

Celeste Dupuy-Spencer and Figurative Religion

Frank Luntz hangs his specially commissioned portraits of the founding fathers in the faux oval office built into his Brentwood home. Conservative Christians have been partial to figurative work, certainly since the 1980s—when the culture was turned so many Evangelicals into traditionalists set against avant-garde experiments—its recognizable content seemingly more honest than esoteric abstraction and conceptualism. Some like to quote Pope John Paul II’s letter, in which, citing Bernini and Michelangelo, he calls on the contemporary artist to render “visible the perception of the mystery” that makes the Church “a universally hospitable community.”⁴

The work in Celeste

Dupuy-Spencer’s recent show at Nino Mier Gallery almost did this—it had all the right references without the right reverence. There are baptisms, worship sessions, choirs on altars, exorcisms. Indeed, the exorcism in Dupuy-Spencer’s 2018 painting, *Through the Laying on of Hands (Positively Dynamic Demonism)*, appears to be going quite well. Three men up at the altar wear church suits, crisp white shirts and suspenders. The other men wear jeans. A woman who looks like Margaret Thatcher has her hand on the afflicted man’s shoulder. Demons of all breeds fly out of his gaping mouth—aliens, reptiles, screaming men. The painting is full of loosely rendered flesh, packed-in bodies, fast fashion, and smoke. It could be interpreted as crass, a representation of religious pageantry at its worst, or as an empathetic attempt to understand such spiritual passion.

That Dupuy-Spencer walks this line is partly why her work compels: “an inventory of white experience,” that has “new urgency in the age of Trump,” wrote Aruna D’Souza for *Vice*.⁵ Her “figurative paintings and drawings capture the zeitgeist without sacrificing soul,” wrote Margaret Wappler, for *Elle*.⁶ She can do both, be the critic and the empath. That the work is representational matters; it reads

8 The evening after Brett Kavanaugh secured his Supreme Court nomination, elite Evangelicals held a party in North Carolina. At the Westin in Charlotte, the Council for National Policy—an outfit that oil heir T. Cullen Davis co-founded after he discovered Jesus and after a jury acquitted him of double murder¹—had gathered for their annual meetings. Ginni Thomas, Clarence Thomas’ wife, and Nikki Haley attended, among senators and strategists. They were happy that night.

Davis, who told *The Intercept* that at least Trump “is not hostile to Christianity like Hillary and Obama,”² used to be an art collector. In 1982, he gave \$1 million worth of his antique treasures to the televangelist Jim Robison, who’d gotten into debt. Robison drove off to sell the trove but then remembered Old Testament proclamations about graven images and the like, and brought the art back to Davis. Davis didn’t want it back. So out came the hammers and, two years later, gawkers and collectors left a Texas auction with shards of lapis and bits of faces carved from ivory.³ Others at the CNP’s Kavanaugh party still had their figurative art intact, however. GOP policy advisor



Celeste Dupuy-Spencer, *To be titled* (2018).
Oil on linen, 65 x 50 inches. Image courtesy
of the artist and Nino Mier Gallery.



immediately as accessible, even to non-art-worlders, its grappling with us-versus-them impulses thus legible to both the “us,” the “them,” and whoever lies between. Dupuy-Spencer is in good company, other artists working in similarly empathetic, vulnerable figuration that puts its politics—and its questions and frustrations—on the line in a way that feels more invitation than antagonism.

Resurgences in figurative painting have accompanied turns to the political right before. Sometimes by force (when regimes deem experiment a threat), but other times just in response to, or in an attempt to grapple with, the zeitgeist. Eric Fischl, David Salle, and Robert Longo’s ascendancy coincided with Reagan’s. The painters poked at times at whiteness, even as white people celebrated and supported them (think Fischl’s painting *A Visit to/A Visit From/The Island*, 1983, of white vacationers cavorting while black islanders rescue black refugees from waves of a storm).

Jeffrey Deitch, dealer and former MOCA Los Angeles director, explained two years ago that figuration was of the zeitgeist again. “That’s really what most artists do,” he told *ArtSpace*, right after he’d put both ’80s phenom Julian Schnabel and the much younger Sasha Brauning in the same show, “and what the general public generally expects out of painting. They relate to it.” He then further peddled the myth of populist art form ignored by the establishment, saying, “there’s hardly been an ambitious exhibition of new figurative painting in any American museum in a long time.”⁷ (He isn’t entirely wrong, if he means group surveys.) His words echo past critics who framed figurative resurgences as repudiations of the avant-garde, returns to more traditional and thus comprehensible ways of representing life.

Explicitness sets Dupuy-Spencer and her peers apart from the likes of Fischl, Salle, Michael Andrews, and others who made a name for them-



Celeste Dupuy-Spencer, *The Chiefest of Ten Thousand (Sarah 2)* (2018). Oil on linen, 105 x 96 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Nino Mier Gallery.

selves in the mid-to-late 20th century, painting in intentionally open-ended ways. In contrast, Dupuy-Spencer makes clear in her work the stakes she grapples with. She names her context and concerns, sometimes literally, with Trump hats, hipster record collections, or captions that poke at people across political spectrums and classes. Henry Taylor, whose work hung with hers in the Whitney Biennial in 2017, has similarly done this; his references to slavery (*That Was Then*, 2013), police shootings (*THE TIMES THAY AINT A CHANGING, FAST ENOUGH!*, 2017), and class warfare are direct enough to leave no question as to what he's probing. Jordan Casteel too falls into this camp, her portraits of incidental moments pregnant with context—a brown-skinned man wearing gray reading *Lost Tribes and Promised Lands: The Origins of American Racism* in an intimate oil-on-canvas; or, in *Glass Man Michael* (2016), of a guarded man selling vases and platters street-side, in front of crisp graffiti that says "Harlem not for sale—fight back." (All this stands in stark contrast to the other strain of figuration with traction now, the Sascha Braunigs and Jamian Juliano-Villanis, which recall in a way the '80s market surge, paintings not about relatability and empathy but about calculation, visual provocation, and seduction.)

The religious content in Dupuy-Spencer's recent work provides particularly coherent parameters, and an intuitive recipe for blurring together poles and worldviews. In *To Be Titled* (2016), another of the Dupuy-Spencer paintings at Mier Gallery, a baptism plays out. The soon-to-be-redeemed stands in waist-high water, flanked by two friendly peers in "Oasis All-in Team" t-shirts (the L.A. mega-church called Oasis sponsored a star for Jesus on the Hollywood Walk of Fame). A robed figure (an apparition of Christ?) stands behind, his face cut off by the top of the canvas but reflected, ghoulishly grinning and crowned by thorns, on the water's surface. Beneath the water,

anxious horses scramble. From the water up, this is the kind of painting easily mistaken for idyllic, maybe happily pro-faith, like the early aughts rom-com *Baptist at My Barbecue*. Except that those ghostly horses sliding around in murky liquid and that discolored face, more like the demons in Dupuy-Spencer's exorcism than a saint, introduce a bleaker counter-narrative, in which redemption is only an above-the-surface sort of story.

Francis Schaeffer, the Evangelical theologian, wrote in his book *Art & the Bible*, that, for Christians, art can evoke the "mannishness of man,"⁸ all the more so because the Christian, armed with God's truth, is particularly equipped to distinguish reality from illusion. Would this enlightened Christian see in Dupuy-Spencer's baptismal scene the competing narratives? Or maybe the Christian would favor a more affirming interpretation, like George W. Bush in the memo he famously sent to office staff in 1995, when he was still Texas' governor. He had just received a 1916 W.H.D. Koerner painting on loan from a friend. He told his staffers that the painting was called *A Charge to Keep*, after a hymn by original Methodist Charles Wesley:

When you come into my office, please take a look at the beautiful painting of a horseman determinedly charging up what appears to be a steep and rough trail. This is us. What adds complete life to the painting for me is the message of Charles Wesley that we serve One greater than ourselves.

Where the president-to-be got this notion is hard to say. While he believed the picture, of riders racing through brush, depicted Methodists urgently spreading gospel, Koerner had in fact painted it to illustrate a story about a horse thief escaping a Nebraska lynch mob.

1. After a mistrial, he was acquitted of the murder of his stepdaughter and his estranged wife's lover, then, two years later, acquitted of the for-hire attempted murder of his ex-wife and the judge adjudicating their divorce proceedings. "T. Cullen Davis

Acquitted in Murder-for-Hire Case," *The Washington Post*, Nov. 10, 1979.

The potential for such slippage is partly what makes figuration so accessible and enjoyable. It reads as legible, because we all can recognize limbs, landscapes, faces, and interiors. But familiarity, as the Bush episode illustrates, is subjective. The text Dupuy-Spencer embeds into her paintings keeps her meaning from being as easily twistable (a strategy both Taylor and Casteel interestingly use as well). In her 2017 Marlborough Gallery exhibition, she included *Love Me, Love Me, Love Me, I'm a Liberal* (2017), in which a woman with a fleshy face hides behind a flower vase with a peace sign and "flowers not bombs" painted across it. An "I love NPR" mug and a book called *The Burden of Blame: How to Convince People That It's Not Your Fault*, also sit on the table before her. The woman writes letters (to the editor? Senators?). Her self-righteous liberalism comes off as embarrassing.

A drawing in Dupuy-Spencer's previous, 2016 exhibition at Nino Mier Gallery depicted a Trump rally, the attendees posed as if for a selfie, with men in KKK hoods lurking behind. Faux Western text mixed with bubble letters waved along the top of the paper: "Trump: 'Cause we Don't Know What The Hell Is Going On!!!" Dupuy-Spencer titled the work *Trump Rally (And Some of them I Assume Are Good People)*. (While on the campaign trail, Trump said "some, I assume, are good people" after calling Mexicans who come the states "rapists" who are "bringing crime.")

Such work eschews subtlety and ambiguity, two strategies artists use to seem potent without seeming literal, crass, or naïve. Yet Dupuy-Spencer's more heart-on-sleeve relation to content does not make her work overly blatant or flat. Even in the drawings of Trump supporters or lazy liberals, there's diversity of personalities, expressions, and class trappings (though definitely not always a diversity of ethnicities). More notably, she combines these deep dives into political confusion and religious passion with intimate,

relaxed personal imagery. In her recent show, her painting of a church service hung across from *The Chiefest of Ten Thousand (Sarah 2)* (2018), a large delightfully cluttered painting of the artist performing cunilingus on her partner, surrounded by a cat, a warm red rug, a skull.

Something happened when evangelists, priests, and purportedly blameless God-fearing patriarchs began openly supporting a pussy-grabber and praising a chief justice who defends his "love of beer" while badgering U.S. senators. The hypocrisy of associating morality with partisanship became so barefaced and indefensible that a space opened up where God, orgasms, left, right, queerness, family, church, redemption, and disaster could blur into each other, steeping together in the same confused stew. Depicting that space, as Dupuy-Spencer does so well, won't ever erase the chasms that divide those of us living in this country, but it can render a version of America raw and contradictory enough to feel invitingly believable.

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2. Lee Fang, "At Secretive Event, Evangelical Celebrate Brett Kavanaugh's Confirmation," *The Intercept*, Oct. 7, 2018, <https://theintercept.com/2018/10/07/brett-kavanaugh-evangelicals-council-for-national-policy>.

3. Paul Taylor, "Asian Art Remains Sold for Cut Rate at Auction," *The Washington Post*, Dec. 3, 1984.

4. Author Robert Webber cited it in a passage about returning to aesthetics in his 2002 book *The Younger Evangelicals*, among other examples.

5. Aruna D'Souza, "Painting in Black and White: Race and the New Figurative Art," *Vice*, Sept. 26, 2017, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/zm3zm3/painting-in-black-and-white-race-and-the-new-figurative-art.

6. Margaret Wappler, "Celeste Dupuy-Spencer's Art is a Reflection of Her America," *Elle*, Sept. 10, 2018, <https://www.elle.com/culture/art-design/a23067048/celeste-dupuy-spencer-art-america-exhibit-nino-mier/>.

7. Karen Rosenberg, "Jeffrey Deitch on Why Figurative Art Rules the Zeitgeist, and His New Calling as a Pop-Up Impresario," *Artspace*, Nov. 26, 2015, https://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/body-of-art/jeffrey-deitch-miami-interview-53310.

8. Francis Schaeffer, *Art & the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973/2006), 35.