

ArtSeen

Sascha Braunig: *Lay Figure*



Sascha Braunig, Study for "Medusa", 2021. Oil on linen over panel, 14 x 11 1/4 inches. Courtesy Magenta Plains, New York.

During a recent trip to New York Academy of Art, I was reminded of *écorché*, the meticulous art of rendering human figures stripped of flesh, bare to the body's stringy muscles and lean bones. A mastering of *écorché*, as my companion told me, during the times of the old masters was the foray into capturing the essence of the human likeness on canvas or in bronze. Echoing the statuesque nooks of the body's innards and attributing to paint or stone a similar breath of life demonstrated utmost artistry.



Sascha Braunig, Lay Figure, 2021. Oil on linen over panel, 54 x 42 inches. Courtesy Magenta Plains, New York.

In the contemporary order, mirroring the human physique is merely an artistic ambition; however, the body that envelops the carnal desire beneath the skin and contains the beat of a restless heart is still a territory to explore. Sascha Braunig's new suite of corporal paintings are molecular and grandiose, both openings and veilings of the anatomy, not only as a yearning skin and pulsating heart, but also as a den of celestial chances. Dotting the walls of Magenta Plains and François Ghebaly, a few blocks apart on the Lower East Side, are paintings of spines as pillars of bodily temples, each made with a frivolous lightness while slicing the linen surface with a quirky determinism.

Gently folded like lush theater curtains or heart-wrenching love letters, the spines revel in a statuesque elegance, an alluring mystery of the impending, as well as the vagueness of their intentions. Perhaps this last trait—the in-betweenness of Braunig's anti-human bodies—makes her paintings challenging to look away from. Each backbone is forcefully grabbed by hands with brutal determination, clutched like a life-saving arm or a long-missed lover. The grips, however, seem nothing like a caress, but more like products of an alien familiarity with their brittle thinness and sly approaches.

Challenging the hands' drained appearances are their evident power, so strong that each spine is tightly squeezed to its last breath, such as in *Study for Clutches 1* (2020) or *Study for Fountain* (2021), both on view at Magenta Plains. In the combat between weightlessness and force, the winner is left ambiguous: are the hands guardians of affably soft columns or do they clutch the helpless anchors to destroy? Searching for an answer is futile, and settling for humor is suggested.



Sascha Braunig, *The Fitting*, 2020. Oil on linen over panel, 52 x 36 inches. Courtesy Magenta Plains, New York.

Braunig's main medium is her wit, a wildly necessary matter, in fact, to handle the body as a subject matter. Christina Ramberg and Kiki Kogelnik, as the shows' joint press release notes, are her inspirations. Additionally, I also see a dose of Judy Chicago in Braunig's flirtation with the sexual abstract, Hilma af Klint in the paintings' odes to a transcendental geometry, as well as Tamara de Lempicka in the artist's construction of the body with architectural composition. The show's titular work *Lay Figure* (2021) is a radiant yellow moment with two skinny arms gripping the backbone—or waist or spine—like a bouquet of flowers offered in asking for forgiveness. The implication of a body is elevated with two tiny legs sprouting from the bouquet. Various shades of yellow populate a background, either a theatrical set with vertical drapes or impeccably cut slices of a glutinous cake.

2nd Study for Lay Figure (2020) also claims a yellow setting, paired with a blackish sky that bleeds into the lower, sunny half in an amber haze. The spine is spectral, a transparent veil in front of the golden horizon. Two sets of arms grab the see-through cloth with an unforgiving will while their bony hands form geometric cubes around the slim corsage. The limbs' light red skin is repeated in two vertical lines, outlining a waist that contains the clutched veil. The stage is a clearer set in *Medusa* (2021), at François Ghebaly, a green heavy juxtaposition of grip with pockets of air. The squeeze of the green here yields five pipes through which the outlines of the limbs arise. The self-sufficient cycle of existence and tension summarizes Braunig's commitment to wit. Two green drapes cap the left and right edge, contributing to the painting's overall showiness, almost with the brazenness of a pair of jazz hands or a blown party horn.

Braunig builds maquette versions of her figures in paper, fabric, wire, wood armature, and epoxy resin clay before reaching out to her paint brush. Whether a romantic homage to old masters or a training of the synchronization between the hand and the eye, the artist's method shines in *The Fitting* (2020). Also at Magenta Plains, this is one of the two shows' few paintings without a moment of clutching. A perfectly blue sky backdrops a barbed wire silhouette's attempt to robe itself with an airy bodysuit woven with a blood-filled vein—or simply red-colored string. The figure's hands carefully pull the tight suit on both sides, pulling its threads up from the waist towards the shoulders. Both eerie and somewhat sad, *The Fitting* is a hopeful step towards revival for our steel (anta)protagonist.