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Rachel Feinstein's New Sculptures Reveal Victoria's Secret

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Rachel Feinstein's studio, 2017. Artworks © Rachel Feinstein. Courtesy of Gagolian. Photography by Robert McKeever

The former model's exhibition at Gagolian Beverly Hills deconstructs the beauty industry.

On a recent evening, Rachel Feinstein's Walker Street studio was alive with activity. The front room was cluttered with mirror paintings as she directed her husband, painter John Currin, along with Cecily Brown, Matvey Levenstein, and Richard Phillips, as they helped to complete scene details in her compositions. In the back gallery, assistants perfected eight large, brightly colored sculptures of women. Based on specific Victoria's Secret Angels, the runway models who each assume a certain persona for the annual lingerie fashion show, they included *Bandleader*, *Butterfly*, and *Ballerina*. And while the specific costumes and poses were recognizable, the heavy color application on the bodies and faces had been coaxed to the point of burlesque. Feinstein's new exhibition, *Secrets*, was shipping out the next morning to Gagolian Beverly Hills, and while the artist and her team had labored until 3 am the night before, they were still up against the deadline.

Feinstein's work draws on inspirations as diverse as Baroque and Rococo sculpture, Romantic landscape, religious iconography, and pop culture, but these are her first sculptures directly inspired by contemporary figures. Furthering her ongoing exploration of beauty, fantasy, and decay, the new sculptures bring her dialogue into the present, and into the realm of current issues around gender. It's also her first body of work in almost 20 years to address themes she

associates with her hometown of Miami, where the Victoria's Secret Fashion Show was held in 2008. While Victoria Secret Angels are presented as the feminine ideal, Feinstein puts the industry's artifice front and center. "They are supposedly walking down the runway as a banner for the ideal of female beauty," she told GARAGE, "but the secret is that they are put on a regimen for months where they work out 12 hours a day and eat nothing. They don't look like that in real life."

To make the new sculptures, Feinstein employed a technique developed while working on her 2011 Lever House installation *The Snow Queen*. She molds polymer clay into maquettes, which are 3-D scanned and enlarged to hard foam versions. She then coats them with layers of hand-colored epoxy resin. Appropriately, the process reminded the artist of cosmetic surgery: "I kept thinking of our current notions of beauty," she said, "putting things in lips and faces, or carving things away." The works exemplify her "obsession with duality," her desire for the viewer to consider what is simultaneously beautiful and grotesque, and to question concepts of desire. While Feinstein freely admits that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, she recognizes the works in *Secrets* as both formally beautiful and not unchallenging.

Feinstein's new mirror paintings also address desire, in this case consumer appetite, by juxtaposing West Coast architecture and luxury cars with figures and scenes transposed from 18th-century English wallpaper. Feinstein paints on mirrors in part because doing so involves a technique that resembles her sculptural method; she scrapes away the paint and builds it back up. Echoing her painted line, while simultaneously acting as a void, the surface takes on a life of its own. The mirrors throw a reflected light back on viewers.

Feinstein's earliest work using mirrors is a lithe, white plaster sculpture titled *Model* (2000), whose companion piece is *Fat Friend* (2000). The titles employ modeling industry slang, something she did not address publicly at the time. As she reaches back to her Miami roots, making works that acknowledge her younger self, it seems relevant that she's returned to the subject. Like many artists, she only comes to understand her work fully with distance, and the *Secrets* works are no exception. "These new sculptures are about how you come into your own, how you accept things about yourself," she said with a smile. "Some things are really good, and some are bad, and you have to figure out how to deal with both sides. I can't tell you absolutely right now, because they're too fresh, I'll know more in ten years."