

ARTFORUM

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ALTERNATIVE FACTS
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DOCUMENTA 14
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REVIEWS

Bonnie Lucas

JTT

Since the 1970s, Bonnie Lucas has been reconfiguring the icks and discomforts of feminine aesthetics, revealing the precise flavor of subjugation imposed by sweetie-pie girlishness. Combining frilly garments, plush animals, hair grips, jelly shoes, flowers, bunnies, decorated eggs, wedding cake figurines, sequins, baby toys, and ballet ribbons, the artist constructs unstable bodies that burst open at the seams. “Young Lady,” at JTT, curated by Marie Catalano, was a timely presentation of works made by the artist between 1983 and 1987: intricate, wall-based assemblages she calls “object collages,” and small paintings that have been accumulating in Lucas’s apartment in New York’s Little Italy for decades.



Bonnie Lucas, *Smiling Girl*, 1983, mixed media, 30 x 21 1/2”.

The earliest works in the show were the object collages, in which Lucas brings various items together to create delirious portraits, such as *Smiling Girl*, 1983, a white face with large, manic eyes made from pink and pearl beads arranged inside gold hoops, and a peach-colored airplane button for a nose. Twisted and knotted pink underwear forms the rictus of the title, though in the context of Lucas’s discomfiting practice, it seems more correct to call these *panties*. The oversized head rests on top of a tiny body with a knitting-needle torso

and crochet-hook arms. Then, like an exquisite corpse, the style shifts a third time for the figure’s bottommost section, which takes the form of an illustration of a girl’s lower half, possibly from a game piece, wearing an *Alice in Wonderland* blue skirt and patterned apron, white socks, and Mary Janes. As in other works in this series, delicately arranged rows of embroidery thread outline the body in alternating shades of white and cerise, creating a pink halo. For *New Man*, 1984, Lucas again pairs delicacy with derangement, constructing a face using an upside-down infant onesie, whose legs serve as rabbitlike ears and whose collar acts as a mouth spewing strings of pearls. *And This Too Will Pass*, 1983, features a figure with pale-pink spoons for eyes, somewhat reminiscent of the empty shells for eyes from Hans Schärer’s *Madonna* paintings, while *Running Mother*, 1983, a figure holding a baby bottle aloft, has a white ring lined with sharp broken shells for a mouth, bringing to mind a hostile contraceptive diaphragm. The vagina dentata and its inverse recur in the exhibition—elsewhere, a teething ring on a young girl’s dress suggests a vaginal opening. Such confusion throws into relief the infantilizing vocabulary of objects listed above—pearls, panties, and Mary Janes—a fetishism that is embroidered into the feminine, and into the identity of children who must negotiate it. The glee and desire present in some of the objects are a reminder of their coercive power.

These more figurative compositions later become assemblages of excess, with dense piles of beads, buttons, fabrics, and toys creating a sense of glut rather than specific discontent or imagery, more akin to the horror vacui of Mike Kelley’s “Memory Ware” works 2000–10. In fact, the curator painted the gallery walls dark green for the installation, to make the pastel pinks of Lucas’s work shine but also possibly to anchor

the light, sparkly materials with a somber weightiness. It’s worth considering why they should require this background, and why this work has been mostly overlooked, especially in comparison with that of similar artists such as Kelley, whose stuffed animals and craft materials cast the longest shadow over the exhibition. One significant difference is Lucas’s commitment to the “purchased object,” as opposed to the used (soiled) one, but another is her pursuit of an aesthetic category that remains hierarchically positioned and attached to gender. The sweet, pastel feminine is a threatening entity, a cloying mommy-child, that is pushed away. A series of small watercolors depicted female figures being devoured by pink hybrids of breasts, faces, flowers, and vaginas. Femininity, an amorphous pink blob, ingests other possibilities, suggesting that it is constantly in danger of swallowing those who dance too near it.

—Laura McLean-Ferris