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Celeste Rapone Crosses The River To The Jersey Side In A New Body Of Work

Brienne Walsh Contributor ©

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In the midst of the pandemic and approaching an age – 37 – where she knew she had to make a decision about whether or not to become a mother, the artist Celeste Rapone found herself nostalgic for her childhood in suburban New Jersey. What if, rather than working as a painter represented by galleries and a professor at the Art Institute of Chicago, her artistic career hadn't panned out, and instead, she took New Jersey transit into Manhattan every few weeks to check out a museum or gallery show? What if, rather than living with her husband, she was still sneaking out of her parents' house in the middle of the night for late night cigarettes and sexual encounters with an Italian American hottie with a six pack from her high school? "I have all of these wonderful memories from [Jersey]," Rapone says. "My family is all there. But at the same time, I think there's also a thought process with this show that's sort of like, 'But what if I was still there? What if I hadn't left?'"

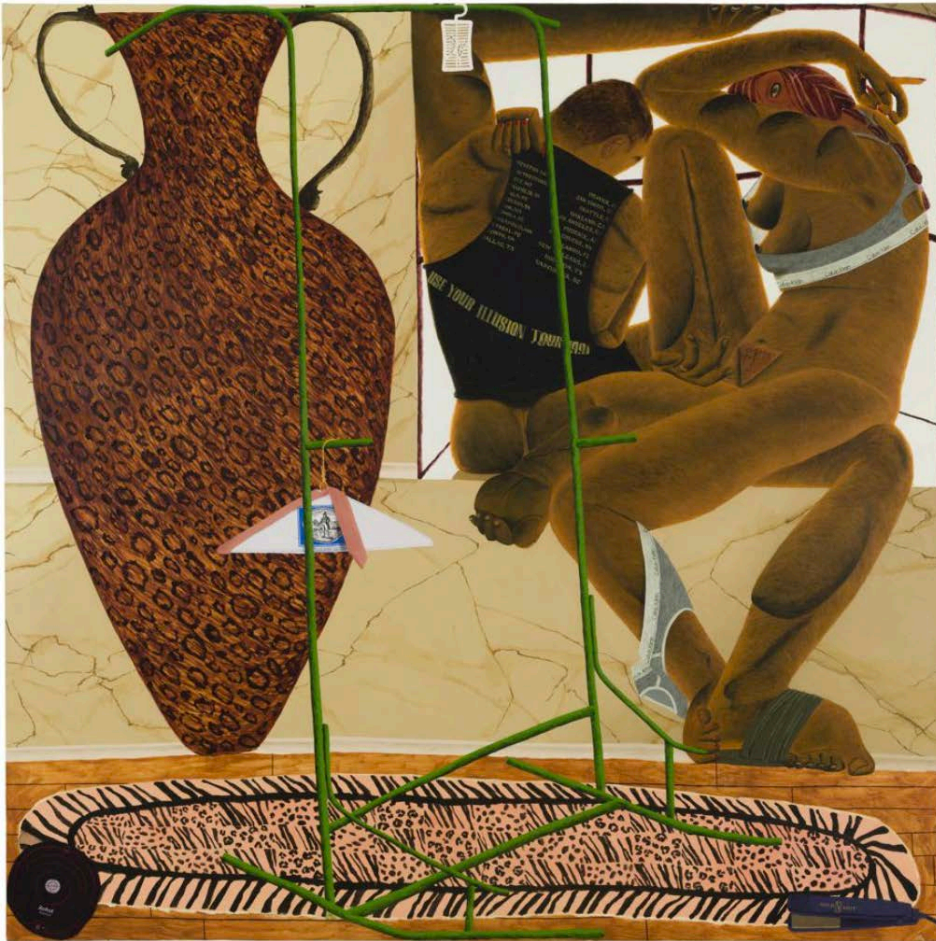
In "Nightshade," her first solo exhibition at Marianne Boesky gallery, Rapone debuts nine large-scale paintings that mines this possibility. Open through June 11, the show, which is rendered in dusky, almost funeral colors, depicts Rapone's self-described autobiographical avatars, who are contorted and crammed in the confines of the compositions, engaged in activities such as arranging flowers while reading art magazines, taking selfies on the New Jersey transit with a phone covered in a reproduction of Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus," slicing garlic cloves with a razor blade and smoking cigarettes at 3:14am. The expressions on their faces, rather than radiating with contentment, betray paralyzing fear, anxiety and ennui, and on occasion, a complete deadness. "A lot of the women I paint are trying too hard, and dealing with a lot becomes a collision between formal consideration and this sense of doubt and anxiety."



A detail from "Nightshade," 2022 PHOTO CREDIT: NATHAN KEAY

Because she doesn't work from sketches, Rapone generally tries to establish a formal constraint at the outset of each work. For example, she chooses a color, and tries to negotiate how she can create a dynamic composition within the constraints of the hue.

In *Nightshade* (2022), the eponymous work of the exhibition, she started with the desire to make a tomato red painting and ended up with a sophisticated mise en abyme that depicts a woman squinting to look through a frame created by her fingers at a nude male reclining within the confines of a painting that is also a garden overlooking a harbor. Rendered mostly in shades of carnelian red, the composition is broken up by flashes of lighter colors – the orange buckets where tomatoes are grown, the unbuttoned white shirt the woman wears, her hot pink thong. The painting is a narrative feast with as much poignancy as the myth of Dido on a cliff overlooking the ocean, watching Aeneas depart from Carthage. The man, wearing a jacket covered in Caravaggio reproductions, bears a gaze that is notably steady and calm.



Celeste Rapone, "Romantics," 2022, Oil on canvas, 72 x 72 inches, Courtesy the artist, Corbett vs. ... [+] PHOTO CREDIT: NATHAN KEAY

Another constraint Rapone experiments with is fitting an entire body within a composition rather than cropping parts out to make it neat and pretty. In *Romantics* (2022), Rapone set out to make a beige painting that mimicked the beige interiors of her childhood home and ended up with a beige painting of a woman in Calvin Klein gray underwear, pulled down around her knees, wrapped up in the muscular body a man with a buzz cut wearing a Guns N' Roses concert tank top. The woman gazes with a single, piercing eye at the viewer from behind the veil of her hair and it's unclear where the female and male bodies begin or end, if they even have disparate parts in the first place. The beige is everywhere, in the marble that the couple perches on, in the leopard print vase and rug, in the nude bodies. "I'm interested in this idea of containment, and women in these totally impossible positions," Rapone says. Physically and metaphysically as well, in a post-feminist world saturated by pornography.



What sets Rapone's paintings apart, beyond their narrative complexity, is that they are so deftly rendered. Beneath her brush, banal objects such as the foam cover on a hanger from the dry cleaners; the terrazzo tabletop upon which a figure lays her body in *Purist* (2022); the lace doily on a table in *Living Room* (2022) all have tactile, real-life qualities. Rapone notes that it can be full of pleasure to indulge in her extraordinary skill of reproduction, but that she is skeptical of the skill as well. "[These details] make me question, am I defaulting to my skill set, or is this what the painting really needs?" she says. Sometimes, she says, she'll work on a pattern or a detail for a half a day, and then step back and say, "Shit. I should not have gotten comfortable with that." She erases the section and starts over until she gets it right.



Celeste Rapone, "Muscle for Hire," 2022, Oil on canvas, 67 x 67 inches. Courtesy the artist, ... [+]
PHOTO CREDIT: NATHAN KEAY

The exhibition does not contain any ambiguity about where Rapone's nostalgia for her suburban childhood has led her. In *Muscle for Hire* (2022), a woman in a velour pink track suit digs a deep, black hole to nothingness in the midst of a soccer field. On the foot not sinking into the hole, a pigeon perches on a dirty heel. The composition is littered with the detritus of suburban motherhood, including a parking ticket, a water bottle in a carrier, a container of plants, the wrappers of Ricola Natural Herb Cough Drops and the silica gel packet you get in the bottom of packaged seaweed, a popular toddler snack. "I'm going to be 37, and I haven't made a decision about children yet," Rapone says. "And the question is starting to dig in a little bit. I mean, I find purpose in painting, but what's my purpose beyond that?" Back in present day New Jersey, Rapone has a niece and a nephew, and a family she loves. "I feel so far away from that," she continues. "Both geographically here in Chicago, but also in terms of lifestyle." If the show is any indication, when Rapone investigates the void of the future, she sees certain things from her past. Tattoo necklaces, Chanel decals, bottles of Cherry 7UP, Brazilian waxes, lace bras, leather couches, hair bands, tote bags. Participants in culture, but not makers of it. She is her own seer, even if she doesn't realize it yet.

To learn more about the exhibition, [visit Marianne Boesky's Gallery Website.](#)