

What's More **REAL** than
FLESH

featuring the work of
Michael Alvarez & Victoria Reynolds

curated by Sue Spaid

NAN RAE GALLERY

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gallery hours

Wednesday-Saturday, 12-5 pm



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Associate Editor of *Aesthetic Investigations*, **Sue Spaid** recently published *Ecovention Europe: Art to Transform Ecologies, 1957-2017*, her fifth book on art and ecology. She is currently completing her first philosophy monograph, *The Philosophy of Curating: Bringing the Work in Contact with the External World*, which reflects her nearly thirty-five years experience as a critic, gallerist, curator, and museum director. In addition to regularly presenting papers at philosophy conferences, she has published chapters in *The State of Art Criticism* (2008), *The Philosophy of Arthur Danto* (2013), *Arte y Filosofía en Arthur Danto* (2016), *Advancements in the Philosophy of Design* (2017) and articles in journals such as *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, *Rivista di Estetica*, *Journal of Somaesthetics*, *Popular Inquiry*, *Art Inquiry: Recherche sur les art*, and *Philosophica*.

Michael Alvarez received his BFA from Art Center College of Design in 2007. Recent solo exhibitions include: 2019 Riverside Art Museum, 2016 Mars LA and 2017 Marlborough Contemporary NY. Recent group exhibitions include 2018 Divided Brain LAVA Projects 2018 35x35: Dual Vision- Mexican Cultural and Cinematographic Center, Consulate General of Mexico in Los Angeles- Los Angeles, Ca. His work has been published in 2018 *New American Painting* #133 and 2015 *Juxtapoz Magazine*.

Victoria Reynolds received her Master of Fine Arts in Painting/Drawing, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Las Vegas, NV 1993. Bachelor of Fine Arts in Painting, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma 1990. Recent solo exhibition include 2017 "Medaillons de Corps (Flesh Medallions)", Bert Green Fine Art, Chicago, IL 2014 "Where Flesh Meets Flora," Laguna College of Art & Design Gallery, Laguna Beach, CA. Recent group exhibitions include: 2017 "Nature Morte: Contemporary Artists Reinvigorate the Still-Life Tradition," Museum of Contemporary Art, Branch of the National Museum in Wroclaw, Poland, The Four Domes Pavilion, traveling to Antwerp, Belgium, and MOCA London in 2018.

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THE COURAGE TO "KEEP IT REAL"

The title of this exhibition and accompanying essay stems from Victoria Reynolds' recalling art historian Libby Lumpkin asking "What's More Real than Flesh?" in response to De Kooning's gnarly portraits of women (ca. 1950-1953). Although Reynolds and Michael Alvarez practice very different painting styles and target extremely different subjects, both are drawn to similar substances, the fleshy bodies of animals inhabiting their respective environments. Reynolds prowls supermarkets and butcher cases, while Alvarez strolls his milieu online and off, in search of intimate scenes from everyday life.

WHAT IS IMMEDIATELY STRIKING is that despite the obviously political dimensions of yesteryear's meat paintings (Chaim Soutine, Francis Bacon, Sue Coe) and cityscapes (Ben Shahn, Ashcan School, Aaron Douglas, Romare Bearden, and "street art" itself), these paintings manage to eschew overt political agendas. Hardly formal exercises in painting, they display a carnal sensuality that is as true as it is taboo. And in fact, we can't stop staring, because these artists have mastered the art of drawing attention; compelling spectators to discover, explore, and study every last juicy detail.

To honor art historian Linda Nochlin, the Feminist Caucus Committee invited me to present a paper on her life's work at the 2018 American Society for Aesthetics annual conference. This provided me an opportunity to tease out the philosophical implications of her many

REYNOLDS CLAIMS TO BE NATURALLY DRAWN TO MEAT, WHETHER ORDINARY LUNCHEON MEATS, PACKAGED HAMS AND CHICKENS, LACEY TRIPE, TRI-TIP STEAK, BRISKET, PORK BUNG, OR REINDEER VISCERA. SHE CONSIDERS THEM "LIFE IN THE FLESH," RATHER THAN IMAGES OF CONSUMER PRODUCTS (SOMEONE'S NEXT MEAL).

essays, which in no uncertain terms set the stage for this two-person exhibition. One aspect of her work that has gone under-appreciated is that she showed how movements sometimes become genres, as Realism did. To achieve this, she first had to characterize Realism as

a movement, which requires identifying its location, duration, aims, and diverse practitioners.¹ In *Realism* (1971), she writes: "Preceded by Romanticism, and followed by what is generally termed Symbolism, [Realism] was the dominant movement from about 1840 until 1870-80. Its aim was to give a truthful, objective and impartial represen-



Victoria Reynolds
Cardio Benedictus, 2017
 Oil on panel in painted frame
 14.5" x 10.25"
 Courtesy the artist

tation of the real world, based on meticulous observation of contemporary life".ⁱⁱ Nochlin's writings on art demonstrate how in the 1970s Realism evolved into a genre, whose global practitioners share an epistemic commitment to art grounded in "meticulous observation." Another of Nochlin's great insights was her anti-essentialist view that "historical and local factors play a greater role in determining style than does the sex of the artist".ⁱⁱⁱ

WHAT MAKES THE FLESHY PAINTINGS OF REYNOLDS AND ALVAREZ SO REAL

is that they offer accounts of lived experiences, thus putting these painters' own flesh on the line. And in fact, one of the first questions that Reynolds routinely faces is "What do the Vegans say?" One can easily imagine Alvarez being asked what his now infamous friends think about appearing in his tableaux. In light of today's increasingly retaliatory publics, I consider artists' capacities to share such personal experiences not only an act of courage, but exemplary of a free act.

ON THE CUTTING EDGE

As it turns out, Reynolds' primary motivation for painting meat concerns its "endless movement," sinuous forms, astounding compositions, and prevalence.^{iv} Apparently, oil paint was originally invented to render meat realistically. Red meat may be the rare material whose white bits signal trouble, whether chewy gristle, sinewy muscle, or rich fat. The white webs in *Full Fathom Five* (2019), *Sirloin Sanctorum* (2018), *Sirloin Sumptuary* (2017), *Globular Cluster* (2012), and *Creamed Cherry Crevasse* (2011) ease the eyes, yet also elicit distress.

Reynolds claims to be naturally drawn to meat, whether ordinary luncheon meats, packaged hams and chickens, lacy tripe, tri-tip steak, brisket, pork bung, or reindeer viscera. She considers them "life in the flesh," rather than images of consumer products (someone's next meal). Nothing is a more potent reminder of meat's prior status as

living flesh than its torrid smell as it decays, which her time-consuming painting practice forces her to confront, keeping her conscious of flesh throughout her artistic process. Her "nature mortes" capture both meat's appearance (carefully staged, painstakingly rendered and often displayed in yesteryear's baroque frames) and its eventual disappearance. Apparently, she is not alone in her fascination with meat's beauty, since complete strangers sometimes approach her to indicate aspects of meat's pulchritude that she might otherwise have overlooked.

RECENT WORKS like *Valiant Torso* and *Heirloom Pork Uterus* (both 2019) recall photographers' ongoing fascination with body builders, who capably pump-out new body forms at will. Specialized meats branded "appellation of controlled origin" ensure the standardization of certain

ALTHOUGH REYNOLDS CONSIDERS HER "DEAD REPRESENTATIONS" HIGHLY SYMBOLIC, EVOCATIVE OF DIVINE SACRIFICES, THE CRUCIFIXION, CARNALITY, MORTAL FLESH, OR TEMPTATIONS OF THE FLESH; I FIND THEM EXEMPLARY OF PAINTING'S CAPACITY TO CHARGE POTENTIALLY DISGUSTING, ORDINARY MATTER WITH WONDER, MAJESTY, AND SULTRINESS.

hams, sausages, and steaks. By contrast *Chicken Pentagon* and *Enso of Sirloin* (both 2019) suggest the art of butchery, whose cutting-edge forms stop shoppers in their tracks. Although Reynolds considers her "dead representations" highly symbolic, evocative of divine sacrifices, the

crucifixion, carnality, mortal flesh, or temptations of the flesh; I find them exemplary of painting's capacity to charge potentially disgusting, ordinary matter with wonder, majesty, and sultriness. I imagine some even tempting Vegans!



Michael Alvarez
Hollywood/Highland, 2017
 Oil, spray paint and graphite on
 panel 72" x 84"

URBAN ANTHROPOLOGY

Alvarez is a keen observer of human behavior, whether it be the personal material people bizarrely post online, the uncomfortable situations human beings both create and tolerate, or the wild intersections of people from every walk of life. To my lights, his paintings double as sociology/anthropology field work and even mirrors, since spectators can't help but reflect upon their personal experiences while beholding them. I imagine people recalling their own cases of: "sex gone wrong" (*Post Coital Clean Up*), weird stuff they've let their pets witness (*Larry (Pissbath)*), or the trippy people traipsing about Hollywood Boulevard (*Hollywood/Highland*).

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Of course, the very candor that makes these paintings so refreshing and earnest is also what girds their truthfulness. According to Alvarez, "The paintings are informed by reality: a lot of [scenes] are based on experience, shared stories or artifacts

collected, but imagination is also a part of the process. Imagination and recollection tend to distort and warp the narrative, which I try to reflect [upon] within the pieces".^v

TWO SUBJECTIVITIES

Another of Nochlin's insights concerns the way portrait paintings demand the meeting of two subjectivities:

If the artist watches, judges the sitter, the sitter is privileged by the portrait relation, to watch and judge back. In no other case does what the artist is painting exist on the same plane of freedom and ontological equality as the artist her or himself...and in another case is the role of the artist as mediator rather than dictator or inventor so literally accentuated by the actual situation in which the artwork comes into being. This is particularly true of the representations of

relatives, friend or kindred spirits—rather than commissions—and of course, of self-portrayal.^{vi}

Even though neither Reynolds nor Alvarez is a portrait painter, per se, I find Nochlin's assessment particularly relevant here.

PEOPLE STRANGELY FORGET THAT ART BOTH INSPIRES AND REQUIRES CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS. FOR THIS REASON, SOCIETY SHOULD PROTECT ART, THOUGH NOT PROPAGANDA; ESPECIALLY THOSE WORKS THAT GENERATE DISAGREEMENTS WORTHY OF PUBLIC DEBATE.

Her move to liberate sitters coincided with feminist art historians' demonizing Painting for having historically victimized its subjects. She rather emancipated future subjects who might one day be subject to artists' misdeeds, thus equalizing the playing field. And indeed subjects do "watch and judge back," because the only way to prevent artists from mischaracterizing/disrespecting them is to issue rebukes, which art-school crits facilitate.

Nochlin's move seems to have empowered viewers coast to coast. Museums that exhibit artworks deemed offensive risk reprisal from members of the public (e.g. The Walker, the Whitney, and the Guggenheim). Problem is, realist art poses as nonfiction. When its "truthiness" disarms doubt, realist art is perceived as dangerous stuff. Such is the tightrope that artists who traffic in the real must balance. People strangely forget that art both inspires and requires critical thinking skills. For this reason, society should protect art, though not propaganda; especially those works that generate disagreements worthy of public debate. From my experience, people's negative responses to artworks that they've experienced have positive outcomes, when such reactions shake free thoughts and feelings that would otherwise remain unvoiced. If art is to remain the cornerstone of a free act, today's artists must master the art of empathy.

Reference

Linda Nochlin, *Women Artists: The Linda Nochlin Reader*, Maura Reilly (ed.), London: Thames & Hudson, 2015.

SUE SPAID, PH. D.

Maransart, Belgium

ⁱ Sue Spaid, "The Birth of Movements," *New Frontiers*, SEP FEP Conference, Dundee, UK, 2015.

ⁱⁱ Linda Nochlin, *Realism*, New York: Penguin Books, p. 13.

ⁱⁱⁱ Linda Nochlin, "Women Artists After the French Revolution," *Women Artists: 1550-1950*, Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1976.

^{iv} Video, Victoria Reynolds' artist talk at Hammer Museum, March 17, 2009.

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=bFnPiIFyNw0>

^v Email correspondence with Michael Alvarez dated September 6, 2019.

^{vi} Linda Nochlin, "Some Women Realists: Part 2," *Arts Magazine*, May 1974.