




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## At 74, Bonnie Lucas, Artist of Feminine Macabre, Is Getting Her Big Break

Portland Gallery ILY2 is presenting a solo booth of work by the artist at Art Basel Miami Beach.



Bonnie Lucas in her SoHo studio, 2024. Photo: McKenzie Taplin. Courtesy of ILY2, Portland, Oregon.

by **Katie White** • December 5, 2024 •  **Share This Article**

Artist Bonnie Lucas believes girlhood is both a delicate and a dangerous thing.

For over 50 years, the New York artist has cut, ripped, and mangled girlish toys, garments, and knickknacks to create collages and assemblages that conjure what might be called a feminine macabre. These creations are wonderfully wild, filled with beheaded doe-eyed dolls, shredded floral nightgowns, tangles of costume jewelry, beads, and baubles, secured in place on canvas grounds by hand stitches.

“I’m especially attracted to small, fluffy, pretty, girlish, and cute things,” said the 74-year-old artist during a recent conversation at her Spring Street apartment. “But I both love and dislike these things. I want to tell my own story. I want to take them apart and make a new story.”



Inside Bonnie Lucas’s SoHo studio, 2024. Photo: McKenzie Taplin. Courtesy of ILY2, Portland, Oregon.

In this 400-square-foot apartment where she has lived since 1979, Lucas has worked resolutely, and joyfully. For most of her career, she has been overlooked by collectors, instead paying her way as an adjunct professor (she only recently retired from City College in Harlem).

But now, at the age of 74, Lucas may be on the cusp of a major career breakthrough. This week, at Art Basel Miami Beach, Portland's ILY2 gallery made its debut at the fair with a solo presentation of Lucas's creations offering a vibrant introduction to Lucas's feminine and feminist works through a curation from across the decades. The presentation is a follow-up to a showing of her works by the gallery at Paris Internationale in October of this year.



Inside Bonnie Lucas's SoHo studio, 2024. Photo: McKenzie Taplin. Courtesy of ILY2, Portland, Oregon.

Lucas has, in some ways, been making these types of works since childhood. Born into a Jewish family in Syracuse, New York, in 1950, Lucas was raised amid a conservative postwar culture with prescribed ideas of girls, women, and femininity. She knows that her works, both unabashedly effeminate and destructive, bring discomfort to the surface.

“A lot of my family and friends hated that I would buy a doll and then take it apart,” Lucas recalled. “That was ‘not nice.’ Especially growing up a girl, we were supposed to take care of these things. But I take great pleasure in taking apart and cutting up things.”



Bonnie Lucas, *Spoiled* (1986). Courtesy of the artist and ILY2, Portland.

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She attended Wellesley College, where she majored in art history and found a passion for watercolor painting. In the 1970s, she enrolled at Rutgers University in New Jersey, where she began collecting objects and making collages. Later, as an artist living, working, and exhibiting in New York City, she found her work criticized for its embrace of craft and its perceived crudeness. Lucas, however, embraced these tensions as reflecting the contradictions of girlhood and womanhood. Her creations are meant to be both frilly and violent, innocent and awakened, broken, and contained.

At moments, her works are reminiscent of Weimar artist Hans Bellmer's disquieting "Doll Series" and others of Portia Munson's feminist, maximalist installations of accumulations of toys and objects. She cites women of her own generation including Miriam Schapiro, Maureen Connor, and Pat Lash, as having influenced her in various ways through their embrace of feminine-coded materials and themes.



Inside Bonnie Lucas's SoHo studio, 2024. Photo: McKenzie Taplin. Courtesy of ILY2, Portland, Oregon.

Lucas hunts for her materials, what she calls her “treasured objects,” in discount stores throughout the city. Many of these stores are in Chinatown and Harlem, close to where she worked at City College. She also frequented the now-defunct Kmart at Astor Place. In a way, Lucas’s works have charted the changing face of the city; the discount racks she frequents are harder to find. “Over the last 20 years, there are fewer and fewer [of them]. Every time a neighborhood is gentrified, they disappear very fast,” she said. She rarely uses vintage materials. “I don’t use second-hand objects because I want the objects to look sparkly new and unaltered until I get to alter them,” she explained.

In her work *Spoiled* (1986), a large-scale work anchoring ILY2’s Miami presentation, a tee-shirt with “SPOILED” emblazoned is embedded within a vortex of toys, and the disturbing splayed, but bound legs of a doll (this work, like many others, is named after as labels, logos, or phrases found on the collaged objects themselves). These works are often vividly pink, a color contemporarily associated with the feminine, and frilly, romantic escapism. But in Lucas’s works, pink can feel bodily, lusty, brash, and even aggressive.



Inside Bonnie Lucas's SoHo studio, 2024. Photo: McKenzie Taplin. Courtesy of ILY2, Portland, Oregon.

But quieter, more introspective works are present too. At the fair, ILY2 is also showing a series of hauntingly delicate collage works from the late 1970s. Made while the artist was finishing her MFA at Rutgers, these intimately scaled works are covered in rivulets of white thread, which meander through ribbons, beads, garter straps, and other odds and ends. The softness of these works is like the stillness of a child's nursery and the hints of women's undergarments—garters, bra extenders—feel gentle, tender, like recollections of a mother dressing herself, of darning and mending garments.

Recurrently, Lucas creates pouches or veils where small treasures are hinted at and yet kept shielded, guarded, whether a cluster of pearls or a few stray beads, a protective veil. "It's a peekaboo effect, where you ask, 'What is behind the scrim?'" she said, "My work is about treasure-finding."



Bonnie Lucas, *Untitled* (1978–79). Courtesy of the artist and ILY2, Portland.

In some ways, Lucas's works have been a treasure waiting to be discovered. She credits a younger generation of women for giving her work a deeper look, including Allie Furlotti, the founder of ILY2, and Marie Catalano, a curator and writer who curated "Young Lady" a 2017 exhibition of her work at JTT.

"Working with Bonnie these past few years, it has been an incredible honor to begin expanding the audience for her important work, and she is a cornerstone of our all-female roster," Jeanine Jablonski, executive director of ILY2.



Inside Bonnie Lucas's SoHo studio, 2024. Photo: McKenzie Taplin. Courtesy of ILY2, Portland, Oregon.

Lucas said she is delighted by her recent successes but knows time is fleeting (her partner passed away this year. During our conversation, she quizzed me on the average life expectancy of an American woman. It's 81 years old.) Still, she's not one to waste a moment. Her apartment was recently renovated with the support of ILY2 and now, for the first time, she's been able to devote an entire table to working in her apartment. She says she's never really had an artistic block.

"I work steadily. Not every day. Not every week. I take time off," she said. "But, I made decisions. I never married, I never had kids. I never owned property. I knew I couldn't handle that and be an artist. I had to just have flow. And it worked. I'm still here. I'm still making things."