## Flora Yukhnovich

## Thirst Trap

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Victoria Miro 16 Wharf Road, London N1 7RW

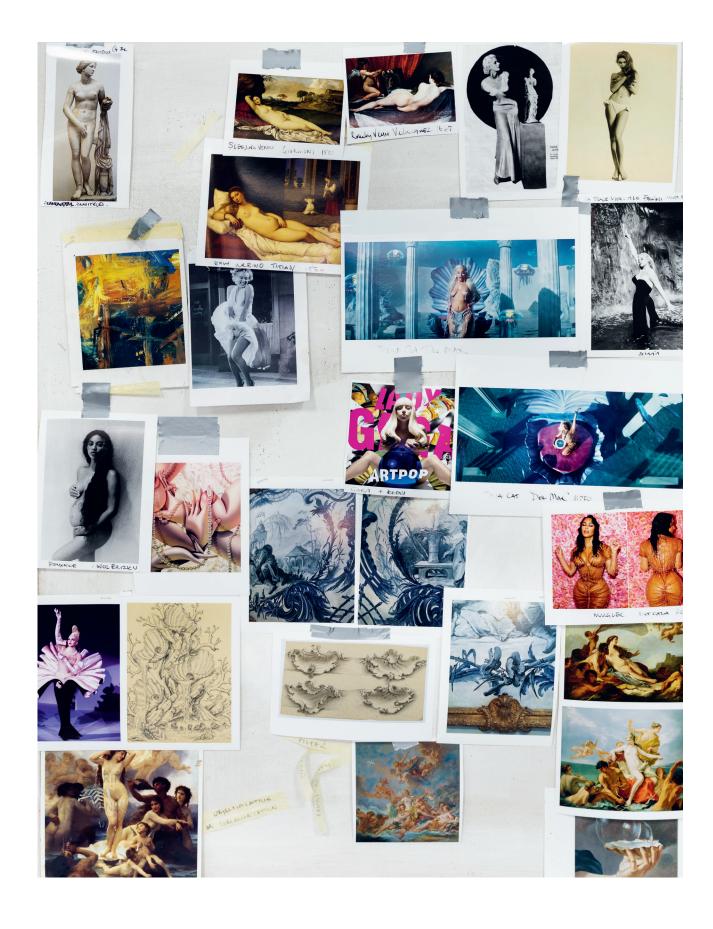


In a corner of Flora Yukhnovich's Battersea studio, next to the microwave perched on top of a pile of books, there's a corkboard with a cultural medley of images devoted to Venus. Up on the left is her Greek cousin Aphrodite, a marble copy of the lost statue from Knidos, in which she clutches a towel in her left hand, and covers her pubis with her right, leaving her tender breasts exposed. Her right fingers gesture down towards her bent left knee, as if the sculptor Praxiteles wants us to admire her *contrapposto*, that subtle flow of weight across her hips, which allows one heel to gently lift. In the top right of the board is Sam Levin's 1958 photograph of Brigitte Bardot, who also poses with a come-hither soft knee; see how it releases the fluidity of her body, inciting a kind of malten desire

According to myth, Venus arose fully formed out of a foaming sea. That saline water is a reminder of our own mortal beginnings in amniotic fluid; we are all 'born of water and the spirit' (John 3:5). And it's an image that equates the erotic with liquidity – what with Venus being the goddess of sexual temptation as well as of love, beauty and fertility. Think of Silvia frolicking in Rome's Trevi Fountain (which also makes an appearance on the corkboard) in Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*, 1960, and you're soon carried back to Sandro Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, c.1485–86, in which the goddess floats serenely across the water on her seashell. When a reporter asks Silvia, 'how do you sleep, with pajamas or nightgown?' she purrs that she needs nothing more than 'two drops of French perfume'.

These paintings originate from watery sensuality too: they hark back to scenes of frolic and seduction in Rococo painting and are begun with oil paint thinned down with turpentine to the consistency of watercolour, washed over stretched linen canvases with sponges and thick brushes to invoke a subaqueous world. At this point, they feel evocative of post-war American abstraction: glowing white primer emerging through generous arcs of paint, which collide and dribble over one another. This forms the architecture for the unctuous details that then follow: marks that cavort across the canvas like ancient revellers, gesturing towards an image that never quite resolves.

There's a triptych in the exhibition responding to Peter Paul Rubens' *Feast of Venus*, 1635–1636, a scene of voluptuous abandon inspired by the Roman festival of Veneralia (Rubens was also something of a Venus obsessive, having made a copy of Titian's *Worship of Venus* which he kept in his collection until he died). Helen Frankenthaler adored Rubens too; her biographer Alexander Nemerov could well have been writing of her



soak-stain technique when he described him as 'the *wettest* painter who ever lived, the artist who most revelled in oil paint's shimmer and viscosity.' The surface of Yukhnovich's work liquifies this history of more than 400 years of artists who have felt drawn to paint as a medium uniquely able to express the fluidity and sensuality of life as it is lived.

'The thing that makes me want to paint is paint,' Yukhnovich has confessed. Each work is borne of its own frothing sea: the vigour of an artist seduced by the sheer loveliness of paint and ready to submit to its command. 'Oh, but the lines of her! / The curve and glinting swell' writes Jo Bell in her poem *The Shipwright's Love Song*, 'Oh, I was launched and splashing in the slipway, / happy to be rudderless / and yawning, mast head / touching to the foam.' Yukhnovich finds a way to suspend her paintings in this flux, the oil having been worked over a number of days so that even when it's finished there is the feeling of barely perceptible movement — like dust motes swirling in the half light, or milk marbling into a cup of tea. In his ode to the Venus de Milo, Auguste Rodin called this quality 'infinite suppleness', insisting that a representation must 'never be arrested'.

And then there's Yukhnovich's faithful palette of eight colours – always the same zinc and titanium whites, cadmium lemon and yellow deep, permanent rose, cadmium red, ultramarine and cerulean blue – carefully mixed into quintessentially Rococo lilacs, pinks and turquoises, which make the paintings almost obscenely attractive. And begs the question: what has been erased to make such prettiness possible? The word 'obscene' stems from the Latin prefix 'ob', meaning 'in front of', and 'caenum', meaning filth. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 1984, the novelist Milan Kundera gives the unusually brilliant definition of kitsch as 'the absolute denial of shit, in both the literal and the figurative senses of the word; kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence'. Could this be a perfect description of Yukhnovich's interest in the seduction of the Instagrammable, and its annihilation of the 'caenum' of life?

I think of her painting from 2020 called *Warm*, *Wet N' Wild*, after a line from Katy Perry's pop hit *California Gurls*. The music video is set in a candyladen wonderland, the singer wearing a lilac wig, pink glittery eyeshadow, and lying naked in a marshmallow cloud, as if Willy Wonka had cast her in a queer rendition of Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, 1534. With a coy smile and enough saccharine irony to make your back teeth ache, Perry seems to ask: must women really be made of sugar and spice and all things nice?

Likewise, Yukhnovich's paintings refuse to indulge in earnestness, with any risk of celestial grandiloquence quickly undercut by the appearance of a bubble or a cherub: there is 'shame in the pleasure I take in things widely considered to be lowbrow or in poor taste,' she has said. 'The discomfort is endlessly interesting to me.'

A recent painting is called *Bombshell*, 2021, pointing to that which both tempts and destroys – a word that contains a pin-up like Bardot, and the violence with which late capitalism fetishises the image of women and co-opts it for the marketing of next to everything. 'Seduction is the new opium of the masses,' declare the French feminist collective Tiqqun in their *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of a Young Girl*, 2012: 'THEY speak of "bombshells" using a metaphoric register that borrows less and less from aesthetic discourse and more and more from that of ballistics.' Perhaps the term should really refer to the detonation such imagery triggers within the beholder; in her translator's note, the poet Ariana Reines confesses to the fierce somatic response she had while working on the text: 'although it does not belong to me it did pass through me… gave me migraines, made me puke.'

Airbrushed women in quasi-pornographic poses have come to dominate our Western cultural imaginary – ironising this kitsch landscape is arguably one of the only sane ways to respond. The title of the exhibition, *Thirst Trap*, refers to the phenomenon of people posting sexually alluring photographs of themselves on social media, designed to arouse quivering desire and admiration in their followers. Are Yukhnovich's oh-so-pretty, wet, wet paintings the thirst trap described here – aligned with all of those self-styled Venuses, cloaked in little more than their foaming waters? If they could cock their head and bend a knee, they surely would, but like so many of the greatest temptresses throughout history, these paintings are much more than satirical eye candy.

Eleanor Nairne, 2022