

Deborah Oropallo

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Deborah Oropallo @ Catharine Clark

By David M. Roth
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.45, 2016 Photomontage, paint, paper and canvas 70 x 60"

Since taking up digital painting in the late 1990s, Deborah Oropallo has developed an arsenal of visceral imagery that grabs viewers and leaves them questioning whether her intent to terrorize, enlighten, empower or all three. Where fairy tales once served an equivalent function, Oropallo's art, which draws on modern and ancient fables, warns of dangers lurking in the darker recesses of the Internet. More recently, with the right-wing takeover of American government, her work has turned pointedly political, all the while retaining the tantalizing visual provocations and post-feminist themes that have elevated her to her present position. All are thrillingly encapsulated in her current show, *Bell the Cat*.

The title derives from a story that was originally called Belling the Cat. It dates to 1200 has evolved through many variations, but its basic thrust is that of a cautionary tale, warning of

spineless political leaders, who, having succumbed to corruption and cronyism, fail to steer clear of imminent and foreseeable dangers. It's a fable that applies well to the present moment. Oropallo grafts that ethos onto her own list of concerns and visual tropes. The result a fresh hybrid that contains prominent elements of several prior exhibitions: *Guise* (2007), her breakthrough show at the de Young that employed advanced digital trickery to demonstrate what the world might look like if humans were truly hermaphroditic; the *Wild Wild West Show* (2009) in which downloaded images of rodeo queens were transformed into hyperkinetic ghosts; *Tale Spin* (2011), a frightening display of warrior women derived from images on costume-play ("cosplay") websites; and *Heroine* (2012), wherein the above-described techniques were applied to images of female fencers, which the artist shredded and posed provocatively, posing, en route, provocative questions about power and victimhood.



Still image from *White as Snow*, 2016, video compilation with music by Jeremiah Franklin Edition of 8 3:16 minutes

As such, *Bell the Cat* serves as something of an Oropallo primer. It's comprised of mostly large-scale paintings. However the best entry point into them is the animation running in the gallery's media room, *White as Snow*. It's the artist's first foray into video and it's superb. In just over three minutes it lays out, in a whirl of overlapping costume changes involving an infant morphing into a young woman, the issues that have dominated the artist's work over the past decade. It's accompanied by a soundtrack created by 17-year-old Jeremiah Franklin, made from heavily distorted samples of Walt Disney's score for *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937). Perfectly synched to the moving images, it slips surreptitiously in tone from cheery to ominous, befitting Oropallo's long-running idea, that attempts to construct female identity out of any aspect of pop culture – be it film, comics, TV, porn or the Internet – is a doomed proposition. Building off Disney's original yellow-blue-red color scheme, Oropallo gives her version of the character an American flag for a scarf and encircles it with poisoned apples. Fittingly, those same elements appear in the 12 "paintings" that form the core of this show. They feature the blurred, vaporous, blown-apart female figures Oropallo's followers have come to know well.

I put the word paintings in quotes because these works are actually photomontages, built from multi-layered, heavily altered Photoshop files, which the artist prints on sheets of paper and affixes to canvas in much the same manner as she did in *Tale Spin*. The overlapping seams, slightly out of alignment, bring to mind David Hockney in his post-Polaroid phase, and offer ample evidence of the highly iterative process the works undergo en route to completion. Spray paint is the only pigment Oropallo applies manually to the surfaces; yet the works feel startling painterly, owing to how skillfully she employs a battery of electronic effects to unite the disparate pieces. Some to leap off the surface; others recede into indecipherable, if not grotesque blurriness, as in *Snow Blind* and *Seeing Red*. Combined, these methods make for fragmented scenes of physical and psychic dislocation, played out against multi-planar backdrops set in clinically lit interiors.



L to R: *Naval Destroyer* and *Moral Fiber*, both 2016, photomontage, paint, paper and canvas, each 61 x 50"

While artist's sexual politics have always been exceedingly sharp, here she takes aim at the forty-fifth president with a painting titled *.45*. It's a faceless Colonial-era military figure wrapped in the American flag. The numerals, crudely painted, appear graffiti-like, just to the right of the head. To look is to feel yourself and the country taking a bullet. *American Puppet* and *Moral Fiber* reinforce that association with Pinocchio-like figures hanging from spray-painted strings, which, in Oropallo's handling, seem closer to extreme bondage than mere puppetry, again echoing earlier series.

Oropallo says she didn't intend to make a show about the 2016 election, but when the results came in ("I was thinking *MADAM* President all along, not *MADMAN!*") her mood shifted, which is how the sprayed strings found their way into the puppet paintings and how the numeral *.45* got appended to a visage that could have come straight out of *Guise*, the 2007 series about gender confusion. Throwbacks to *Wild, Wild West Show* and *Tailspin* loom large as well. In *Naughty or Nice*, for example, misaligned female breasts peek out from behind a piece of cowhide, while in *Naval Destroyer*, missiles (breasts, really) replace a woman's eyes, calling to mind Bruce Conner's famous conflation of eroticism and warfare in *Three Screen Ray* (2006).

In these regards many links can be drawn between Oropallo's oeuvre and movements of the past (Cubism, Surrealism, German Expressionism and Neo-Expressionism), as well as to peers, like Albert Oehlen. But in the interests of time, which is running short, I leave you with this suggestion: see the show. It represents Oropallo at the peak of her powers, which, at this perilous juncture, can't be valued too highly. No representational painter in California I can think of is making tougher, smarter, harder-hitting work.



Seeing Red, 2016 Photomontage, paint, paper and canvas 68 x 48 inches

Deborah Oropallo: "Bell the Cat" @ Catharine Clark Gallery through February 18, 2017.

Oropallo's newest video, "Going Ballistic," screens at BAMPFA, as part of the Hippie Modernism Forum with a panel discussion on February 11 @ 1 pm.

Learn more about the artist. [Read the Squarecylinder interview.](#)