

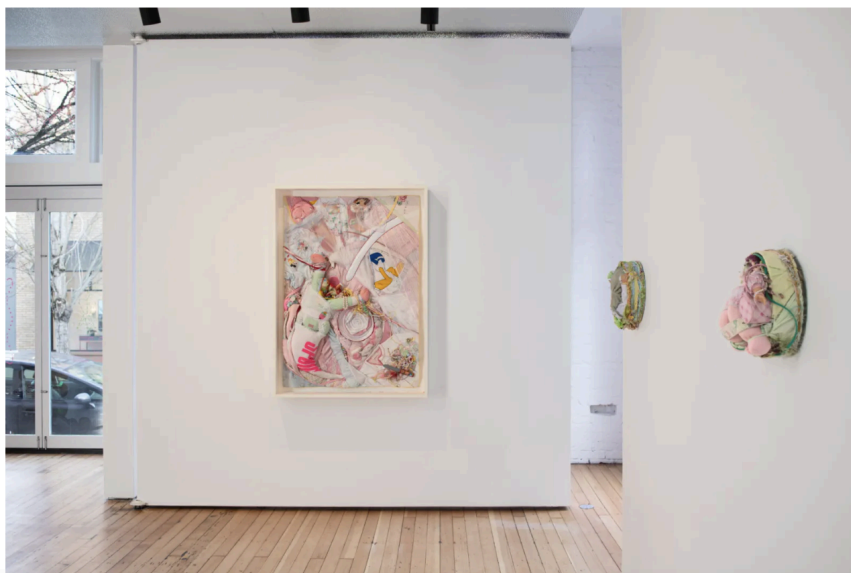


## Bonnie Lucas at ILY2

The retrospective "Bonnie Lucas 1978-2023" is the first show in ILY2's new Pearl gallery space. Hannah Krafcik considers the coded meanings of the bejeweled and bedecked compositions.

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VISUAL ART



*Bonnie Lucas 1978-2023, installation view, photo courtesy of ILY2*

A retrospective of work by New York City-based artist Bonnie Lucas (b. 1950) christens the brick-and-mortar opening of Portland's [ILY2](#) gallery—a new art space that sits at the corner of NW Flanders and 9th Avenue in the Pearl District. Both ILY2 and its east-side “grungy little sister” space, [ILY2 TOO](#), lean hard into the aesthetics of the Y2K-era comeback, complete with goopy graphics and a [manic web presence](#) drenched in soft pastel. Even the pink signage on ILY2's windows reminds me less of an art gallery than it does a cyberpunk boutique. The space's inaugural exhibition, *Bonnie Lucas 1978-2023*, doubles down on pointed aesthetics, diving into the complicated power dynamics that belie its feminine-coded presentation.

Lucas's work enwraps both ILY2's exterior and interior: The gallery windows display some of her surrealist oil paintings created between the late 80s and late 90s. Here, I notice young white femmes painted in fantastical predicaments with Lucas's signature hues of powder blue, bubblegum pink, and mint green. In contrast, the gallery's interior cocoons Lucas's more thrilling dimensions and sensational textures in the form of her hand-sewn assemblages.

Once inside ILY2, I am directed by the gallery attendant to begin taking Lucas's works chronologically. I start at the far northwest wall with her cream-colored collages from the late 70's. These early works look pristine given their age, preserved with care to mitigate the tarnishing effects of time.



*Bonnie Lucas, Untitled, 1978-1979, mixed media collage, 11 x 8.5 inches*

In one untitled collage, rows of thread undulate around a zipper—which is partially unzipped to reveal a treasure trove of glistening pearls and shells between its teeth. Another collage contains a white infant dress with a mess of red beads and thread near its hem. The small splash of red unsettles otherwise pale hues, reminding me of a blood stain. I wonder, are there traces of ephemeral beings hiding in Lucas's assemblages?

I find a swift answer to this question in Lucas's collage *Booty* from 1985. A pink glove dances like a body along a gravel sidewalk made of beads and sequins. Five rabbit figurines appear tethered to its form, leashed by their tiny necks with pink satin string. Lucas opens the floodgates of animism by assembling her material figuratively, allowing narrative to surface as the glove-body wrangles its precious and prized captives. Objects begin to coalesce and come alive, calling out from the bounds of their tidy frame.



*Bonnie Lucas, Booty, 1985, assemblage on fabric, 15 x 11 1/4 x 1/2 inches*

ILY2's press release describes Lucas as unapologetically celebrating the "dimestore consumer culture that targets and indoctrinates the young girl." Her choice of hyped-up feminine commodities becomes an expression of agency. "I honor and love the supercharged feminine objects I use," she proclaims. "I want to make them potent and powerful." Her assemblages invite me to parse my aesthetic desires from my conditioning as a consumer—and to ask if this kind of differentiation is even possible.

Lucas's work often dwells in the realm of the infant and child, bodiless beings who haunt her collages by way of clothing and playthings, as if to acknowledge who sits at the lower stratospheres of feminine social power.



Bonnie Lucas, *White Rock*, 1986, assemblage on fabric, 49 x 34 x 4 inches

In *White Rock*, a signature assemblage created in 1986, however, Lucas plays along a greater spectrum of age. Like many of her other works, *White Rock* pulls me in, prompting a close-up examination of its intricate composition. I notice a ghostly adult's shirt sewn at the bottom of this piece, and a doll pressed face-down into the shirt's bosom. The doll's legs spread apart from above, restrained by strings of pearls. A large shiny egg emerges, as if being birthed from the doll's nethers.

Only after stepping back do I realize that Lucas has sewn this entire saga onto the backing of a large baby blanket. Death and rebirth flow in a cycle on her strange canvas.

In the press release for her first solo show in 1984, Lucas is quoted saying, "I create feminine monsters"—a sentiment she still maintains. Her "monsters" have ridden out the waves of feminist art movements, complicating the sensuous glorification of femininity by celebrated artists such as Judy Chicago. Violence finds continuity with beauty and delight in Lucas's work, as the oppressed merges with the oppressor.

For her collaged compositions from the 1980s onward, Lucas presents dolls and stuffed animals looking especially contorted or uncomfortable. Occasionally, they lay face-down, as if hiding, crying or suffocating, conjuring visceral sensations of head-in-pillow. These hints at relational violence send me back to an observation by social psychologist Devon Price, who writes: “Much of the abuse women (particularly white cis women) enact on others is not documented by the police state, so people behave as if it does not exist and as if women are safer to be around.” In Price’s view, “Women tend to abuse power differently, because the way their power looks and operates is different. They abuse their children, employees, queer people and men who are marginalized in ways that they are not.”



*Bonnie Lucas, Pretty in Pink, 2018, mixed media assemblage, 38 x 29 x 3 inches*

Along these lines, Lucas’s *Pretty in Pink* troubles the construct of contemporary femininity by inviting a racialized reading into frame, which hints at the impact of whiteness on feminine performance. I cannot enjoy this work’s loveliness without also feeling into the unsettling tenor of its composition.

*Pretty in Pink*, created in 2018, showcases a pink bat decorated with illustrations of white Disney Princesses (The Little Mermaid, Rapunzel, and Sleeping Beauty). The bat's neck is tucked into the body of a child-sized Chinese garb, surrounded by toys, clothes, costume jewelry, and a sparkling cellphone case. As I take in the whole of this work, I imagine that Lucas wants me to ask where much of this paraphernalia was originally fabricated, e.g. in sweatshops. Maybe she wants me to consider the violence of eurocentric beauty standards as perpetuated by global corporations. Or, perhaps she wants to call my attention to the way femmes, especially white femmes, learn from childhood to wield social power through covert forms of violence, even as they experience harm at the hands of an insidious patriarchy.

Whatever the intention might be, Lucas finds expertise in the tidy mess and the tight knit facade of calculated chaos. Her works bind femininity with relational struggle. She asserts agency through jaw-dropping, ageless assemblages that speak loudly to other femmes, as if to say: Whether you realize it or not, you have power at your fingertips—now what will you do with it?