

Disrupted Circuits

Debra Singer on Victoria Gitman

Engaging with one Victoria Gitman painting is a complex enough viewing proposition, but a twenty-year survey of this mid-career artist is an entirely different level of physical encounter, given the ways in which the artist's paintings captivate the viewer with their hyper-realistic style and intense abstract materiality.

With each considerably smaller than one foot square and all rendered in exquisite detail, Gitman's paintings gently beguile at a first distanced glance. Most focus on depictions of elaborately beaded purses, bejeweled costume necklaces, plush fur swatches, or fragments of sequined dresses -- all vintage personal objects commonly associated with the feminine, ornamentation, and the body. Others, in a related series, concentrate on art historical portraits of women; projecting an equally demure sensibility, these latter works are either recreations of postcards of iconic Old Master paintings or are paintings based on drawings by the French Neoclassical artist Jean August Dominique Ingres.

Regardless of the depicted subject, every example requires that we get up close, in intimate proximity, to really see them. And, what we discover there is startling.

The artist's extraordinary finesse of execution yields such a persuasive verisimilitude that her paintings seem to suspend normal perception and even ordinary experiences of time. Our modes of looking decelerate as the brain grapples with mixed messages about textures commingling with temperatures, shadows with light. Her paintings direct our vision, even as they transform it, provoking a dramatic slowness of seeing that is a welcome refuge.

Every bead, sequin, or wisp of fur is painted by Gitman individually, through a one-to-one transposition, with patience, meticulousness, and, one might suspect, even a touch of alchemy. There is a bit of ineffable magic to her paintings, an illusionistic transubstantiation. A cold hardness is conveyed in one, a cozy warm softness in another, as our optical signals spill over into the tactile senses. Gitman ignites, what she describes as, a kind of "touching with the eyes."¹

Such scrambled kinesthetic reactions provoke a second shift of understanding--an unexpected bait-and-switch. Up-close scrutiny reveals how the artist's luxuriously painted objects, in fact, are at odds with their often surprisingly clinical presentation. Set dispassionately against vaguely monochromatic, neutral backgrounds, they brandish a rather thorough disregard for the viewer, amplified by the practically audacious level of virtuosic skill. If the works' coy allure initially draws you in, it's an assertive toughness that greets when you linger. Gitman's representations exist in their own hermetic worlds, divorced from any descriptive familiar space. Even as her painted images hover on the surface as a vibratory presence, our sense of nearness to the objects within the pictorial space is compressed; we are left without air, enchanted but breathless.

These discoveries lead to a further, unforeseen affect in this elaborate tango between the viewer and the artwork: that of a playfulness, tinged with absurdity. This is partly evident in the patterns of the beaded, fur, and sequined passages that mischievously echo art historical compositional devices of 20th century abstraction. Irreverent nods to Pop Art's Benday dots or Abstract Expressionism's outsized brushstrokes appear in one example or Minimalism's monochrome geometries and Op Art's pulsating repetitions in another. There is, too, a borderline outlandishness in choosing to replicate in paint, postcards of iconic historical paintings that already have been shrunk to diminutive proportions—to say nothing of the inherent, punning critique, given how historical Western depictions of women frequently "reduced" them to an objectified status.

Intermixed, though, into this deadpan humor is an absurdist melancholy as well. While Gitman's paintings, for instance, often present us with images of "luxury" items, they are vintage ones that have lost some glamour, humbled by either their noticeably faux status or now outmoded fashion. And, it is onto these objects that Gitman bestows an incredible, perhaps inordinate, amount

¹ Conversation with the artist, January 28, 2022.

of time and concern – far more attention, the artist has pointed out, than their original owners likely did, exalting them into another realm of consideration.²

In each situation, Gitman perseveres with her remarkably labor-intensive process, often spending three or four months to complete a single painting. Each nine-to-five working session, she explains, is equal to just a few centimeters of surface covered; her highly disciplined approach necessitates both a meditative temperament and a fierce stamina of will. As curator René Morales, who organized Gitman's 2015 survey at Miami's Pérez Art Museum, has observed, there is a way in which her paintings "function as surrogates or conduits, not only for human sensory experience, but also of (her) own subjectivity."³ These paintings are, in a rather literal way, indexes of the artist's daily life.

Ultimately, though, what Gitman's work highlights is the embedded gendered associations integral to the pictorial experience itself. Her paintings draw our attention to, in her words, the "circuits of desire" that connect the viewer's gaze to the work of art, often resulting in slippages in identification with the depicted subject and the picture plane itself, and the conflation of erotic and pictorial desire.⁴ At the same time, her works also suggest a meaningful disruption of such "circuits," one that offers up more indeterminate dynamics of spectatorship, beyond a gendered polarity of subject/object dichotomies. Instead, Gitman's precise alignment of image, scale, style, and form facilitates another perspective: we are able to observe these paintings as if through her own eyes, with an informed and critical pleasure in looking. We begin to appreciate from her vantage not only her multifaceted interrogation of specific art historical conventions but also her undeniable admiration for these same stylistic traditions as well as her unwavering devotion to the expansive formal possibilities of paint.

Debra Singer is an independent curator, writer, and art advisor based in New York City.

² Conversation with the artist, January 28, 2022.

³ "The Haptic Gaze: Victoria Gitman in Conversation with René Morales," in *Victoria Gitman: Desiring Eye* (Miami: Pérez Art Museum, 2015), 21.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.