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In L.A., Rachel Feinstein Finds Inspiration in the Victoria's Secret Runway Show

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*Rachel Feinstein studio image, 2017*  
*Photo: Robert McKeever / Courtesy of Gagosian / © Rachel Feinstein*

It's an understatement to say that the artist Rachel Feinstein is an over-the-top maximalist. Everything about her is larger than life, and "Secrets," her debut show with the Gagosian gallery, at its Beverly Hills outpost (through February 17), makes that abundantly clear. This is also her first solo show in Los Angeles, and there's not one iota of stage fright here. On view are eight life-size figurative sculptures made of high-density foam, 11 collage mirror paintings, and one large, all-white majolica figure made in the famous Nymphenburg porcelain factory in Munich. (She's already working with the factory on making her L.A. sculptures in porcelain, for her next show.) Rachel's love of the Rococo and the Baroque, mashed up with her inner, Coral Gables self-assurance that anything and everything goes, have given birth to some of the most insane figurative sculptures you'll ever see: eight "Angels" based on Victoria's Secret models, with names like Butterfly, Fireworks, Ballerina, Icicle, and Feathers—fantastical grotesque beauties, pinup girls gone wild.

The sculptures are like animals, circus beasts, clowns, tragicomic confections. They wear wildly colorful baby doll lingerie, skimpy thongs, and gem-encrusted underthings. The luxurious plays ball with the gritty, romance with pornography, ostentatious chic with Rachel's signature raw and goofy awkwardness, which flirts with but never quite tips into vulgarity. The touch is

outsider as much as insider. There's an idiosyncratic naïveté about these powerful and goofy goddesses—Niki de Saint Phalle's bulging super-gals meeting up with German expressionist angst-ridden harridans.

For the past two months, Rachel has worked late nights in her studio, dropping by after dinner at parties, and asking people whether she should or shouldn't include the painted aluminum wings she had made for her Angels. John Currin, her famous artist husband, was against the wings, but Rachel's maximal self was for them. "John thinks these are classical sculptures, and that I should not be adding a different material to them. He said no sculptor has ever been able to successfully put two different materials together." The artist Sarah Sze told her to pay no attention to John because "he's from Connecticut and you're from Miami." George Condo recommended that she put the wings on the mirror paintings, not the girls.

When I visited her studio the day before all the works had to ship, she was working around the clock, and she was not alone. Her studio was going full tilt. The sculptures were in back, and the collage mirror paintings—photos of Los Angeles McMansions and modernist houses that are for sale, collaged onto mirrors, with painted images of people from 18th-century wallpaper, cars, big trees, and tacky fountains. "That's Simon Cowell's house, from American Idol," Rachel says. "It's for sale for \$35 million. And that one is Eddie Murphy's house." Even though most of the mirror has been extinguished by paint, your reflection peeks through.

John had been helping her with the painting—he did the red/burnt umber-ish foliage on the trees. They had been working day and night for the last three weeks, but there was just too much to do. By New Year's Eve, Rachel was desperate—the work had to ship to L.A. on January 3. When their good friend, the artist Lisa Yuskavage, heard that Rachel was "freaking out" about not being able to finish the paintings in time, she said, "Get everybody involved," and that's what happened. Everybody meant artists Sean Landers, Richard Phillips, Cecily Brown, and Matvey Levenstein (Lisa's husband), in addition to John. "My famous artist friends helped me finish the paintings. I had already hired three New York Academy painters to work on the paintings—the sculptures and the paintings all had multiple hands working on them to begin with, like the way the old master workshops used to do it, where everyone had a specific task. It was so much fun having my friends with me, like the old days when we all had studios next to each other in the Meatpacking District. We got a bottle of tequila and a bottle of vodka, ordered in pizza and Mexican food, and worked straight through."

For the next three nights, all or most of them (including Mr. Greenjeans, the Currins' black Affenpinscher) pulled all-nighters to get the job done. "John told Sean and Richard it really helps your own painting to do this, because you don't have to worry—your name isn't on it." I dropped by her Tribeca studio the day before her creatures left for L.A. One of the Angels reminded me of Serena Williams. "She's definitely Serena," Rachel admitted. "This one turned out to be the muscular, stronger one." She added, "The truth is, I don't really know how I feel about these myself."

"If they're so raw that you don't know what they mean, that means they're real," Matvey said. Rachel replied, "This is, I guess, how I feel—I have to admit it."

Rachel emails me from L.A., on the morning of her opening. She's installing the show and she's very excited.

“The work looks better installed than I thought. The wings on the girls are incredible, but I think we’re going without them. It’s so hard to decide. The wings make you think you have never seen a sculpture like this before, but then it takes away from the form . . . The girls feel more real without them.”

I email her back: “What gave you the idea to use Victoria’s Secret models as sculpture?”

“I can’t really tell you the exact reason,” she shot back. “I had been a fashion model myself from the age of 14 to 20. But, I think it was honestly coming from getting angry. It seems to be building with a lot of women these days.”