, 2018

## Koak's Emotive Comics Illustrate Sexuality and Sickness

By Margaret Carrigan • 02/06/18 2:15pm



*Brick Curtain, 2016. Koak*

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“Comics are way more serious than you think,” [San Francisco-based artist](#) Koak said. “The humor in them can be really helpful when dealing with difficult issues, but I think I’ve always gravitated toward them in order to explore a certain kind of darkness.”

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Koak’s comic-inspired drawings and paintings of voluminous nude women caught in the act of everyday activities ranging from chores to child-rearing, however, have recently propelled her into the art world spotlight. Within the space of a couple of years, the artist has gone from selling her drawings for \$40 at various artist-run spaces and pop-ups around the Bay Area to mounting her works in exhibitions around the world. She is currently featured in the exhibition “[NSFW: Female Gaze](#)” at New York’s Museum of Sex and is on view at London’s Union Pacific Gallery as part of the co-op art fair, [Condo](#).

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Koak suffered a lot of sickness when she was child, which often relegated her to indoor activities. That when the 35-year-old artist became obsessed with X-Men comics, often copying characters out of the books. “I was in love with Storm,” she told Observer. But her practice now is much more idiosyncratic, although she still draws inspiration from comic artists such as Dash Shaw and Ulli Lust. She also cites Henri Matisse and Joan Miró as artistic influences, although her use of geometric shapes and heavily drawn lines often invites comparisons to Pablo Picasso and his cubist style.

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“I personally don’t feel that influenced by him,” she said, noting that, as a known philanderer with a history of assault against his significant others, Picasso is a problematic figure in history when it comes to equal treatment of women. “It sucks as a female artist always being compared to really creepy old dead guys, you know?” she laughed. “I like to think I make work that’s empowering for women. But if you look at it and just see Picasso then O.K., cool, I guess.”

---

The artist, who earned her M.F.A. in Comics at the California College of the Arts where she studied under well-known illustrator Barron Storey, developed her own distinctive style while creating a multi-volume comic autobiography about her chronic and debilitating struggle with Pelvic Inflammatory Disease. “I’ve been working on it for over a decade; I don’t think I’ll finish it until I’m, like, 80.”

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She sees the swift momentum of her own career as part and parcel of a growing interest in comics within the fine arts. “I think there are so many amazing things happening in the field right now

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because they're accessible and expressive," she said. "There's a rich history of comics in so many other countries, but for a long time American comic culture was limited to superheroes and the whole good vs. bad storyline."

The ability to experiment with new narratives, more diverse characters, and different styles comes on the heels of the abandonment of the Comics Code Authority guidelines that prohibited, among many other things, unsavory depictions of law enforcement and "sexual abnormalities." Created by the Comics Magazine Association of America in 1954 in an effort to stave off McArthur-era government regulation, the code became a self-censoring crutch that not only limited what and how comics could be created, but also fostered a largely heteronormative white male perspective. While these rules haven't been hugely enforced since the 1970s, they have only been altogether abandoned in the first decade of the 21st century and have indelibly shaped comical expression in the U.S.

"In countries like France and Japan, you see comics that are so specific and niche. The protagonists don't need to be superheroes to be worth depicting," Koak explained, noting that there are whole genres devoted to culinary fetish and depictions of gay men drawn by women. For the artist, dynamically drawing women in the midst of the mundane—feeding babies, bathing themselves, cleaning kitchens—isn't meant to relegate them to traditionally ascribed gender roles. Instead, it's a way of reclaiming their agency in these situations.

"When I'm drawing figures, I want them to feel hyper-present and emotive. I'm trying to amplify the moment of *being* in the moment," she said. "I think that's really lacking in historical depictions of women in art. It's always been about the act of looking at them rather than experiencing what they're doing."

In March, Koak will join San Francisco's Minnesota Street Project Liquitex residency, where she'll work on a new body of work before mounting a solo show at Walden Gallery in Buenos Aires later this spring. "My latest batch of work is about female creativity, like what it means to birth something, what it means to bring life into the world," she said. "I feel like these are embarrassingly simplistic ideas, but the great thing about comics is that they can explore some of the most complicated aspects of life."

## CULTURED

Slenske, Michael, "The Body Politic. Behind the veil of Koak, the San Francisco comic artist whose feminine figures are enchanting the art world," *Cultured Magazine*, Summer 2017

# THE BODY POLITIC

Behind the veil of Koak, the San Francisco comic artist whose feminine figures are enchanting the art world.

BY MICHAEL SLENKE PORTRAIT BY MARIA KANEVSKAYA

### On a sweltering spring Saturday, surrounded

by rainbow-hued stacks of curved resin and fiberglass that form the bases of Thomas Linder's glass-like sculptural environments, a group of young Angeleno scenesters is gathering in and outside of Timo Fahler's downtown artist-run space BBQLA. It's the last day of a six-person group show, "Teeter Totter," and Alex Becerra is giving tattoos beside the Linder blocks while Fahler entertains sweat-soaked guests in the neighboring gallery who have come to see Amy Bessone's electric pink Blue Leaves canvas, and a black and white floor painting by Daniel Gibson. They're also scooping up some risographs—a portion of whose proceeds benefits the Transgender Law Center, Futures Without Violence, UNICEF and Free Arts—and peeping three new works on paper that capture the louche and limber figures of the ascendant San Francisco-based artist known simply as Koak.

"It's a problem, we're trying to figure it out," says the 35-year-old, Michigan-born artist of her increasingly name-checked *nome d'arte* at a Hollywood Thai restaurant the following Monday. "A lot of people think I'm a guy because of it and because I draw women the way I do. But my name is Kristin Anna Olson Katz."

When she was making work in high school as a teenager Koak and a friend made their debut at cafe in Santa Cruz, so she created an acronym of her name, backwards, "Because it was so personal I wanted a buffer." Though she was raised by a philanthropic, artistic family—her stepfather was a musically inclined C++ coder and her mother ran a daycare/kindergarten and started the nonprofit Firelight Foundation, which raises money for grassroots organizations in Africa that are affected by AIDS—growing up in '90s Santa Cruz meant Koak witnessed the ravages of teenage heroin addiction with her peer group. As such, her early autobiographical, comic-styled dioramas teased out ideas of belonging against a world of substance abuse.

"The stuff I was doing back then was pretty grotesque," says Koak, who went on to spend a year at CalArts, where she grew her dioramas into inhabitable life-size forms, before moving her practice to San Francisco where she earned an MFA in Comics at the California College of the Arts. There, she studied under the famed American illustrator Barron Storey, who encouraged her to start her now three-part, 2000-page, 12-years-in-the-making comic book "Sickbed Blues." The

narrative features animals who live inside Koak's reproductive organs, which were threatened by a sickness in her late 20s.

"It's kind of like this apocalypse because if you were animals living inside of a body and the body couldn't have kids that would be like the end of the world," says Koak, who still battles some illnesses, but constantly appears cheery with her banged bob bouncing over her yellow curry and songbird voice dripping over a discreet lip ring. She only began making her loose female forms—whose smoking and bathing nudes have rated her shows from San Francisco to London—a year ago, and only after accidentally banging her drawing hand against a wall in a restaurant bathroom. "When I started drawing them I was interested in parts therapy and really interested in creating a woman that felt like feminine archetypes of different emotions my friends or I had been," she explains. "A person has all these different tropes—like heroin addict or teacher—and they're all there because they are helping you deal with something."

Though she started out selling graphite drawings of these amorphous forms—with their snaking limbs and attenuated nipples—to friends for \$40 a piece, and later through her husband Kevin Krueger's San Francisco gallery Alter Space, Koak's new crushed pastel and milk casein pieces are growing to epic scales that are now attracting the attention of serious collectors and international dealers at Art Los Angeles Contemporary or Mexico City's Material Art Fair. To wit: this summer her work will be featured in group shows at London's Laura Bartlett Gallery as well as the Museum of Sex and MAW Gallery in New York.

"I am drawn to her colors, the voluptuousness of her figures and their digression into a sort of geometric abstraction," says Fahler, who became aware of Koak's work via her Instagram feed and the Night Gallery publication *Night Papers*. "Teeter Totter" was about the conversation of abstraction and the figure, and how various artists utilize both of these practices within the same body of work. It seems as though the current political climate, the separation and self-segregation of race, gender and political-based ideologies has introduced a whole new meaning to the figure and its conversation with the abstract realm. Anna's work tells of an evolved individual, matriarchal and powerful yet soft and destructible. It drives me to find the solution and not focus on the problem."

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“Koak: Women on the Verge. The rising San Francisco artist Koak draws women that are more than the sum of their warring parts,” Interview in Issue #18, *Vault Magazine*, August 6, 2017

MARGINS

# KOAK: WOMEN ON THE VERGE

The rising San Francisco artist Koak draws women that are more than the sum of their warring parts.

By Neha Kale



KOAK  
ama Curtain (From  
Bad Case of the  
Uglies), 2016  
pastel, pigment,  
graphite and casein  
on rag paper  
mounted to panel  
35.5 x 28 cm

Opposite

Top to bottom

KOAK  
Sheena in the Rain  
(From Treasures and  
Treasures), 2016  
graphite, gouache and  
casein on rag paper  
25.5 x 20.3 cm

KOAK  
The Thinker (From  
Treasures and  
Treasures), 2016  
graphite, chalk and  
casein on rag paper  
49.8 x 40.6 cm

KOAK  
Leda, Tale as Old  
as Time, 2016  
limited edition  
risograph print  
28 x 35.5 cm

Courtesy the artist  
and Alter Space,  
San Francisco

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Kristin Olson just reminded me that the pseudonym, that cloak usually reserved for reporters that morph into superheroes in phone booths, could be useful for those of us whose biographical particulars are always slightly shrouded in doubt. The San Francisco artist, who goes by the moniker Koak (KO-AK) says that her work is the result of the dissonance she experiences on a daily basis. No wonder her paintings of naked women, limbs contorting and distending as if they were made from rubber, seem like they're battling a villain from a comic book - one that's lodged itself inside their bodies and refuses to leave.

"There's this really interesting quote from *The Punk Singer*, the documentary about Kathleen Hanna from *Bikini Kill* when she says that even when women tell our own stories about what we've had to deal with throughout our lives it sounds completely absurd," laughs Koak, who has huge, blue-green eyes that go from smiling to serious in a heartbeat and whose distinct cadence, those slightly hollowed-out vowels, speak less of California than the Midwest, where she was born. "It reminds me of the way I don't feel certain about a lot of things. Even when I feel happy, I feel a lot of guilt. Every time I'm drawing a figure, I want to portray that uncertainty. The women might seem happy and confident but there might be a hand or a leg that shows that there's internal conflict."

Koak was born in Ann Arbor, Michigan to artistic parents. "My dad writes code but is also a musician and my mum always wanted to paint even though she never actually did," she grins. Like so many children who endure bouts of sickness, she found solace in comics, painstakingly drawing and re-drawing the characters she read about in *X-Men*. When she was a teenager, her family relocated to Santa Cruz,

California, where a utopian history - communes have long proliferated in the nearby Santa Cruz Mountains - was shot through with darker currents. "A lot of my friends had tried heroin, they'd gone through really difficult things and a lot of the stuff I was making was autobiographical and personal," she recalls matter-of-factly. Katie Harper, her high school art teacher ("she was really strange, she kept a horse skull on her desk and would show us alien autopsy videos") encouraged her artistic abilities.

Art school, however, proved less affirming. "I went to CalArts for a year and hated it, it's apparently a very prestigious school but it supported the idea of an artist as being kind of a party-er and the work was second to the lifestyle." Something gelled four years later when she moved to San Francisco and enrolled at California College of the Arts with now-husband Kevin Krueger. The pair went on to set up *Alter Space*, a contemporary art gallery in a former bondage shop in the city's South of Market district. "When I went back to CCA, I started doing really different work, and started working on a comic book, *Sick Bed Blues*, which was [a big departure] from the fine art I had been doing," says Koak, who's just completed her Master of Fine Arts in comics. Of course, San Francisco, once home to the punk novelist Kathy Acker and the publisher Gary Arlington, who established the country's first comic book store in the Mission has always championed the underground elements of visual culture. But as Koak points out, there's still the question of artistic legitimacy, even though it's been decades since Pop Art conflated the highbrow with the lowbrow.



## MARGINS

"I recently saw a Roy Lichtenstein show and there was a painting that incorporated a reference from a famous comic book artist and the caption just said, 'pulled from a comic book artist,'" she grimaces, pushing aside her auburn bangs. "Literature and art are two amazing things that are so respected but comics get such a bad rap!" Not, it pays to remember, that this is entirely unwarranted. "Ulli Lust is an amazing female graphic novelist, but I also really love the comic artist Brett Evans and [author and illustrator] Dash Shaw who wrote *Bottomless Belly Button* and *Bodyworld*," she says, adding that showing alongside the cult filmmaker Mike Kuchar in August 2016 was among the highlights of her career. "My first boyfriend had a comic book collection that he gave me when we broke up, probably from guilt because he was in prison. My favourite comic books, those that use the form best, are the same old stories about older guys and younger women. It bothers me so much!"

For ten years, Koak drew nothing but intricately etched animals, rabbits and foxes with human faces (a hand-drawn animation of a deviant kitten recently made an appearance in *Kitty*, a short film debut by Chloe Sevigny) but a year and half ago she returned to the human figures that she'd sketched compulsively as a child. In *That Time of The Month* (December), part of *The Woodies*, a year-long collaboration with Alter Space, a model sits on a stool, cigarette dangling from her mouth, right arm pinned around her head as if by an invisible force. The lines are taut, stretched to their limit. This muse isn't a passive object, content to bask in the artist's gaze. Her beauty curls into something darker, closer to what the writer Mary Russo calls the female grotesque. The same goes for *Ramona's Smize* (2016), shown as part of Los Angeles group show *The Weeping Line*. Close your eyes and you'll see Picasso's lovers Olga Khoklova or Dora Maar, open them and Ramona glares back, defiant. History tricks us, the same way paintings can.

*Hello Darkness* (2017), shown as part of Los Angeles Contemporary 2016, sees a naked girl with a face out of an Archie comic staring into a mirror, arms and legs playing tug of war. Like comic book heroes, women must reckon with bodies that are both battleground and mystery; preternaturally powerful yet somehow never truly their own.

"A lot of the women I draw are based on mythology, on the archetypes that I see across all my female friends," says Koak, who's a fan of Dana Schutz and Ella Kruglyanskaya, painters partly responsible for the radical re-imagining of female subjectivity sweeping through the art world and is currently showing as part of *On Elizabeth*, a group show at Olsen Gruen, New York. "I'm also fascinated with this thing called 'Parts Therapy', the notion that every single person has these different archetypes inside them." She pauses to consider it. "It really fits."

Over the last few months, Koak has been researching paintings of women bathing, the theme of her upcoming solo show at Alter Space and although the trope, beloved by everyone from Brett Whiteley to Cézanne to Degas, seems to me tailor-made for mining the fractured female consciousness – the indignity of being conquered by your lover or surveilled through a keyhole – a few months ago, she started having doubts.

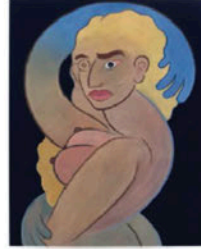
"For women, bathing is one of the most symbolic things you can do, it's this moment of transformation and reflection and it's something that people have been painting forever, but after Trump won, I was like: women bathing, what is that about?" she laughs. Then again, you only learn to be uncertain when culture teaches you to question your stories. "If you look at some of the older paintings, it's a bunch of women hanging outside and that's not how it is for me or any woman I know. They all have the same body type. It's like, you're just painting women that you're attracted to!" She smiles hopefully. "But my favourite sets of bathing paintings are by Mary Cassatt. There's such a difference in the way she draws women. You notice it straight away." **V**

Koak's upcoming exhibition *Bathers* opens May 6 and shows until June 24, 2017.

Koak is represented by Alter Space, San Francisco.

koak.net

alterspace.gallery



Top to bottom  
left to right  
KOAK  
*Ramona's Smize*  
(From *The Weeping Line*), 2016  
pigment, pastel, chalk  
and casein on rag paper  
77 x 61 cm

KOAK  
*Hello Darkness* (From  
*Bathers*), 2017  
graphite and casein  
on rag paper  
35.5 x 28 cm

KOAK  
*Three Bathers* (From  
*Bathers*), 2017  
graphite and casein  
on rag paper  
35.5 x 28 cm

Courtesy the artist  
and Alter Space,  
San Francisco



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KOAK  
Blonde (From  
Blond Cases of the  
Uglies), 2006,  
pastel, pigment,  
graphite, chalk and  
casein on rag paper  
mounted to panel  
152 x 122 cm

Courtesy the artist  
and Altar Spoke,  
San Francisco

**"EVEN WHEN I FEEL HAPPY, I FEEL A LOT OF GUILT. EVERY TIME I'M DRAWING A FIGURE, I WANT TO PORTRAY THAT UNCERTAINTY. THE WOMEN MIGHT SEEM HAPPY AND CONFIDENT BUT THERE MIGHT BE A HAND OR A LEG THAT SHOWS THAT THERE'S INTERNAL CONFLICT."**

Stromberg, Matt, "The Weeping Line," *Carla*, February 15, 2017

*The Weeping Line*  
Organized by  
Alter Space  
at Four Six One Nine  
(S.F. in L.A.)

February 15, 2017  
Text by Matt Stromberg



*The Weeping Line* (organized by  
Alter Space) at Four Six One  
Nine; Mattea Perrotta, Mindy  
Rose Schwartz, Koak  
(installation view). Image  
courtesy of Alter Space. Photo:  
Phillip Maisel.

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Female representation in the art world is maddeningly low, even decades after the emergence of the feminist art movement. However, too many exhibitions of women artists take an essentialist view based on gender, thwarting a complex and nuanced reading of their work. The Weeping Line, organized by the San Francisco-based gallery Alter Space, and hosted by Four Six One Nine, opts instead to treat gender as beside the point, rather than as the lazy, reductivist frame so often used to group female artists together. Free of gendered cataloguing, the focus stays on the work itself, which can be evaluated on its own terms.

The three artists featured in The Weeping Line do not readily fit together, thereby encouraging a teasing out of the aesthetic and conceptual connections between the work. The show features three female artists from three different cities, working in three different mediums, spanning roughly three decades in age. While the artists may come from varying perspectives, running through all their work is an emphasis on the handmade—on craft, the physical, and the tactile. The exhibition feels unapologetically old-school.

Chicago-based artist Mindy Rose Schwartz has created rough and funky mixed-media constructions, composed of paper-mache, feathers, and string. Her all-white sculptures channel Louise Bourgeois's body-based surrealism. Oversized masks teeter on long, furry necks in *Harlequin Romance* (2016), with strings of tears streaming from their eyes. The piece walks the line between absurd and sincere. In *The Hands of God* (2011), two large, puffy hands hang down from the ceiling. They are meant to reference the *Yad*—literally translated to hand in Hebrew—which is the pointer that is used to read the Torah. Instead of the elegant, silver or gold instrument however, Schwartz's are misshapen, bulbous objects, further grounded in the material realm by the small, gremlin-like figures emerging from their centers. Here is the sacred made profane; the divine found in the debased.



*The Weeping Line* (organized by Alter Space) at Four Six One Nine; Mattea Perrotta, Mindy Rose Schwartz, Koak (installation view). Image courtesy of Alter Space. Photo: Phillip Maisel.

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By contrast, the pastel and graphite drawings of San Francisco-based Koak have a completely different feel: they are lyrical and sensuous. These figurative works pull from the sweeping lines of Art Deco as much as from contemporary cartoon illustration. The female protagonists in her drawings—all ample curves and solid volumes, threaten to spill over the boundaries of the paper. The way in which Koak folds and twists these figures seems not so much like external violent manipulations, but rather organic expressions from within. In Koak's gorgeously sinuous wall-drawing, *Creep* (2016), a larger-than-life nude figure looks back at an open doorway, perhaps casting the epithet at anyone who gazes upon her form. Women are on view, but they also look back.

Ironically, the youngest of the trio, painter Mattea Perrotta from Los Angeles, creates work that feels the most like it could be from another era: confident, geometric abstractions. With prominent paint handling, she delineates imprecise, organic forms. *Garden in Bloom* (2016) features two irregular, pink hills set against a black background and topped with small bumps, revealing them to be breasts, unashamedly free. A small painting that resembles early Kandinsky, *The Swimmer at Playa Santa Maria* (2016) depicts a white body floating over brightly-colored waves. The titular beach could be referring to a location in Cuba, giving the historically passive genre of the bather an active and potentially charged subtext.



Koak, *Ramona's Smize* (2016).  
Pigment and pastel on rag paper  
mounted to panel, 30 x 24  
inches. Image courtesy of the  
artist and Alter Space. Photo:  
Kevin Krueger.

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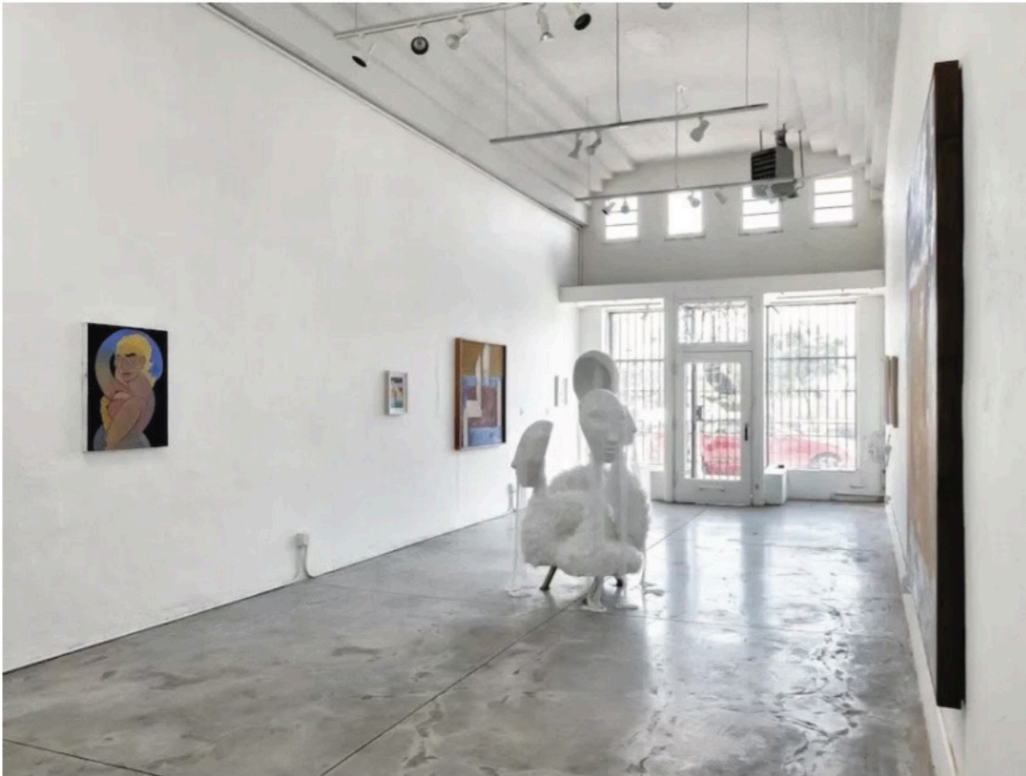
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Perrotta's most compelling piece is *Fata Morgana* (2016), a large orange-pink trapezoid on a coarsely brushed grey ground. The title refers to a nautical mirage that takes its name from Morgan le Fay, the fairy witch of Arthurian legend, who would conjure visions of floating castles over the ocean, luring sailors to their death. In this context, the painting functions as a rebuke against the unchecked male gaze: stare at your own risk.

What's perplexing about the title's allusion to weeping is the implication of emotional vulnerability, if not hysteria, that is often cited to delegitimize female perspectives. On the contrary, these artists insist that vulnerability does not preclude a wider range of emotions, as can be seen in the humor, pathos, and bite on view. The show displays a range and depth that could be easily lost by viewing it through an overly gendered lens. Despite the marked differences in their styles, all three artists engage with fairly well established artistic modes. The results however, mark quite a departure from historical precedents, proving that traditional media need not be abandoned to convey a contemporary message.



*The Weeping Line* (organized by Alter Space) at Four Six One Nine; Mattea Perrotta, Mindy Rose Schwartz, Koak (installation view). Image courtesy of Alter Space. Photo: Phillip Maisel.



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**Koak, *Sisters* (2016). Graphite on rag paper, 20 x 16 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Alter Space.**



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