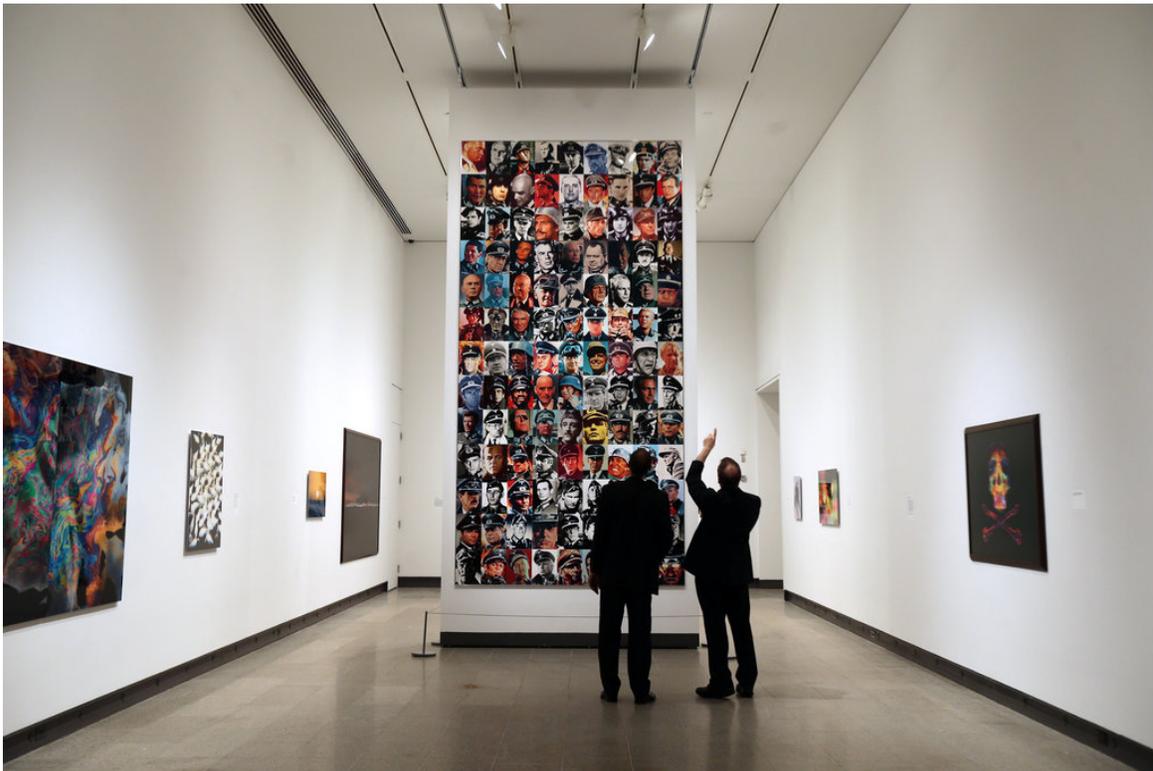


## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

### The New York Times

#### Review: In ‘Fatal Attraction,’ Piotr Uklanski’s Unblinking Gaze

Roberta Smith



*Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times*

As bad-boy artists go, Piotr Uklanski has always been fairly elusive. During his 20-year career he has tended to do something startling — if not shocking — and then lie low, reappearing after a decent interval. And when he does, he is often somewhere else entirely, doing something unlike anything he’s done before.

Right now, Mr. Uklanski’s efforts — both artistic and curatorial — can be seen in the decorous precincts of the Metropolitan Museum. The occasion is a pair of shows with the overall title of “Fatal Attraction.” One show is “Fatal Attraction: Piotr Uklanski Photographs,” a survey of around 30 works of his restless photographic activities, including two banner-size images unfurled over the Met’s Great Hall. The other, “Fatal Attraction: Piotr Uklanski Selects From the Met Collection,” is nearby, a display of about 80 works — photographs and objects — that he has picked from throughout the museum’s holdings. They deepen the understanding of this maverick artist.

The latest sign of the Met's drive to encompass contemporary art — and one of the more convincing — “Fatal Attraction” follows by two years a quite different Uklanski presentation at the excellent Karma, a hip downtown publisher of artists' books. There he covered the walls with his “Pornalikes” series, over 100 pornographic images whose actors bear uncanny resemblances to well-known figures, among them Cher, Tom Cruise and Tony Blair. A bawdy comment on our fame-obsessed, voyeuristic times, that series is represented at the Met by one of its more demure examples: a bare-chested gamin easily mistaken for Michael Jackson.

Mr. Uklanski, who was born in Warsaw in 1968 and came to New York in 1990, is a latter-day Conceptualist with an unusually robust feeling for materials, scale and knockout visual effects, as well as a taste for the perverse. He divides his interests among photography, painting, sculpture, film, installation and performance. All these art forms harbor undercurrents of satirical intent, evocations of sex and death, and frequent references to Polish art and politics, and are riddled with unexpected intimations of sincerity. For example, the show includes an aerial shot of 3,500 Brazilian soldiers marshaled into a giant portrait of John Paul II, the first Polish pope. (It was Mr. Uklanski's contribution to the 2004 São Paulo biennale.)

The banner images in the Great Hall consist of two more aerial views involving 3,000 Polish soldiers, this time in the Gdansk shipyard. In one they form the red and white Solidarity emblem, in the other they start to go their separate ways. The emblem blurs; solidarity is literally dissolving.

In New York, Mr. Uklanski is especially well known for the fully functioning disco floor that was his 1996 gallery debut at Gavin Brown's Enterprise — perhaps the most intoxicating work of the interactive art known as relational aesthetics — and “The Nazis,” a compilation of more than 160 headshots of several generations of Hollywood and European actors playing Nazis. It was included in “Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art,” a hotly debated exhibition at the Jewish Museum in 2002, and a good portion is also here, covering a narrow wall, inviting us to play “name that actor” and, in so doing, help usher evil personified into camp.

Also in the show (and on its poster) is Mr. Uklanski's single best-known, most blatant sex-death image: a skull on a black background made entirely of ingeniously placed naked people, including the artist in the central cruciform pose. It is a tribute to a photograph by Salvador Dalí and Philippe Halsman which used only women, but it also connects to a tradition of Eastern European morbidity. (Think of the folded bodies in Klimt's “Beethoven Frieze.”)

Mr. Uklanski doesn't expose only himself in his work. In 2003, Artforum magazine published his large two-page color close-up — also on view here — of the naked backside of his future wife, the writer and curator Alison M. Gingeras, punning on her last name (which is pronounced, however, jin-JER-us). On the other hand, in the past five years Mr. Uklanski has also taken, with visible relish, to making extravagant works of fiber art quite like something a feminist artist might have created in the 1970s.

Typically Mr. Uklanski has gotten the most out of his Met appearance, which has been organized by Doug Eklund, curator of photography. Besides adding paintings and sculptures to the collection show, Mr. Uklanski has insinuated a few works of his own, although not always to the best effect. (A new version of the death skull, printed in gold on a good-size canvas covered with paint that looks like burned wood, is no match for its neighbor, the stylized painted wood figure from Papua New Guinea, used for displaying skulls.) But Mr. Uklanski's “Untitled (Sacré

Coeur),” a suggestive chunk of bright red resin, does all right next to the solid yellow jasper of “Fragment of a Queen’s Face,” one of the most sublime Egyptian pieces in the museum; and both commune effectively with the brilliant colors in Dalí’s gemlike 1929 painting “The Accommodations of Desire.”

This selection brings out Mr. Uklanski’s softer, more connoisseurial side, while also living up to the sex and death theme. There are relatively contemporary works like Laurie Simmons’s 1991 “Walking Gun” alongside a Weegee photograph of a murder victim — and numerous photographs of cavorting or coupling bodies (as well as a small early Picasso painting in this vein). Among the sights not to miss: “Beauty Revealed,” an exquisite watercolor on ivory of a woman’s breasts surrounded by a shroudlike (gift box) arrangement. It was painted in 1828 by Sarah Goodridge for her lover, the great Daniel Webster. And to counter such perfection, seek out Andreas Feininger’s 1946 “Cape Cod Artists,” a large black-and-white photograph in which an outdoor art class, easels and all, converges on a nude model so awkwardly posed she seems likely to fall over.

In Mr. Uklanski’s show, his photographs range from 1990 to 2014 and survey his continuing exploration of image size, mounting and framing treatments, print processes and subject matter. It even includes a 2004 daguerreotype made from a 1985 self-portrait of the artist as a young man with a tattooed chest and an improvised Mohawk. There are nearly 20 beautiful if banal images inspired by the lessons, subjects and techniques of “The Joy of Photography.” In Mr. Uklanski’s hands this Kodak how-to manual yields clichés like a waterfall, Mount Vesuvius at night, tulips and a sunset at sea — all blurred or unbalanced in color.

Also on view with the photographs is a work of fiber art that almost steals the show. An enormous, somewhat grotesque clot of dyed rope, fiber, macramé and embroidery 10 feet high, this dark crusty form intimates a burned-out planet until you recognize its one spot of bright color as a pupil. It is an eye, and it echoes the many images of eyes and semblances of eyes throughout both shows. Possibly ripped from its socket, and perhaps rotting, this monumental three-dimensional version nonetheless evokes the act of looking as irresistible, invasive and voracious — especially where photography is concerned.