

Paper-Bag Princesses and Cardboard Castles in Brooklyn: Avital Burg at Slag

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By [Etti Yaniv](#)

All photos by [Jeremy Haik](#), unless otherwise indicated



Avital Burg in front of her work; photo by Sarah Lehat

In paintings by the artist [Avital Burg](#), paper-bag princesses and cardboard castles conjure the lavish magic of past worlds while evoking the immorality of excessive splendors in the present. All her paintings depict structures she has constructed out of humble materials such as cardboard, typically featured as main subjects, architectural models, or fashion accessories of young female characters. Whether depicting objects or figures, all of Burg's paintings can read as portraits that convey her acute awareness of the Now while utilizing strong formal and narrative ties to the past, particularly through art history. The current exhibition titled [Fancy Seeing You](#) at [Slag Gallery](#) gives visitors an opportunity to experience first-hand these worlds created by Burg.



Birthday Self-Portrait by Avital Burg
(oil on canvas mounted on wood),
2015

Recalling the inspiration for some of the work on display, Burg describes how an encounter with an exhibition of Early Renaissance portraits at the Metropolitan Museum of Art a couple of years ago transformed her notion of portrait painting. Burg's vivid recount of her experience at the Met illustrates how art history informs her paintings. At the Early Renaissance portraiture exhibition, she was particularly moved by Andrea Mantegna's *Francesco Gonzaga*, a profile of a young man wearing a big red hat. She was struck most by two notions: how the hat is as significant as the man's features and the way Mantegna manages to evoke a strong sense of individuality without over-trying to depict likeness. On her way out, Burg stopped by the *Fayum portraits* from the first century CE: "Every time I read the label again with disbelief; they seem so fresh," Burg noted. Finally, she could resist viewing what she described as one of her favorites: Balthus's *Nude Before a Mirror*. "These painters from completely different times, all come together for me as one source of inspiration," she summed up.



Portrait of Adi as Maria Portinari by Avital Burg (oil on linen), 2014

In some paintings at the current two-person show at *Slag Gallery* (works by artist Tina Schwarz compose the adjoining exhibit titled *Involuntary Voyeurs*), Burg references specific masterpieces. *Portrait of Adi as Maria Portinari* is based on *Hans Memling's double portrait* that was commissioned for Maria's wedding to Tommaso di Folco Portinari, a bank manager for the Medici family (she was 14, he was 38). "It is a dark painting both in terms of palette and subject," Burg says. She focuses merely on the female side of the portrait, creating a light and larger than life portrait, which playfully juxtaposes Memling's dark and tiny image. Maria Portinari's elaborate gold necklace is replaced with a modest chain and the heavy velvet gown with brown butcher paper held together with binder clips and masking tape. Burg indicates that all this was done with great respect for art tradition, but with little respect to the social divisions that enabled such marriages and exaggerated splendor to exist and continue to exist today in different ways.



Eight Boxes and an Emperor by Avital Burg,
(oil on linen), 2014

Each of Burg's portraits evokes a distinct sense of staged theatrical drama, in which both the artist and her animate or inanimate models co-inhabit. She affirms that her models have to be people who are close to her, preferably women, and adds that dressing them up becomes like "a bond of two kids enraptured in a make-believe game." In this choreographed play, building her cardboard props from found boxes is also significant. "Who knows where the box I find came from or what it carried. In a way, the cardboard almost looks like a person's skin to me, with its different wrinkles, stamps, and tapes," she explains. Burg, an Israeli-born artist who has lived in New York for the past five years, says that boxes and cardboard also allude to the instability of an immigrant's life. For the viewer, these painted props readily read as vivid metaphors for the fragility and absurdity of the human comedy at large.



Fancy Seeing You by Avital Burg (oil and
charcoal on linen), 2015

Although subject matter plays an important role when conceiving her paintings, formal elements such as composition and color drive Burg's process. "I constantly look for good excuses to put paint on canvas, to play around with the endless tactile and tonal options that it offers, to make it exciting and moving for me and for other people to look at," she elaborates. Burg paints with oil on canvas, from direct observation, and mostly in natural light. First she builds miniature structures made of simple materials such as cardboard, clay, and tape, depicting imagined or actual buildings or objects; then she paints them with or without a model.



Shira as Saint Petronius of Brooklyn by Avital Burg (oil on linen), 2015; image courtesy of JSP Art Photography

In *Shira as Saint Petronius of Brooklyn*, for example, Burg replaced the miniature model of Bologna held by the city patron with a cardboard model of Brooklyn that includes tiny versions of landmarks such as the Brooklyn Bridge, the Domino factory, and the Greenpoint water tower. In contrast to the way she paints, Burg builds her models completely out of memory. In this body of work, Burg ultimately creates a rich narrative world that hovers on the border between the very real and the really imagined.



Theatro del Mondo #2 by Avital Burg (oil on linen mounted on wood), 2015

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Fancy Seeing You is on view at Slag Gallery, located at 56 Bogart Street, until August 9, 2015; gallery hours are Thursday–Sunday, 1–6PM



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