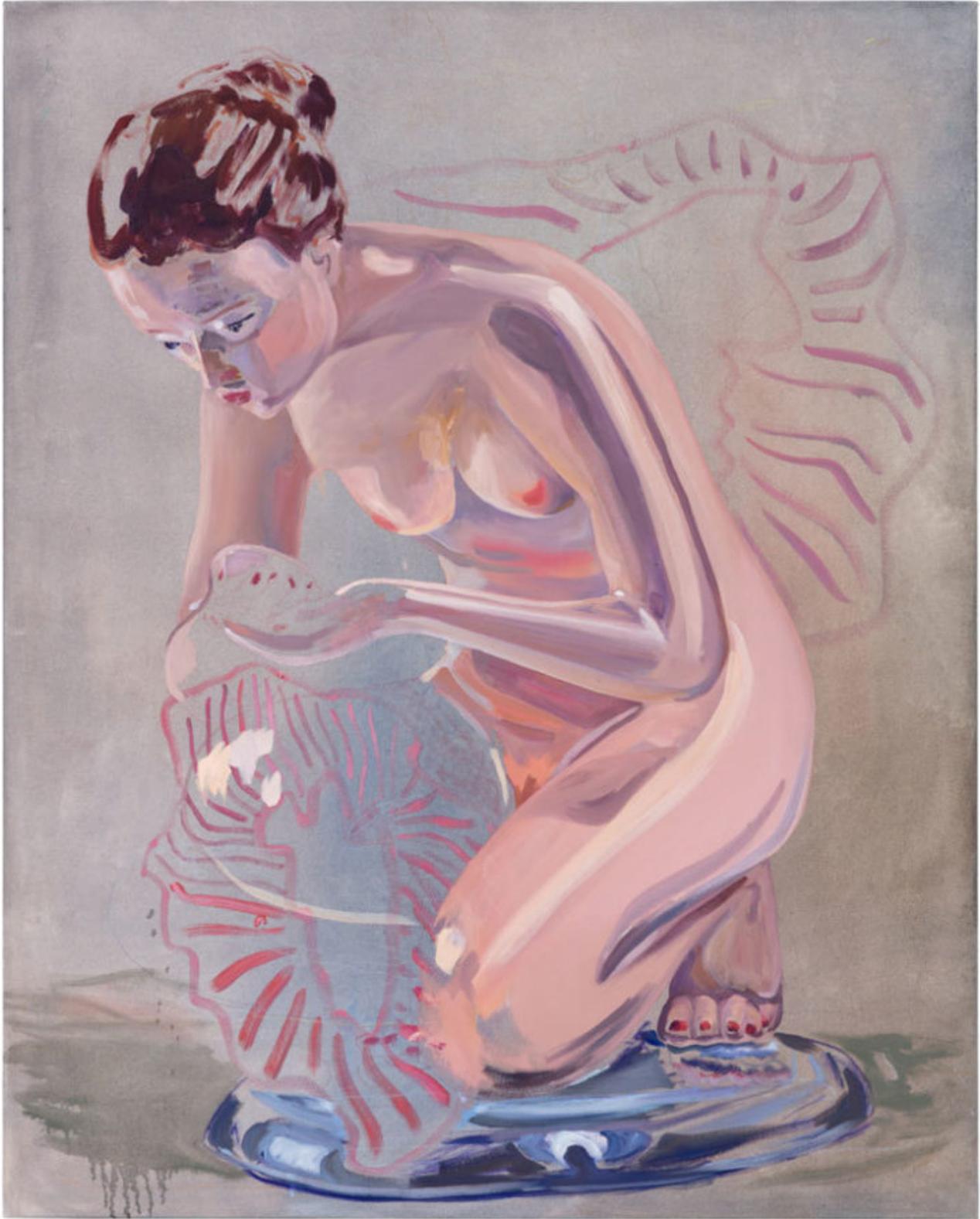


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Misplaced Empathy: Amy Bessone Interviewed by William J. Simmons

Recontextualizing "bad objects."



Amy Bessone, *Invisible Object*, 2017. Oil and pencil on canvas. 60 x 48 x 1.5 inches. Photo by Fredrik Nilsen Studio. Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94.

Amy Bessone and I have recently discussed our mutual awe of a painter we know who exhibits a remarkable lack of self-conflict. One could call this confidence or resignation—who's to say? Bessone's relationship to her materials, art history, and activism are surely fearless. However, the objects and discourses she chooses to appropriate are often harbingers of doubt—quasi-sentient beings that almost crave rejection. She resizes and recontextualizes prototypical “bad objects,” such as figurines of busty, non-Western women that are at once titillating and too tacky to elicit any kind of compelling desire. Even more discomfiting might be Bessone's frequent engagement with sentimentality or preciousness—two terms that have always been levied against the “handicrafts” of women. Yet, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has argued, those debased objects of culture—objects that invite our embarrassed identification or enjoyment—often provide a lifeline for those who feel excluded by the white, hetero-patriarchy. This is not to say that Bessone's work is not critical or deconstructive. I would suggest that she tempers these hallmarks of advanced art with enjoyment, a concept which, like those little sculptures you get in a package of Red Rose tea, might occupy a cherished, but oft-neglected, space in one's heart.

—William J. Simmons

William J. Simmons

What are you conflicted about?

Amy Bessone

Part of my self-conflict just comes from being born in a certain time. I was born in 1970 in New York, and I was a teenager with a growing interest in art in the '80s. I remember, probably when I was about fifteen or sixteen years old, seeing Jean-Michel Basquiat on the cover of the *New York Times Magazine*. I was aware of Julian Schnabel, Eric Fischl, and David Salle, and then I started to become aware of the Pictures Generation.

I remember my mother taking me to Boston to tour colleges. We went to the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, and there was a Cindy Sherman show. This must have been 1986 or 1987? I saw those film stills, and it really was like an arrow to my brain. I had a degree of political self-awareness, and I knew that there were these guys who were painting, and there were these women who were working in other media. I wanted to somehow bridge all those things. There were political

battles centered around the AIDS crisis, conservative forces in the United States and debates on the censorship of art, such as Robert Mapplethorpe and the NEA. It was a very tense, heightened time, and there was a lot going on. I remember seeing Keith Haring's work around. It was an exciting time visually, but I didn't feel like there was a clear path forward. Painting was very compelling to me, so there was a conflict inherent in that. Painting had died a million deaths by that time. It was so associated with a male-dominated, Eurocentric culture, but I was deeply in love with it. I responded by running away to Europe.

Seeing art in person was incredibly important. I didn't want to sit in a lecture hall looking at slides when I could be in a museum, looking at the actual work. Nevertheless, I approached painting with a guilty conscience. I needed to believe I had a rigorous intellectual framework to hang the painting on, and have an emotional distance from it. My paintings change stylistically from body of work to body of work. There are two strains in my work. One is more emotionally distant, maybe tied to idealization, classicism, surrealism, neoclassicism; and then another which is more emotional, romantic, expressive.

In my most recent show, *Reclamation Island*, there's been a shift from the iconic towards the narrative and different styles of painting co-existing within a singular work. In his book on Pablo Picasso, the late, great Per Kirkeby posited that Picasso represented himself in the late work as a disembodied eye, an eyeball on a stick-thin tripod. With his physical vitality waning, the aging Picasso was no longer the lover, but a voyeur observing a passionate couple. Could the pivot to narrative be an effect of aging? Reaching a degree of remove from hormonal drives and egocentricity one shifts from protagonist to narrator? Or maybe I've spent the last thirty years learning painterly languages and assembling a cast of characters. Finally, the troupe is ready to take the stage. Cue: the curtain rises on a large-scale triptych.



Amy Bessone, *Weapons Were Drawn, Sacrifices Were Made, Battles Were Waged, Pleasure Was Had*, 2018–19. Oil on canvas. 72 x 180 inches. Photo by Jeff McLane. Courtesy of the artist and The Pit.

WJS

Given this context in which you came of age, in some ways it would be easy to consider your work in same vein as the stereotypical Pictures Generation discourse—as critical, subversive, or ironic. But what about sincerity? Or is that counter to your political urge?

AB

In the introduction to Audre Lorde’s *Sister Outsider*, Nancy Bereano notes that the work of feminism is to take these conflicts, or these disparate pieces, and make them whole, and bring them together. My work does not pledge allegiance to a dominance of sincerity over politics, or intellect over sensuality or emotion. It rather creates a haven for these things to coexist, to be intertwined. It’s not a dynamic of dominance and submission. I’ll hold this space so that we can all be into whatever we’re into.

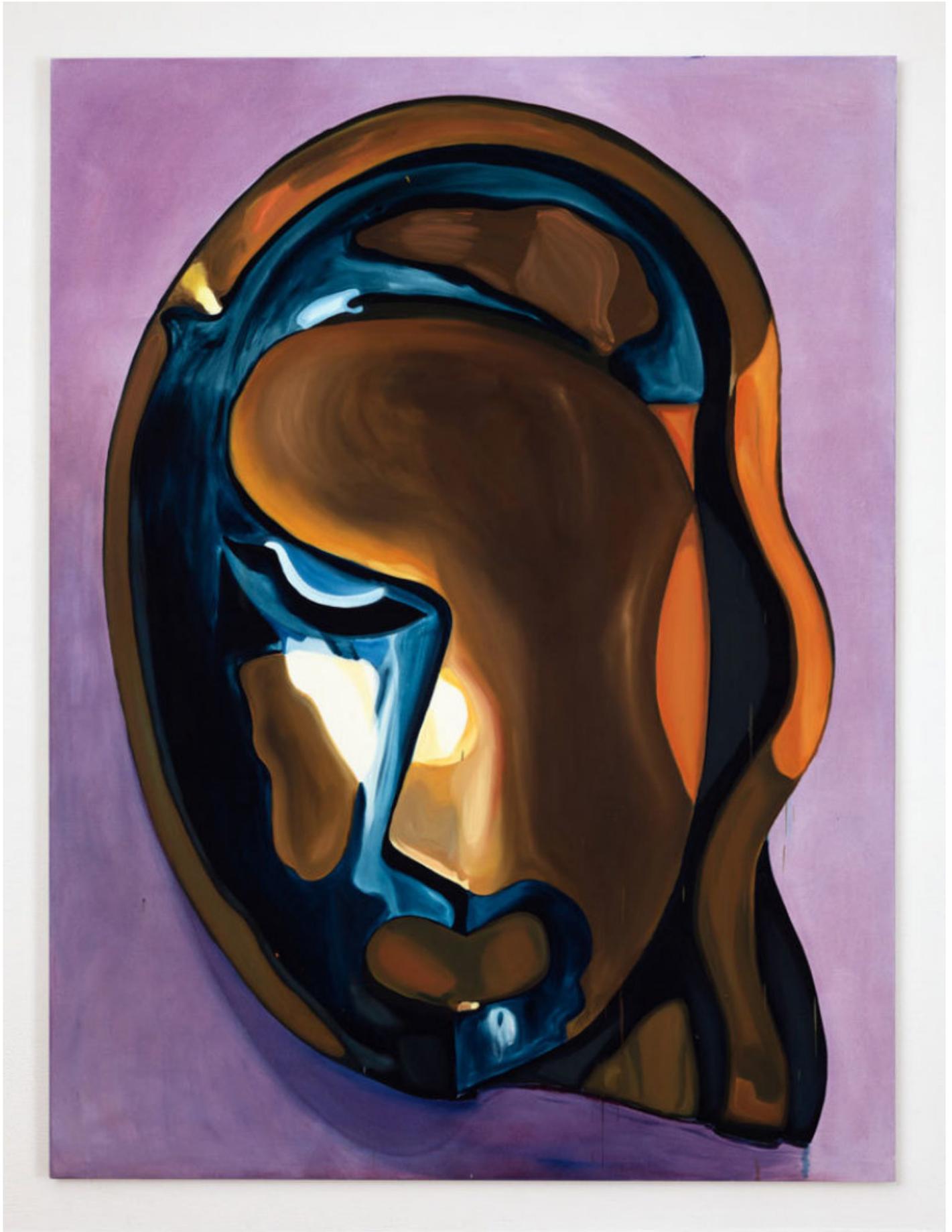
WJS

Maybe scale or proximity are metaphors for what you’re talking about, because

within feminism one has different attachments or goals at any given time that are somewhere between the individual and the collective. Canonical representation and biological imagery were central to Judy Chicago, for instance. They weren't for Mary Kelly. And maybe now representation is coming back into the conversation. At the end of the day, feminism and queer theory are both strategies or critical tools, but they're also rooted in bodies, in objects.

AB

The fact that I make these objects by hand, with their material being in the world and that they take up space is important. We try to tame things by categorizing them or dividing them. It's a means of control. A sensual, physical, emotional, spiritual component is not divorced from the intellectual, academic, or rational. Scale and proximity are relative and therefore about relationships, such as the inescapable relationship of the viewer's body to the art object.



Amy Bessone, *Veronica Lake*, 2008. Oil and alkyd on canvas. 96 x 72 x 1.5 inches. Photo by Fredrik Nilsen Studio. Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94.

WJS

So how do you imagine the connections the original owners have to the objects you depict, or your own relationship to those objects?

AB

Painting can be a great means or pretext to delve deeply into a subject, regardless of how much actually appears ultimately on the canvas. Inevitably, when you depict a body, you're objectifying it, right? When I find an object that I want to make a painting of, I think about its origin. That's also where appropriation comes in. What is the original sin of appropriation? Taking someone's likeness, or making a copy of that likeness? I do think about the original model, and then how they were objectified, and then what happens when I am working from the objectified subject as opposed to the original model. It's an inversion, in a way. Instead of objectifying a person, it's like creating a persona from an object.

WJS

The way you're describing it sounds a lot more compassionate than what we might imagine Sherrie Levine is doing.

AB

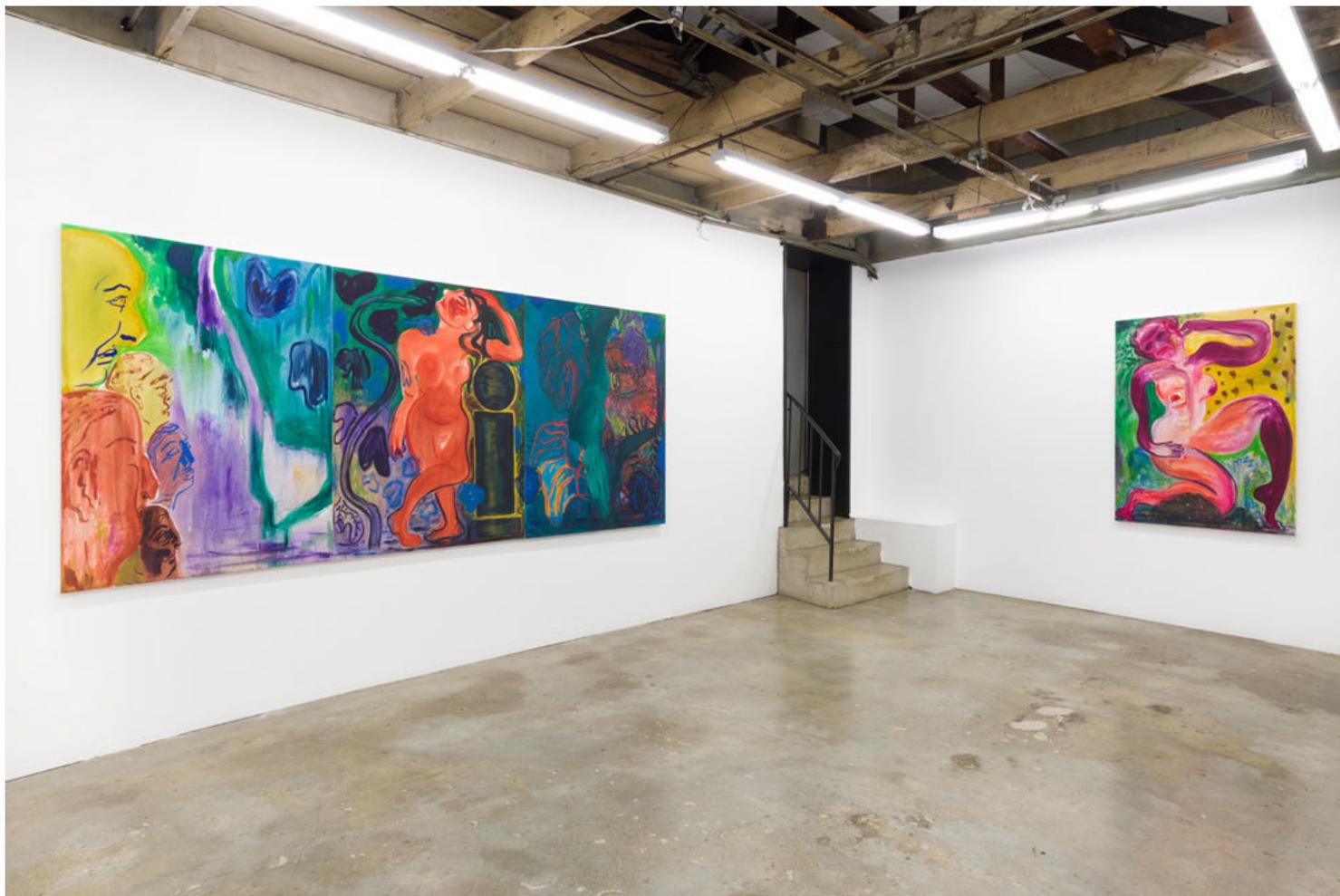
Do we look at artists as compassionate, or not compassionate? That's an interesting lens to consider. I don't know if it's important or not, but it's certainly fascinating to me.

WJS

Are you compassionate? Are you empathetic? Are you sympathetic?

AB

I think I suffer from an excess of empathy sometimes—misplaced empathy. I have a tremendous amount of empathy for my subjects. The subjects are not just the objects, but the person who made the object, the person who is depicted in the object, whoever they may be.



Amy Bessone, *Reclamation Island*. Installation view. The Pit, Los Angeles.
Photo by Jeff McLane. Courtesy of the artist and The Pit.

WJS

There's something so empathetic about making these experiences into something both commonplace and monumental at the same time. You allow those often-cast-away emotions and spaces to become grand. Maybe monumentality is another interesting way to look at scale and emotion.

AB

I do like to look at things that are in the periphery, and with the porcelain figurines, so many people say, "Oh, my grandmother had those on her mantel." They can be horrifying and completely drenched in sexist and colonial impulses, totally banal and also linked to some of the greatest human endeavors in art throughout the ages. To take those things and blow them up is a chance to think about all of those territories. And I do imagine, speculate about how these objects came to be. What was the impulse for making them? What was the impulse to live with them? What do they mean? I'm not actually painting a hand; I'm painting a paw-like lump of clay that came from a mold that somebody then glazed to sort of look like the hand

of a beautiful woman from the South Seas. Then how does that go back to Paul Gauguin, and then Gauguin's problematic nature, and then my love of these extraordinary paintings that he made. If you're perpetuating a fantasy, are you insincere? If you're breaking down an illusion, are you maybe sincerer?

Amy Bessone: Reclamation Island is on view at *The Pit* in Los Angeles until April 13.

William J. Simmons is Provost's Fellow in the Humanities in the art history PhD program of the University of Southern California.

painting figurative feminism

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