

Majoli conjures that halcyon era in evocative ways: Her groovy, soft-focus palette is suffused with rustic greens, limpid golds, sandy apricots, and faded purples, calling to mind swatches of calico bleached by a San Francisco sun, or the colorways of a soigné flat for a “confirmed” bachelor. (I can envision the mustachioed babe of *Blueboy [Ryan]*, 2016, hanging in Sam Wagstaff’s penthouse apartment at One Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, perhaps next to a selection from his boyfriend Robert Mapplethorpe’s lurid “X Portfolio,” 1977–78.) And though Majoli’s smooth-skinned beauties appear easygoing, the process by which they were realized is anything but. To make these prints, the artist first tacked a sheet of paper to one side of her wood block. She then loaded up various sections of the board with watercolor and pressed the paper onto her carved surface—as if she were closing the cover of a book over and over again—creating patchwork saturations of color. This repetitive gesture—like anointing skin with a holy balm, or dabbing at a fresh wound—here takes on a pointedly ritualistic air.

Although a sense of the sacred runs throughout Majoli’s art, the Buchholz show was not infused with melancholy or loss: The images were warm, sensuous, inviting, *alive*. They could have been plans for a series of stained-glass windows, or vestment patterns commissioned by a cool and kinky church. See *Blueboy (Ted)*, 2019, in which the titular model squats over a vividly floral pillow as he thrusts his bronzed ass into the foreground, asking us to marvel at its otherworldly perfection. And observe *Blueboy (Roger)*, 2018, his tie loosened and dress shirt wide open, sleeping peacefully on an arrangement of pretty textiles. My favorite might have been *Blueboy (Carl)*, 2019, a sculpted dirty blond, generously endowed, who is bathed in an elegantly variegated lavender. He leans against a dusty azure wall, just as stacked as he is, fearlessly cruising the viewer. He is healthy, strong, gorgeous, and full of promise—Saint Sebastian before his arrows, an innocent before the fall.

—Alex Jovanovich

Nathalie Djurberg and Hans Berg

TANYA BONAKDAR GALLERY

Nathalie Djurberg and Hans Berg’s exhibition at Tanya Bonakdar Gallery was dominated by four macabre stop-motion animations. In *This Is Heaven* (all works 2019), a hairy, goblin-faced man wakes up inside his own fantasy of wealth and power. The video is reminiscent of Eugène Delacroix’s *La mort de Sardanapale* (The Death of Sardanapalus), 1827, a canvas depicting a scene from the story of an Assyrian monarch who orders the destruction of his slaves, horses, and other possessions after his army has been routed so that his property doesn’t get usurped by his enemies. Like Sardanapalus, Djurberg and Berg’s glutton fills his massive bed with all that he desires, heedless of the destruction he causes. Many meet their ends as the consequence of his avarice. In one alarming sequence, he tosses six nursing piglets aside to fill a chalice with the sow’s milk for his own consumption. As at the close of any morality tale, there is a sense of glee when this false king steps into a gilded bear trap.

In *Damaged Goods*, a female anthropoid digs into a box and extracts body parts, attaching and removing them from herself via Frankensteinian acts of dress-up. Some of the things she tries on in search of the perfect form are a baboon’s ass, a tail, a beak, and a set of arms, which she fashions into legs. Spliced into this narrative is footage of the end result: a fully human woman, lying seductively on her stomach and glancing at us while wiggling her fingerlike toes. She is reminiscent of Madonna in her 1989 music video *Express Yourself*, in which the pop star defiantly prowls catlike through a machinic world, yet remains a kind of pet, observed and trapped in a box.



Nathalie Djurberg and Hans Berg. *This is Heaven*, 2019, 4K video stop-motion animation, color, sound, 6 minutes, 36 seconds.

Artists of previous generations, including Cecelia Condit and the Kuchar brothers, embraced conventional narrative structures while engaging in grotesque forms of entertainment; they are forebears of Djurberg and Berg’s lurid sensibility. But while Condit’s and the Kuchars’ subject matter is mostly grounded in the dogma-free zones of horror and drag, Djurberg and Berg’s use of stop-motion animation puts their references in the realm of children’s television. And, like many kids’ shows, their work is more often than not infused with a sense of ethics. (This is hardly out of step with the times in which we live, especially when this country is experiencing a karmic comeuppance of epic proportions.) *Davey and Goliath* (1961–2004), a Christian-themed stop-motion program about a boy and his talking dog—produced by the same studio that gave us *Gumby*—comes to mind as a reference, as do any of the more hip children’s cartoons of the 1970s, in which age and corruption are defeated by youth and idealism in every episode.

The exhibition’s title was taken from its standout piece: *One Last Trip to the Underworld*, in which a blonde woman in a spangly catsuit descends a ladder and is grabbed by a giant pink octopus. She looks like one of the charming wire-and-cloth figurines from Alexander Calder’s sculptural tableau, *Calder’s Circus*, 1926–31. The duo performs a ballet of attraction and repulsion, domination and submission. Dreamy music sets a sensuous and darkly numinous mood. The cephalopod ensnares its partner, but then she skips along the tips of its tentacles, allowing it to gently lift her. The ending cuts to black—has she been devoured? It seems likely.

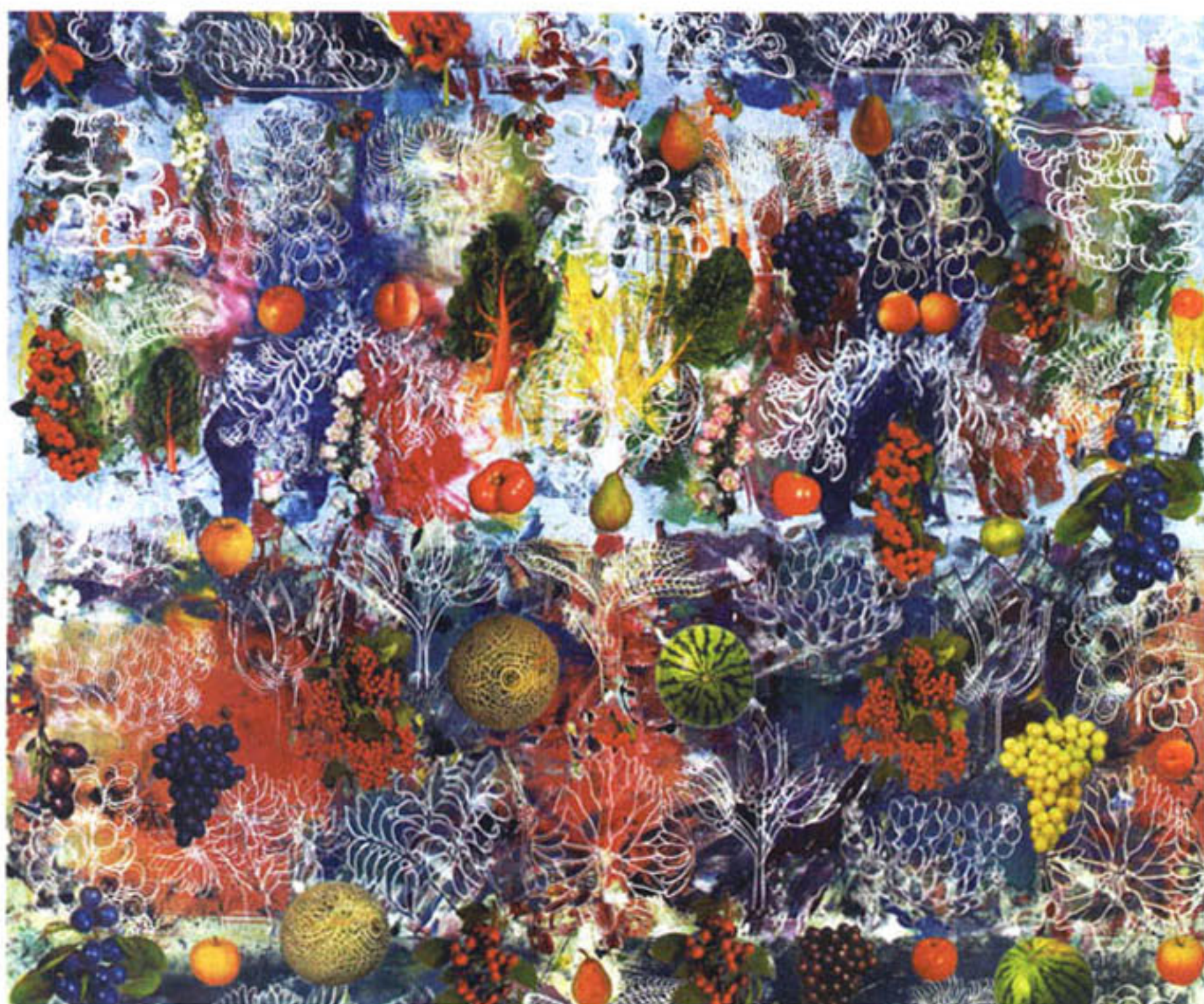
Unlike the other pieces in the exhibition, *One Last Trip* is sticky because it contains moral vagaries—which seems appropriate for a work about love. New information on octopuses suggests they may be descended from a hyperintelligent breed of alien, or at least from owners of subtly nimble brains. To be absorbed by an amorous mind seems an intense way to be adored and not, I suppose, a nightmare.

—Matthew Weinstein

Philip Taaffe

LUHRING AUGUSTINE

Philip Taaffe is a human search engine, an old-school “image scavenger” hoovering up an encyclopedic array of abstract, symbolic, and representational material to populate the transcultural painterly pastiches for which he is famous. No Google sourcing or pixelation here: The library



Philip Taaffe,
Altarpiece (detail),
2018, mixed media on
canvas, 102 × 75 1/2".

and the bookstore conspire with the entire catalogue of analog mark-making and a variety of increasingly quaint or nostalgic printmaking and image-transfer techniques—e.g., decoupage, frottage, mono- and screen-printing—to produce visual fields of varying pictorial and affective intensity. This show, Taaffe's third solo outing with Luhring Augustine, included a few sparky compositions and a couple of scorches, but not all of the thirteen works on view, which ranged in size from large to extra large, burned so brightly. Though each demonstrated a high degree of formal experimentation, a laudable hallmark of this artist's oeuvre—and the best possible excuse for failure—half the works in the show paled somewhat by comparison to the others.

The issue was not that the least lively pieces here lacked vibrancy or incident. It was just that they came off as relatively aseptic and frictionless, as unexceptional, if well-balanced, arrangements of layered sets of like elements. *Orphic Landscape II*, 2016, for instance, places oddly unappealing, richly hued, hard-edge shapes resembling Matissean off-cuts against a ground of brushy, overlapping, pastel-colored curvilinear forms. The elements making up the top layer are evenly dispersed across the picture plane, forming a loose optical mesh through which the atmospheric ground is plainly visible and with which it therefore engages. The interplay of contrast (dark and light, crisp and washy, open and closed) and harmony (chromatic compatibility, structural equilibrium) coheres, yet does not, for me at least, seduce or excite. At the top end of the liveliness scale was the monolithic *Altarpiece*, 2018, a towering mash-up of messily intricate and profligate accretion. The ground this time is a deeply saturated welter of stains, smudges, and spills—as though the canvas was soaked in liquid pigments, repeatedly rucked and rumpled, then pulled taut and left to dry—roughly segmented into four stacked horizontal bands. Overlaid is a dense snarl of mostly white line work and sharply collaged imagery, respectively delineating and depicting a variety of flora, fruit, and vegetables. The frame is packed (Taaffe is clearly a pictorial kenophobe) in this maniacal paeon to the marriage of paint and printed matter; every square foot of the picture's surface bristles and shimmies with a beautifully awkward energy emanating from the expertly but unfussily orchestrated interaction of perceptual and semiotic registers.

Yet as spellbinding as *Altarpiece* may have been, it was not the most immediately likable work in the show. That distinction belonged to *Interzonal Leaves*, 2018. Another outsize canvas bearing segmented grounds of dramatically paint-stained expanses, this one was topped with an orderly grid of large decoupaged leaves, each screen-printed with variegated gradients that the artist made by squeegeeing multiple colors at once so that the inks bled into one another. The foliage's veins appear as an assortment of imperfectly symmetrical white skeletal lines popping off the surface. This is classic Taaffe—an intensified painterly taxonomy. The typological layout of the leaves, with all their adaptive evolutionary variance, can't help but fascinate. And the slopping about of paint only adds to the fun. It's all very appealing, and no wonder: The work does, after all, borrow heavily from an entertainment medium (albeit an early modernist one)—printed scientific illustration—that is now a staple of domestic decor (think John Derian). But Taaffe generally keeps his distance here, professing ambivalence toward the patently decorative aspects of his visual vocabulary, once claiming in an interview with the nonnarrative filmmaker Stan Brakhage (1933–2003) that he chooses his material based on “personal association and memory,” aiming “to invest the work with a psychic energy.” He thus asserts that he is less concerned with the “loveliness of pictorial composition than with finding the best means for holding the energy there.” Loveliness reigns supreme in *Interzonal Leaves*, while *Altarpiece* buzzes with a more challenging and electric dis/pleasure.

—Jeff Gibson

Andra Ursuța RAMIKEN

Victims of pleasure, vehicles for pain: Human bodies tend to be at the mercy of violent desires—their own and those of others—in the work of Andra Ursuța. The artist has created X-ray-esque images of bound figures being sodomized by carrots, and once exhibited a blackened cast of her naked self, gaunt and collapsed like a peat-bog mummy, and splattered with suggestive white silicone. Sometimes her targets are implied: *Stoner*, 2013, involves a batting-cage pitching machine hurling rocks at a tiled wall with long hair emerging from the cracks. But if Ursuța has been dredging dark streams of consciousness for years, her discoveries never took such luminous, seductive form as in this recent exhibition.

At Ramiken, Ursuța's new work, a tribe of gorgeous cast-glass sculptures that combine pieces of the artist's body and inanimate objects, served as monuments to mortification. In *Yoga Don't Help* (all works 2019) Ursuța's head juts from the base of an erect torso with exposed viscera and stubby arms. She gazes up at the mutant extension, apparently reconciled to its presence and authority, while another smooth, nearly featureless face at the top stares ahead,

Andra Ursuța,
Succubustin' Loose
(detail), 2019,
lead crystal,
46 × 18 × 13".

