

ArtSeen

Gabriela Vainsencher: *Epic, Heroic, Ordinary*

By Christopher T. Richards



Gabriela Vainsencher, *Sea Mother*, 2023. Porcelain, glaze, underglaze, acrylic, 15.5 x 14 inches. Courtesy the artist and Asya Geisberg Gallery. Photo: Etienne Frossard.

On View

Asya Geisberg Gallery

March 2–April 15, 2023, New York

The latest in a series of recent solo exhibitions featuring contemporary artists who explore not only figural art, but specifically historical—and thoroughly canonized—representation forms showcases Gabriela Vainsencher’s playful ceramic riffs on ancient Greek and Minoan aesthetics. Now on view at Asya Geisberg Gallery, presented with *New Discretions*, these artworks offer her an unexpected avenue for feminist reflections on motherhood and the maternal body. In *Biological / Career Clock #1* (2023), for example, incised numbers race forward from 34.5 to 43 around the pinched and prodded surface of a clock face. The distortions in the clay, impressed by the artist’s fingers, evoke the figurative “pinch” many women feel in the critical period that marks both fertility’s waning and the beginning of so-called “peak earning years.”

But while female embodied time mercilessly rushes forward here, elsewhere Vainsencher presents time in terms of repetition and cycles, as in her *Hourglass* (2023), which is also a cervix. In the majority (and most novel) of the exhibited artworks, time seems to flow backwards, towards an ancient world filled with Greek amphorae, Roman cameos, and hair worthy of the Egyptian Queen Tiye (in *Why is it so quiet (pink)*, 2022). At a moment when the dynamics of motherhood and fertility are of enormous political import, the grim forward march

of time feels considerably more regressive than progressive, but Vainsencher invites us to travel fantastically backwards, instead. History and temporal regression, it would seem, open up an imaginative space in which progress becomes powerfully visible.

Vainsencher's most recognizable quotation from the art historical canon appears within *Sea Mother* (2023). This ceramic oval in the shape of a Victorian portrait miniature, about the size of a dinner plate, features the elegant but troubled face of a woman, rendered in incised, curling contour lines and jewel-like glazes, whose color palette is ripped straight from Pompeii. The addition of acrylic paint further enlivens the shimmer of the glazing and the churns of the stylus's carved drawing. Although the figure's upturned eyes and prominent lips appear rather brooding, she nonetheless sports a pendulous earring that is also—absurdly—a Minoan octopus vase (those ceramic vessels made on Crete around 1500 BCE and covered with tangles of tentacles). This girl with an octopus earring transforms a pot into jewelry that springs from her ear, puncturing the oval contour of the frame she inhabits. Playful and tonally dissonant, a winking humor infuses this and all of Vainsencher's most successful ceramic creations—generally speaking, the more recent works included here are also the cleverest. The artist herself seems to swing beyond history into the imaginary, a space where sights hitherto unimagined become visible *as* history.



Gabriela Vainsencher, *Mom 1*, 2021-22. Porcelain and underglaze, 96 x 144 inches. Courtesy the artist and Asya Geisberg Gallery. Photo: Etienne Frossard.

As historical fiction writer Hilary Mantel explains, “History is not the past—it is the method we have evolved of organizing our ignorance of the past.” The historian relies on an archive of incomplete accounts, scraps, and fallible, biased evidence—fictionalization infuses even the most rigorous scholarly practice. The art of art history and archeology, then, inevitably involves a play of cracks and gaps that scholars are charged to fill, in service of a coherent story or picture of the distant past. The cracks in Minoan art history are famously wide: thanks to the efforts of *Belle Époque* intellectuals, antiquarians, and artists, Aegean depictions of women are more

fiction than fact, down to anachronistic titles such as *La Parisienne* (ca. 1400-1350 BC). It is hard to escape the sense that, as novelist Evelyn Waugh quipped in 1929, heavy-handed restorers of fragmentary artworks “have tempered their zeal for accurate reconstruction with a somewhat inappropriate predilection for the covers of *Vogue*.” Such fantasies paint over gaps in the archive so expertly that we too often forget them—but Vainsencher leaves history’s cracks visible to the eye, even as she paints new visions in the spaces left open by them. In this sense, the artist works much as a historian, but one whose zeal for the present is tempered by politics, self-awareness, and impish reflexivity.

Time infuses Vainsencher’s material praxis, a time punctuated by gaps. The monumental *Mom I* (2021–22), made after spending the height of the pandemic in the home of the artist’s in-laws, was constructed via a necessarily modular process. The completed tangle of glazed ceramic tentacles is an artful arrangement of fragments, each of which is small enough to sit upon a side table and small enough to work quickly, before a baby needs a pacifier, a breast, a toy, a much loved, and therefore cracked, iPhone. As in *Sea Mother*, Vainsencher uses a carved drawing technique to inscribe these interruptions and caesuras into the artwork she creates: each object held by the mother octopus is not only glazed or painted but deeply incised with the fluid line of a stylus, such that each modular section of the sculpture is itself visibly fragmented. In other words, *Mom I* not only visualizes the cyclical and apparently endless activities of motherhood (motherhood at a moment when daycares and even public parks were closed) but performs a poetics of gaps. As with Waugh’s restorers, the process of fashioning material history reinscribes itself as history.



Gabriela Vainsencher, *Epic, Heroic, Ordinary*, 2023. Porcelain, glaze, underglaze and acrylic, 30 x 20 inches. Courtesy the artist and Asya Geisberg Gallery. Photo: Etienne Frossard.

In *Epic, Heroic, Ordinary* (2023), which gives the exhibition its title, Vainsencher depicts a mother combing a young girl’s hair, boosting her up, and embracing her. These scenes appear on the surface of an amphora-shaped ceramic substrate, on which we might expect to see Achilles or Hercules or the deeds of other “great men” of the epic past. Instead, it is a pleasure to discover this triptych of tender maternal acts set within an epic frame. The collision of contemporary hairstyles and clothing with clearly Grecian meander patterns and Ionic scrollwork underscores history’s necessary and tentacular entanglement of past and present. Indeed, historical artworks only speak when contemporary voices pose them questions informed by the pressing needs of their own moment. Vainsencher questions the dead for the sake of the living.

Here the artist-as-historian plays in the gaps of ancient art history and fills them with precisely the kind of moments that George Eliot referred to as “unhistoric acts” at the end of her own epic of

ordinary life, *Middlemarch*. By unhistoric, Eliot was not simply identifying her stories as fictional. She meant that the past is populated by a throng of unknowable souls who made life better for others, but of whom no record remains. Needless to say, most mothers (and most people) are unhistoric persons. By making an unrecorded epic of everyday motherhood visible as history, Vainsencher fills the cracks in our vision of the past with a commemoration of her own embodied experience of maternal time. In doing so, she fabricates the kind of past that those of us who feel out of step with the present desperately need right now. The troubled faces of these unhistoric Minoan women look skeptically at us and skeptically back on the historical fictions, like *La Parisienne*, that they supersede, speaking in a voice that is louder, livelier, and manifestly more nuanced.

Christopher T. Richards is an art historian living in Brooklyn. He specializes in medieval art and queer visual cultures, and his research considers picture theory, the history of sexuality, and especially their intersection. Christopher is currently a fellow with the Georges Lurcy Charitable and Educational Trust and Rare Book School, University of Virginia.

<https://brooklynrail.org/2023/04/artseen/Gabriela-Vainsencher-Epic-Heroic-Ordinary>