



ARTFORUM

REVIEWS PORTLAND, OR

Bonnie Lucas

ILY2

By Bean Gilsdorf ☺



Bonnie Lucas, *White Rock*, 1986, mixed media on fabric, 49 × 34 × 4".

Bean Gilsdorf, "Bonnie Lucas". Summer 2023.
www.artforum.com/events/bonnie-lucas-2-251348/

Born in 1950, at the height of the baby boom, Bonnie Lucas developed a feminist aesthetic that was undoubtedly influenced by saccharine depictions of postwar domesticity alongside the dramatic rise of mass-produced goods. Just as plastics manufacturing shifted from military supplies to household wares, the millions of children born to this generation created a novel consumer base for trinkets, doodads, and toys. Such a history, which merges the tender with the artificial, manifested across this abridged retrospective of the artist's work, "Bonnie Lucas: 1978–2023," at ILY2 gallery. The show opened with the wistful *Untitled, 1978–79*, a seventeen-by-thirteen-inch collage featuring cream-colored polyester yarns and lustrous threads encircling shiny bits of sewing-room flotsam. In shades of pearl, pink, peach, red, mint, and baby blue, scattered seed beads, sequins, buttons, paillettes, and snippets of ribbon are accompanied by a fragment of an embroidered tag that once read MADE ESPECIALLY FOR YOU, a prefab item that homemakers would stitch to their handmade garments. The delicate, repetitious lines of yarn that radiate outward from each object suggest that these domestic castoffs are indeed precious, even treasured.

About seven years later, however, this sweetness curdles. In *White Rock, 1986*, Lucas employs a child's satin-trimmed baby blanket as the substrate for a lumpy assemblage of knitted pink clothing, lace collars, loofah mitts, white gloves, safety pins, alphabet-print shoelaces, knitting needles, and an assortment of plastic toys. In the center of this profusion lies a bonneted cloth doll, face down, spread-eagle, and tightly bound by gold cords and lengths of fake pearls. The poor thing is fetishistically displayed before a sheer blouse like a sacrificial offering. The doll's cotton dress is hiked up from behind, and, lodged between her legs is a fist-size Easter egg decorated with a cheerfully heterosexual family of ducks. Over this disturbing scene, a voluptuous cartoon bathing beauty winks and leers at the viewer. The title of this work is taken from the label on the blouse, but the garment isn't a stand-in for maternal succor by any means; the top's open neckline reveals an ugly tangle of pastel embroidery threads. From across the gallery, the work's bubble-gum hues appeared pleasantly dainty. Yet in this chilling, violent tableau, they are anything but.

When sentimental and stereotypically feminine aesthetics intersect with cheapness, we call it kitsch. But to use that designation for Lucas's art would be to overlook the ways in which it smartly contends with the disposability of women. There's no evidence of irony in *Angel*, 2018, for instance—a framed composition full of tacky items that takes its title from the golden letters bedazzling a T-shirt within the piece. Likewise, *Pretty in Pink*, 2018, in which a plastic baseball bat printed with Disney princesses rises from the neck of a child-size lilac-satin *qipao*, evinces no tongue-in-cheek flippancy. Rather, the dime-store items signify the connection between the value of a girl's life and the second-rate tat that both ensnares and represents her.

At roughly twelve by nine inches, *New York City Princess*, 2023, exemplified Lucas's skill at conjuring the tensions and pathos connecting certain aspects of gender and class. Elasticated gathers and ruffles of blue and mint fabrics enclose an almond-shaped form—evoking matronly underpants, or a vagina with frilly labia—stuffed with a confusion of low-quality pink loot. The allusive objects—sequined flowers, floral fabric, a molded doll's leg, a souvenir key fob—suggest that the feminine is nothing more than a two-bit commodity. At the same time, the work's careful layering and skillfully ingenious composition underscore a sense of appreciation and worth. Although this girly stuff looks cheap, Lucas turns it into something utterly priceless.

