

Press Release

Kaari Upson

*never, never ever, never in my life, never in all my born days,
never in all my life, never*

August 4–October 8, 2022

Sprüth Magers, Los Angeles

Sprüth Magers

Over a prolific twenty-year period, Kaari Upson created a powerful body of work that mined the emotional linkages and traumas embedded within the objects and architectures that surround us every day. Working across sculpture, painting, drawing, installation, performance and video, the artist explored relationships between the self and others, between inner life and external reality, and the doublings and repetitions that continually resurface in our past and present. Monika Sprüth and Philomene Magers are honored to present the first solo exhibition of Upson's work in Los Angeles in over a decade, and the first in the United States since her death in 2021. Titled by the artist, the exhibition premieres several new series that demonstrate an artist at the height of her creative powers.

On view for the first time in the United States are two projects that debuted in the 58th and 59th Venice Biennales respectively: *Kris's Dollhouse* (2017–19) and *Portrait (Vain German)* (2020–21). Each illustrate Upson's deft combination of painterly and sculptural modes, as well as her complex method of casting and enlarging objects to produce uncanny effects and environments. Through various processes of recording, including 3D-scanning, mold-making, digital milling and painting, a dollhouse belonging to Upson's friend, along with its contents, were enlarged multiple times to bring them to human scale. To these dollhouse fragments, Upson added some of her friend's personal items, which were enlarged to become oversized. Scale is thus rendered strange and unpredictable, in a work that considers how we find self-definition in conversation with those close to us.

Upson's *Portrait (Vain German)* panels, which feature ghostly, abstracted visages, begin from a similar principle: the artist first created a miniature painting, which was 3D-scanned, enlarged and cast using a silicone mold. Working with the mold on the floor, Upson painted one layer at a time, from front to back, making marks with pigment-tinted Aqua-Resin. As she built up the image, the marks she put down first were hidden by later ones, a process she dubbed "blind painting." The final image is thus a combination of deliberate actions, chance effects and forgotten gestures, while the series as a whole relates to the theme of "vanitas" and its consequent notions of time, transience, death and beauty. In some panels the figure is clearly visible, while in others, traces of facial features are absorbed into Upson's network of Technicolor painterly motions.

The exhibition also presents a major new suite of paintings on canvas that Upson embarked upon during the early months of the pandemic. Alone in her studio, she returned to the medium of her early *Kiss Paintings*, reviving some of the same techniques. Using myriad painterly marks within each work, from spraying and masking to heavy impasto, the artist generated compositions in which symbols seen across her work take shape in paint – the blonde, braided Fräulein, gingham-checked fabrics, pairs of eyes, household objects. Crises and transgressions are hinted at, but never revealed. Like Philip Guston and others after him, Upson moves nimbly between abstraction and figuration, wrestling between the two in each richly layered and revelatory canvas.

Gingham patterning reappears in a group of arresting figurative sculptures that began as miniature wooden whittled dolls – another example of Upson's play with scale, as well as her interest in materials, process and the complexity of familial ties. The sculptures' uniform of jeans and plaid shirt is a combo often worn by the artist's mother, and one in which Upson herself performed in videos taking on her mother's guise. Yet the close-cropped hair and the cast vodka bottles that run along the sculpture's spine, perhaps feeding the body or sucking it dry, reference her father. Their pinkish contents recall a mix of blood and water and emphasize the discomfiting bonds of family and the inescapable dilemmas of generational trauma.

Sprüth Magers

As a background to these later developments in Upson's work are recent examples of her large-scale drawings – a cornerstone of her practice. Created over many years, they display evocative fragments of text and image that offer a view into the artist's kaleidoscopic thought process. Faces and bodies intermingle with images of her past sculptures, as well as lines of text that speak out from the page in a chorus of different voices, all incorporated at different scales and orientations to dizzying effect. Like much of Upson's work, her drawings connote mixed feelings of repulsion and attraction, all the while luring the viewer into their experimental webs of information.

Throughout the exhibition, Upson's recurring characters, symbolism and gestures materialize through an array of aesthetic approaches and mediums, always returning to the inner workings of the self. Merging personhood and objecthood in ways both alluring and disturbing, the works demonstrate Upson's unwavering urge to interpret the psyches and psychoses of our complicated twenty-first century lives, with vigor, depth and beauty.

Kaari Upson (1970–2021). Solo shows include Deste Foundation, Athens (2022), Kunsthalle Basel (2019), Kunstverein Hannover (2019), New Museum, New York (2017) and Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2007). Recent group exhibitions include Henry Art Gallery, Seattle (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), 58th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia (2019), Aspen Art Museum (2019), Marta Herford Museum, Herford, Germany (2018), 15th Istanbul Biennial (2017), 2017 Whitney Biennial, Aishti Foundation, Beirut, Lebanon (2015–16), The High Line, New York (2015), Rubell Museum, Miami (2015), Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing (2014), Musée d'art contemporain, Bordeaux, France (2014) and Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2013). Her work is also included in *The Milk of Dreams*, the 59th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia (2022), curated by Cecilia Alemani.

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