

## GAGOSIAN



### Rachel Feinstein: Maiden, Mother, Crone at the Jewish Museum

David Ambrose



*Installation View, 2020, Rachel Feinstein: Maiden, Mother, Crone, images courtesy of The Jewish Museum, New York, NY, © Rachel Feinstein.*

*“All (political) power is primarily illusion...Illusion. Mirrors and blue smoke, beautiful blue smoke rolling over the surface of highly polished mirrors, first a thin veil of blue smoke, then a thick cloud that suddenly dissolves into wisps of blue smoke, the mirrors catching it all, bouncing it back and forth.”*

- Notes from Impeachment Summer, (1975) by Jimmy Breslin

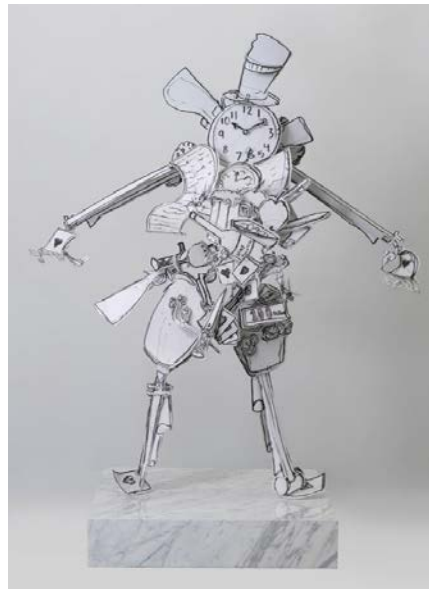
I was surprised to discover the origin of the phrase “smoke and mirrors” was the late, great writer and consummate New Yorker, Jimmy Breslin. Not because he wasn’t capable of coining a phrase of lasting importance, but because I thought that “smoke and mirrors” had been offered up by the ancients; crawling out of the dusty memories that can sometimes cloud our view of history; not the result of covering the Nixon impeachment hearings.

The same atmospheric sensation envelopes, *Rachel Feinstein: Maiden, Mother, Crone* which rolls into the two ground floor galleries at the Jewish Museum. The exhibition is curated by Kelly Taxter, Barnett and Annalee Newman Curator Contemporary Art. It is the first museum retrospective survey of Feinstein’s three decades-long, multidisciplinary career. The exhibition includes over thirty-five sculptures, a group of small maquettes, walls works, paintings and one video. But truthfully, all of Feinstein’s work is primarily sculptural; as even her two-dimensional

works stretch the boundaries of flatness by incorporating mirror as a ground for her painting practice.

The title, *Maiden, Mother, Crone* was adapted from the Harry N. Abrams art book, “*Maids, Madonnas, & Witches*” published in 1961; a book of representations of women in sculpture from Prehistoric Times to Picasso, but not a book of sculpture by women (Doris Caesar notwithstanding). Feinstein’s title differs in that it mirrors and reflects her thematic umbilical cord; one that attaches to the Neopagan deity of the Triple Goddess and the phases of a woman’s reproductive life. It is with this thought in mind that one is halted at the exhibition’s entrance by three larger than life sculptural sentinels; each figure’s milky whiteness evoking thoughts of more pure or precious materials such as marble or alabaster. The opacity of each work beautifully echoes the world Feinstein has conjured; a foggy place hovering somewhere between material and meaning. Even as one studies them, the works appear to float in and out of focus. Their surfaces fluctuate between sawed, die cut, molded, cradled, sanded, hand-smoothed or reflective. Each one generating planes, edges, contours and openings of suspicion and ambiguity.

The installation was designed by Annabelle Selldorf of Selldorf Architects and she takes her cue from the threads of duality Feinstein has woven into the individual works such as fragility and power, inexperience and wisdom, religion and fairy tales, reality and fantasy (and perhaps smoke and mirror). Taken as a whole however, the exhibition feels more choreographed than installed. Feinstein’s larger than life characters jostle and crowd us like members of a wandering troupe of dancing mimes. The two principle galleries appear to be divided: an interior chapel-like space and an implied exterior secular space similar to a Roman pleasure garden, but without a strict admission policy as many of the sculptures teeter between both worlds. The majority of the works and their bases are elevated on pedestals. We don’t walk into the galleries so much as we wade into them shin deep as if at low tide; beachcombing the flotsam and jetsam after a storm of biblical proportion. The coastal reference point is perhaps a nod to Feinstein’s youth spent in Miami in the 80s – a land of Art Deco and decay; lush, tropical overgrowth and seedy, crime-soaked underbelly.



*Rachel Feinstein, Mr. Time, 2015, powder-coated aluminum, vinyl, and working clock. Courtesy of the artist and Gagolian Gallery. Artwork © Rachel Feinstein; photograph by Robert McKeever*

Collaboration is another major theme in Feinstein's practice. The majority of work has been fabricated from the artist's handmade maquettes. One exception is *Mr. Time* (2015), which reverses that trend as Feinstein animates a drawing by her ten-year-old son. Mr. Time is both loving – hands and feet fashioned from heart suited playing cards (a medieval symbol for the church) - and threatening - the splayed figure sprouts rifles for appendages like the triaged prosthetics of a World War I survivor looking a little like the arboreal bones of a Cubist topiary. In *Punch and Family* (2009), stitches replace cuts and riddle the protagonist's torso who is holding a beheaded infant aloft. The sweep of the group calls to mind the pose of Bernini's *Apollo and Daphne*, but rather than Baroque master's pristine, cold, polished marble, Feinstein's figures feel warm-blooded, if a bit coarse to the touch, as if her group was molded from dough spilling out of a mixer. In *Butterfly* (2018) and *Icicles* (2018), the polymer resin has been pigmented, arranged and applied like food colored dough to the oversized female models like a patchwork. The effect is closer to decaying, rotting flesh than the idealized female form sold on fashion runways.



*Rachel Feinstein, Adam and Eve, 2007, stained wood. Collection of Mima and Cesar Reyes, San Juan Puerto Rico. Artwork © Rachel Feinstein; photograph Marcus Leith*

In stark contrast are the cut plywood sculptures which are either stained or polychromed which appear assembled like pieces of collapsible stagecraft suffering from a sudden loss of equilibrium. In works such as *Adam and Eve* (2007) and *Good Times* (2005), one gets that uneasy feeling of discovering a few extra screws leftover in the packet after assembly; not because works don't feel structurally sound, but because their poses and performative nature seem tenuous. Their joints and folds don't always appear to align with the clarity of form and logic, but more with the haze of dreams and the subconscious. It is in this struggle for balance, between fact and fiction and light and shadow, where the works are the strongest.



*Rachel Feinstein, Good Times, 2005, enamel paint on wood and polymer resin. Collection of Robert and Anne-Cecilie Speyer, New York. Artwork © Rachel Feinstein; photograph courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen.*

In *Crucifixion* (2003), Feinstein marries both approaches as swirls of the billowing drapery give way to hints of flesh tone from the natural color of the plywood; the color and grain appearing to have seeped from the cross into the bare arms and legs of Christ. The work, Feinstein's first post-9/11, is weighted down with all the responsibility and guilt of a Grunewald altarpiece. The figures ebb and flow as Christ's ribcage bows forward like the sail of a tall ship propelled by a gust of wind while his attendant saints cover and cower in shame, obscured by wet drapery.

When Feinstein paints, she does so on mirrors where the illusion of depth is achieved both on the surface of the glass and under it on the mirror's face. The result produces a sculptural space that travels from reality to reflection and back again. The vanity attached to a mirror acts as a second skin; the one we hope to perfect for the public, but one that is trapped beneath a layer of glass. In *Eva* (2005), one of a group of oval mirror portraits of ladies done predominantly in grisaille, the work is not hung directly on a wall, but suspended in front of pleated red velvet drapes which add a theatrical splash of color. The softness of the red velvet creates the illusion of a tunnel cut into the mirror space. The thickness of the mirror approximates the depth of plywood. Upon closer inspection, one notices the illusion of a hollowed-out center. It is in that hollowed out core where Feinstein goes about the business of questioning the true meaning of beauty; a thirty-year journey which might have led her to the conclusion that what smoke may conceal the double light of the mirror will always reveal.