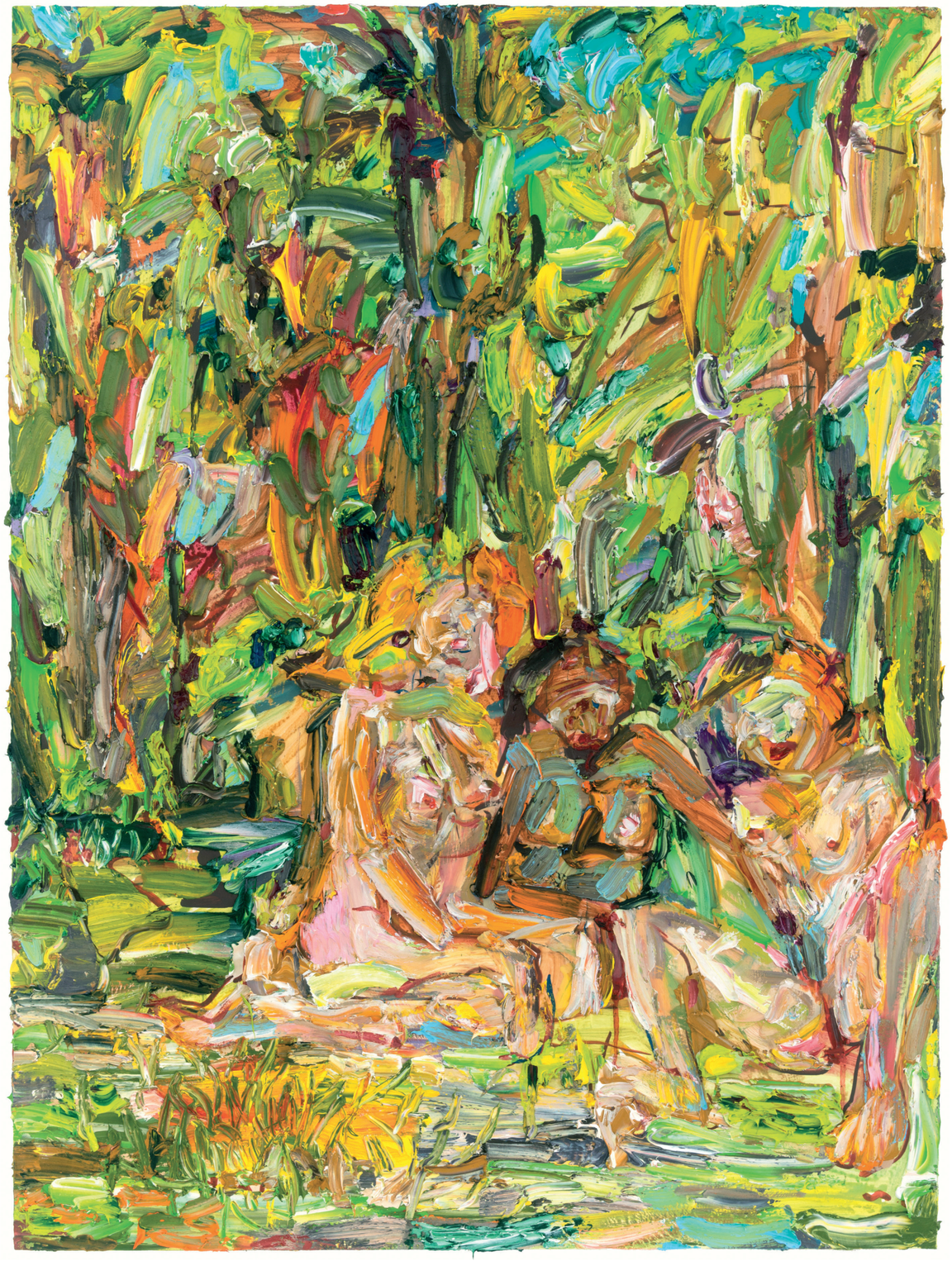


VANESSA PRAGER

words EMMA FIRTH

all artwork courtesy of VANESSA PRAGER

[this page] 'Room of One's Own', oil on panel, 2018

[opposite page] 'Deep in Clear Valley', oil on panel, 2018



"It's been raining here," artist Vanessa Prager tells me. She has been rising early (at her dog's behest) to enjoy, along with the other inhabitants of Los Angeles, the respite from the city's perpetual drought. I picture her "very tidy" studio; its window with a view of chaotic streets, bent through a kaleidoscope of raindrops on the glass. Similarly, Vanessa's work presents itself as a refraction of the female form, so commonly depicted throughout art history, revealing the chaos and humanity of womanhood.

"Women are classically underrated," she says. "I remember being most put off by the fact that there weren't a lot of female artists that could be referenced – mostly it is male painters painting women. The whole field is just covered in that one version. There's a lot of tension there about being subservient and adhering to a specific role. People will try to put lower expectations on women in general. If you're too loud or too outside of that, it's frowned upon – in really subtle ways."

The younger sister of acclaimed photographer and filmmaker Alex Prager ("we're really close, it's awesome!"), she grew up in a creative household in LA. "I sucked at drawing," she admits, laughing. "I wasn't an artist as a kid, but they really encouraged me anyway. My mum would always draw, and I think that had an influence on me – she's actually really talented at ceramics. That, and their mental attitude was always, 'You guys can do whatever you want if you just set your mind to it.' It's so cheesy, but I realise most kids don't get that, so we were really lucky."

She found her calling at the age of 16, while studying at a "boring boarding school in the middle of nowhere in Oregon." Vanessa remembers: "When I was there I really got into the Renaissance. I read the *Agony and the Ecstasy* and was studying these emotions the artists were putting into their work – really classically obviously." Later came her URL education, scanning the internet for hours and finding inspiration from images of technological degradation.

The cinematic backdrop of her native land has inspired her figurative style over the years. While her earlier photo-realistic works have morphed into working on larger, thick sculptural representations, her paintings always conjure up something that appears so real and lucid at the same time. Last September, her portrait of actress Maya Rudolph graced the cover of the *New York Times Magazine*, but all was not as it seemed. In fact, it was a photo – taken by her sister Alex – of her painting. Sort of.

"We had this idea to merge our two works together. Maya came to my studio and I painted the portrait of her, then a couple days later we all got together again and we literally cut through the painting and had a hand, a face, coming through at different times, and then shot that. I think a lot of it didn't matter what was what." Why are celebrities such fascinating subjects? "People feel they have this personal connection to them."

"It's the same with internet profiles," she adds. "Often a whole character can be built that's not real. A couple of years ago I got really into what people see versus the actuality of it. It can be very disorienting." With the rise of Instagram influencers and, more disconcertingly, CGI supermodels, storytelling is becoming ever more skewed. "You really have to know who you are – especially in this day and age – and be confident in that as you move forward. Because a lot of people will see something and just say something at the drop of a hat. It's fine if you're in control of it – if not, it can be very disorienting for somebody in this world and [you] can be influenced by everything.

"I think women in particular are dealing with that issue a lot. If you're looking at a selfie posted on Instagram, that's just one version of a person, who is a thousand different things. You're like, 'I think I get that person,' and it's a very surface view of them. But it's much more complex than that. I've always studied and been interested in, and fought against, the idea of being pegged into anything."





[opposite page]
(left) 'Maya Rudolph', photograph by Alex Prager, painting by Vanessa Prager
(right) 'Sure Thing', oil on panel, 2018



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Vanessa retells a brilliantly bizarre story, which perfectly illustrates this post-truth bubble we can find ourselves in. "I was out walking with my husband near our home, and, all of a sudden, there was a gas station that I'd never seen before. We were like, 'Weird, we've never seen that before.' And it was a movie set that got exploded the next week. It's just a way of life here. It was fully done – the gas pumps, everything. I thought it was real. It was amazing."

It's not all Tinseltown dreams though. Often compared to its east coast rival, LA is developing a thriving art culture all of its own. Frieze Art Fair even had its debut in the city this year, reflective of the landscape's newfound creative identity. "Because of Hollywood, it wasn't taken seriously as a city. It was like it wasn't real and just kind of full of crap and silliness. A lot of artists live here too – that's a thing I've noticed on a personal level. Back in the day [they] all lived in New York and London – LA was kind of like another place that people made fun of behind their back."

Stepping away from the canvas, Vanessa finds escapism in the form of literature and regularly dissects "modern, feminist-driven texts" at her book club. "I really like *A Little Life*, by Hanya Yanagihara – it's heartbreaking. It's about these four guys [who] live a whole life together. I also like reading Stephen King novels and the Harry Bosch detective series. Sometimes I don't even like the book, but it's so interesting to talk about, you know?"

"I'm a part-time food artist too," she says. "I throw parties for my friends – I'll go to the market and get tons of fruit and veg and cheeses, and arrange them in a way that's messy and beautiful and luscious. Not erotic, but I see it as sexy as it is over the top. I mean, I made one for my nephew, so it's not X-rated," she says, laughing. "But it's similar to my paintings – lots of tiers and food dotted together."

More than a year after the #MeToo movement shook Hollywood, I'm curious if this is something that has permeated the art world too. "It was all anyone could talk about," Vanessa says. "I had friends speak out on their own stories and disputes. I heard things about gallerists and their personal experiences. I actually haven't experienced it myself, but my interest lies in the fact that I know that's not true for every woman, it's more insidious than that.

"I'm not trying to make it a 'men against women' thing. I know that there are so many great men and I really don't believe in the idea of bashing men at all. I think it's about enforcing the idea that, yes, in the past things were different. We can be whatever we want to be now." ■

To see more of Vanessa's work visit vprager.com

[this page]
(top) 'Catfish', oil on canvas, 2016
(bottom) 'Blooming Through the Brush', oil on canvas, 2016

