

Press Release

Kaari Upson

Body as Landscape

September 9–October 21, 2023

Public Reception: September 8, 6–8pm

Sprüth Magers, New York

Sprüth Magers

The work of Kaari Upson was always profoundly concerned with the body, its interactions with the psyche, as well as its relation to other bodies both real and imagined. Limbs, eyes, lips, hands, feet and braids populate her sculptures, paintings and drawings, pulling viewers into their complex webs of form and narrative. Even in Upson's abstractions, folds and orifices abound. Monika Sprüth and Philomene Magers are honored to present *Body as Landscape*, an exhibition of Upson's work at the New York gallery that offers an in-depth look at her multilayered, kaleidoscopic drawings, alongside one of her celebrated "mother's leg" sculptural installations which have never previously been shown in the US.

Two masterworks anchor the exhibition, whose title comes from a phrase found in one of the artist's drawings. The room-sized installation *eleven* (2020) fills the New York gallery with a forest of suspended tree limbs; all eleven are cast from the tree outside the artist's childhood home, melded with enlarged casts of her knee. Visible termite trails take on the look of arteries and veins, and the legs' scale miniaturizes the viewer, as if they were returning to a child's size. These hybrid objects, whose colors range from earth- and skin-tones to radiant hues, display the importance for Upson of the casting process, which imprints not only physical surfaces, but psychic and emotional histories as well.

The second monumental work on view is *Untitled* (2015–21), the largest and most ambitious drawing the artist ever produced. Upson's drawing style was unique, filled with seemingly innumerable layers of bodily presences and texts rife with psychological exploration – all sourced from past artworks and readings, as well as the artist's own writings and studies for future projects. Many of her works on paper, such as *Untitled*, were created over many years, affixed to the studio walls to be worked and reworked as her ideas developed. Here, we see representations of her well-known sculptures cast from furniture (a sectional couch at center left, for example); bodies of dolls and collaborators Upson worked with; a giant eye, perhaps of an animal, looks at us at the right with deep, unnerving intensity; while classroom notes on Lacan bring forward notions of time and trauma.

Like much of Upson's work, her drawings connote mixed feelings of repulsion and attraction. A selection of smaller drawings, nearly all of which are presented for the

first time, offer an intimate look at different approaches she took to paper media, as well as the motifs and characters that recurred throughout her practice: included are her semi-fictional fantasy man, Larry; his idol, Hugh Hefner, and his Playboy Mansion; Angelina Jolie; and an array of twins and models, as well as glimpses of the artist herself.

Woven among them, and sometimes filling a drawing entirely, are Upson's textual notations, which work continually through themes of repetition, pleasure and desire, home and the uncanny, inside and outside. Often these came from notes on psychological texts (both scholarly and pop cultural); phrases the artist overheard; her own articulations developed from years of stream-of-consciousness writings; and even studio to-do lists. The drawings' layers function like a panoply of voices, their visual and aural repetitions echoing across the page. Certain phrases become mantras, appearing here and throughout other of her series and projects, including "I feel lonely don't do this," "There is no such thing as outside," "navel gaze," "waiting and wanting."

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Despite expounding on loss, trauma and other emotional breaking points, humor also filters throughout the artist's drawings – a knowing acknowledgment, and respite, from the melodrama of her visual and textual interplay.

Kaari Upson (1970–2021). Solo shows and presentations include Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2023, 2007), Deste Foundation, Athens (2022), Kunsthalle Basel (2019), Kunstverein Hannover (2019), and New Museum, New York (2017). Recent group exhibitions include Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève (2023), Nottingham Contemporary (2022), San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (2022), Cleveland Museum of Art (2021), Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk, Denmark (2021), Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2020), Aspen Art Museum (2019), Marta Herford Museum, Herford, Germany (2018), 15th Istanbul Biennial (2017), 2017 Whitney Biennial, Aïshti Foundation, Beirut, Lebanon (2015-16), The High Line, New York (2015), Rubell Family Collection, Miami (2015), Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing (2014), CAPC Musée d'art contemporain, Bordeaux, France (2014) and Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA (2013). In 2019 and 2022, her work was featured in the 58th and 59th Venice Biennials.

For further information and press inquiries, please contact Silvia Baltschun (sb@spruethmagers.com).