

30 UNDER 35 - SARAH FAUX PLAYS WITH PERCEPTIONS

Sensual, fleshly and sometimes pornographic, Sarah Faux's paintings bring Matisse, Rubens and Titian to mind. Pinks, fuchsias and lemons set a warm, welcoming tone. Everything begins with drawing from life. She'll pick up her sketchbook and draw people that are close to her, often very close to her, in close-up or from an odd angle. Her own body regularly crops up in these studies as well. Later she'll work these up into larger compositions, into paintings on canvas or unique monotypes with watercolor. Lately she's been spending time in the Lower East Side Printshop printing the latter from plexiglass plates; scroll her Instagram for some rather satisfying, striptease-like videos of that magic moment when the layers are peeled away to reveal the finished work.

Faux—that's her real name, not an affectation (and it's pronounced "Fox")—grew up in Somerville, Massachusetts and now lives in Brooklyn's Crown Heights. Since graduating from Yale in 2015, she's had solo shows in New York, Brussels and Shanghai, and at Frieze New York, and she's already preparing for another in Shanghai with her Chinese gallery, Capsule. All of her paintings could be considered self-portraits, but perhaps not in the way you'd expect. "I don't actually think of my work as primarily figurative," says Faux. "It's equally, inextricably abstract. My most direct self-portraiture comes through in all the ineffable elements of painting like color and materiality: somatic, emotional content." As both an artist and a subject, she likes to hover between abstraction and figuration. Her pictures spread out into color fields and it's easy to lose track of the number of bodies and their different parts and orientations in space. They become exercises in perception and how it shifts. "I like to keep that imagery floating in the moment right before reality coalesces," she says. "Sort of like lying in bed too close to someone's face to bring it fully into focus."

SARAH FAUX PAINTS NAKED SENSATIONS

What is the process of painting but a long and never-fully-resolved lovers' quarrel between touch and vision, hand and eye? That blissful moment when our not entirely congruent senses find a momentary reconciliation looks like the ultimate subject of most of Sarah Faux's paintings. Since graduating from Yale's MFA program in 2015, Faux—whose family name is pronounced “fox,” not “foe,” by the way—has found considerable acclaim, with one-person shows in Brussels and Shanghai as well as a couple of them in New York. And while her subject matter has remained consistent, her technique seems to be getting both more refined and more forceful by the day.

Stopping by Faux's Crown Heights studio as she was preparing for her solo booth at Frieze New York with Capsule Shanghai, I found myself surrounded by half a dozen medium-sized paintings in progress or recently finished, as well as a few smaller ones and parts of a couple of her “cut-outs.” These are collaged canvas wall works that, she explains, reflect a lineage that goes back to Matisse's reconstructed bodies. At Frieze New York, she intends to use them as works in themselves as well as backdrops on which to hang paintings—something she hasn't done before. She also showed me a sheaf of monotypes recently made at the Lower East Side Printshop.

As with many of Faux's paintings so far, the new ones are situated in a curious state of ambiguity between abstraction and representation, not unlike the work of some of the midcareer painters who've clearly inspired her, such as Amy Sillman and Charline von Heyl. The first time I went to Faux's studio, all I could see at first was the abstraction—until, noticing that I was missing the point, she gently pointed out that all the paintings included figurative imagery, however loose or fragmented: here a hand, there a foot; here a nipple, there a behind; here a head, there a mons pubis... I was mortified, but she seemed tickled at being able to sneak in her corporeal references so subtly that her paintings could be enjoyed as just strikingly composed—that is, appealingly awkward—abstractions, even by mistake. Now, hyperconscious of my former obliviousness, I tend to see the images in Faux's paintings first.

But when I then go on to describe the works by way of what they represent, which is hard to avoid, I somehow feel that I am doing them a disservice—that I am misdescribing as much as describing. Consider one of those I saw in the studio, in which the bottom of the canvas is occupied by part of an outlined male head—closed eyes with delicate lashes, nose, a bit of beard—while most of the rest of the rectangle is occupied by a hand that, under a spray of lovely cursive squiggles, floats in with considerable spatial ambiguity from the left—though where its wrist should be, aren't those a couple of fingers, presumably of some completely other hand? I had to wonder: Is this a painting of one person, or two, or three? Differences dissipate as self or selves fragment. I'm inclined to believe that closed-eyed man must be dreaming those hands. But it makes me think that I might be dreaming too. When I see those eyes at the bottom of the painting, below the nose that is in turn below the chin, it's as if my own head's been turned upside down—a voluptuous vertigo. There's an effect that was noticed long ago by William James in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890): “when we look at a landscape with our head upside down” or “lie on the floor and look up at the mouth of a person talking behind us”—like turning a painting upside down—what we see becomes estranged, and “we feel more freshly the value of the mere tints and shadings”; whatever we look at, even a human face, “we get it as a naked sensation and not as part of a familiar object perceived.” Something like that happens in this painting. No wonder it's titled *Tinges* (2019).

Faux's paintings are seriously sexy, not because they show bits of naked people, but because they do so in order to get at what James called naked sensation. She makes us intimate with color and facture. In *Tinges*, which I suspect has learned some of its fluency and immediacy from the monotypes, we make contact with a scarlet opacity and a cream translucency, with blue lines bent like iron wire and nameless gray stains that seem to linger under the surface of the canvas like blushes or bruises; our eyes seem to feel their way through layers of appearance, more like hands. Dry or wet, delicate or crude, smooth or sharp, there are as many kinds of touch in how paint rubs up against itself or sinks into or floats atop the canvas as there might be between any lovers, and they're all in the painting.

CHENG XINYI, HUIZI, SARAH FAUX: “FEMALE GAZE UNDER MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

When facing a painting, will the artist’s gender identity fundamentally alter the way one sees the work? This simple question has permeated discussions of art appreciation for nearly half a century.

In the context of representational art, the term “female gaze” generally refers to the observation and description of a work from a female perspective. The film critic Laura Mulvey first introduced the concept of the “male gaze” in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975). She concluded that traditional films always imposed a masculine point of view onto the viewers who were led to view the world through a male perspective, turning women into mere objects of desire. Since then, numerous works have emerged to subvert this traditional male perspective in art history. Women are no longer passive objects to be viewed. Instead, they now stand up and walk behind the canvas or lens as active observers.

Traditional “female gaze” artworks have focused on reversing the power relations between genders. Three female artists, however, offered varied dimensions for “female gaze” through the use of different perspectives and narrations at three recent exhibitions in Shanghai. Cheng Xinyi, a young painter based in Paris and Shanghai, portrays the males around her through a third-person perspective. By exchanging glances with these males, she examines the parallel relations of desire and power between the two genders. Hu Zi, a painter based in Shanghai, constructs a perspective similar to the “free indirect style” in fiction writing. Through her observation and substitution of male characters, we can gain a new understanding of gender and body. Sarah Faux, a painter from Brooklyn, New York, uses canvas as her body. Through a first-person perspective, she attempts to liberate the true female experience from the trap of a passive gaze.

[...]

Sarah Faux: Canvas Is Body

Sarah Faux, an American artist who recently held a solo exhibition—*Pucker*—at Capsule Shanghai, also investigates the relationship between body and gender. What sets Faux apart is her portrayal of females alone—males rarely accompany them. Most of the women she paints are naked and only partially presented. Every painting begins with a private moment, followed by fragmented movements capturing a female’s physical experience in an intimate setting.

In a recent dialogue with the Yuz Museum, Faux mentioned that she had been inspired by American feminist oil painter Joan Semmel, who painted her own body as she gazed down at herself, altering the art-historic tradition of painting a female from a male perspective. Yet, once the body enters the gaze—even if said gaze comes from oneself—the artist nonetheless becomes self-conscious. According to Faux, classical artistic language is permeated with male DNA; in order to escape this language and open a “crack” between the image and the audience, Faux turns her canvas into her body.

“I dream...of creating a sensory setting [on canvas] outside the body, and allowing the audience to fill that white space with imagination and physical memories,” Faux said.

In her paintings, Faux dissects the body, zooming in on body parts. The skeleton is typically the frame of the canvas—or the external contours of the cloth collage. The oil paint poured onto the sketch of the body (coated with a strong water-absorbing primer) is immediately scraped off to create a flat “skin” made visible when hues are soaked into the canvas fibers, while the coarse texture of the canvas resembles skin pores. In this composition, the viewer enters an intimate first-person perspective. What fascinates Faux the most are the moments when one’s self-awareness slowly fades, for example, when a female painting subject indulges in dressing up (*Wet Mirror*, 2018), experiences a moment of ecstasy (*White Smoke Rose*, 2018), or plays with her private parts when no one is watching (*Comedown*, 2018).

As John Berger wrote in *Ways of Seeing*, “Only a man can make a good joke for its own sake”, whereas a woman makes a joke to express how she expects herself to be treated by others. A woman’s double role of an

SEX AND PLAY AND PAINTING: SARAH FAUX IN CONVERSATION WITH ELENA SISTO

I want the process to be analogous to the emotional content of each piece, like trying to contain anger by giving a pour hard edges. I take long periods to look and think between making choices on my paintings. Sometimes I'll take something painted flat on the floor with wet into wet paint and come back into it weeks later to contain those pools of paint with sharp, knifed-on, pressurized shapes.

I'd also say that there's a strong bias toward the narrative in all of our minds, and that a face immediately starts to spin into a story. I'm trying to avoid narrative dominating the somatic, sensory experience of the body, which is present with us always. But we're usually ignoring it, how our body feels. I see those forces battling it out through line versus color. Like the two have a kind of power play going on, where in one painting line and image might dominate and in another the image could be completely subsumed into puddles of yellow.

So your actual technique or paint handling is more expressive, rather than a gestural brushstroke or a figurative narrative expressionism? It's an age-old conflict between drawing, which is often thought of as more rational, and color, which is thought of as more irrational. So the resolution or non-resolution is different in every case?

SARAH FAUX: I'm not sure how to define the word expressive, but yes, I am looking for different solutions in each piece. In *E*. I got the most gestural. The painting became a lexicon of drips and marks, semi-linguistic shapes like a giant green letter "E" in loose black parentheses. But that piece is a bit of an exception. In most of these paintings color ends up dominating over gesture or narrative. And ultimately that's an intentional statement, even if it's a consequence of process. I'm advocating for the senses and for the synesthetic power of color to evoke smell, sound, taste. I've been reading a lot of Maggie Nelson lately, along with the rest of Brooklyn, and I loved "Bluets." Through short vignettes she approaches the color blue via her own ex lover, Goethe's color theory, medieval nuns, Joni Mitchell and Joseph Cornell. It's amazing! What a thrilling way to unpack color. I've been keeping it in my head as a working analogy for some deep painting goals.

How are you choosing colors? Are you working completely intuitively, emotionally, symbolically, spatially, in terms of light? All or none of the above?

SARAH FAUX: Hmm, it's hard for me to be sure if it's the same driving force each time. I think picking color is the most intuitive part of painting for me. And it's emotional and definitely spatial. I'm drawn to a somewhat pop palette – a lot of straight or just slightly tweaked pigments that suggest nail polish or lipstick shades or maybe commercial packaging and textiles. They're purposefully not naturalistic, both because human behavior is learned and sometimes dictated by commercial forces but also because pure pigments are just so beautiful. I can't resist cobalt, you know? But I'm trying in each piece to let that intense color have a lighting condition as well – backlit, spot lit, dappled light, or even-toned dusk.

What about manganese, my favorite color. You can't buy it anymore!

SARAH FAUX: I still use it! But maybe it's imitation manganese?

Unless you bought it more than a year or so ago, I'm afraid it may be. Does it seem important to protect a certain innocence while you are working? There's a childlike approach to your process. Does this imply a desire to get to an unselfconscious arena within which to play? Is there an effort to reach a place of child-like sexuality?

SARAH FAUX: Yes, for sure. Without knowing exactly how to put this, I think childhood sexuality is still taboo and the sometimes-childlike nature of adult sexuality is, often, too. Sex and play and painting all feel very connected to me in how they deal with pleasure and power. While I had been under Freud's spell for a while, I got into D.W. Winnicott's ideas about play more recently. Basically, I find a more authentic self comes to light through play than through the narrativizing tendencies of talk therapy. And also that play continues into adulthood. I wouldn't use the word "innocence" though, because that implies naiveté. I'm an academically trained painter, and I'm not trying to "de-skill". Really I just want to tap into a guttural place, not to paint sex as it appears from the outside, but as it's actually experienced, fraught with expectations, anxieties, constraints. And also with moments of uncomplicated release, where an inner child does come out, or an inner animal. I'm

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I couldn't agree more about not being naive or de-skilled. I meant getting to a place where you're not thinking about what other people think, you're right there in the moment with your work, knowing what the next right step is. I'm glad you emphasize that you are an academically-trained artist.

SARAH FAUX: Can't deny that! There can be a confidence in being a kid too. And maybe that's what you're getting at. A feeling of certainty.

Isn't that what Winnicott called "going on being"?

I understand you also consider yourself a third generation feminist. Would you talk about that?

SARAH FAUX: I've always considered myself a feminist, thanks to my mother, I'm sure, and I suppose that makes me third wave. In the sphere of painting, there's a macho ego associated with the New York School and it's an energy I'm drawn to, and that I've been influenced by—de Kooning, Guston, also Frankenthaler and Krasner—but I'm co-opting that bravado for my own means. There's a fair amount of buried anger in these paintings, hence the show's title, *Seether*, which implies a bubbling, seething, libidinal force under the surface. And I tend to organize my compositions from a first person point of view. I want the viewer to see these paintings as extensions of their own body (in the way of Joan Semmel or Nicole Eisenman). Hopefully viewers, whatever gender they may be, will contend with their own role in a scene. Women are forced to read novels or watch movies with male protagonists an inordinate amount of the time. I'm trying to right the scales a little bit.

Well, I said third generation, I'm not sure what exactly constitutes a wave. I think the identification of the New York School with machismo is a little exaggerated, myself. Were they really so much more macho than anyone else in the culture at the time? And you'd have to say the women were macho then too. Let's not forget how distorted things can get when they are being promoted and marketed. My main issue with A.E. and women is that the women haven't been promoted enough. I think painters in the U.S. have done themselves a great disservice by reacting so strongly against A.E., throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

SARAH FAUX: I see your point, and I think we're probably agreeing with each other. I'm certainly not throwing out the lessons of Ab Ex or turning away from that tradition, and don't think American painting would benefit from doing so. I was very into Amy Sillman's article a few years ago called "AbEx and Disco Balls". She broke down that gender essentialism we ascribe to AbEx and pointed out that that energy could be seen as fertile as easily as it could be dismissed as being ejaculatory, so why are we so set on labeling AbEx "male"? So maybe I'm revising my earlier comment. I'm a huge fan of Charlene von Heyl, who continues to shape shift while maintaining a deep connection with her material and process. I'd put Dona Nelson in that category, too.

Earlier you seemed to be mystified by the word "expressive"? Tell me what that is about.

SARAH FAUX: "Expressive" feels like a historical term to me, and I'm not sure what it means right now. We've been talking about AbEx, but there's also German Expressionism. And geometric abstraction is expressive, political posters are expressive... disconnected from an historical moment, "expressive" feels very general to me. What did you mean by it?

I'm using the word with a small "e." There's an emotionality to your work without making that your agenda.

SARAH FAUX: "Emotionality" I can get behind! When we were speaking earlier you'd brought up the difference between psychology vs. emotion in painting, and I'm realizing that emotion might be the stronger force in this group. I'm thinking of emotion as the feelings themselves, which manifest physically and mentally at the same time. And painting is an emotional act for me. If I don't go to my studio for a while, I'm miserable. We tend not to talk about painting as a primal act all the time — opting for a more critical approach to explaining this activity that really consists of manipulating and responding to liquids and colors and textures. So while my paintings are not specifically autobiographical, they do reflect my emotional life.

I heard a great term the other day: "auto-fiction."

SARAH FAUX: I loved that Pipilotti Rist video from her New Museum show called "I'm a victim of this song," where she was singing Chris Isaak's "Wicked Game" in this creepy screaming childlike voice. Pop music is so good at expressing feelings that play out over and over again in people's lives, like that feeling of falling in love in spite of