

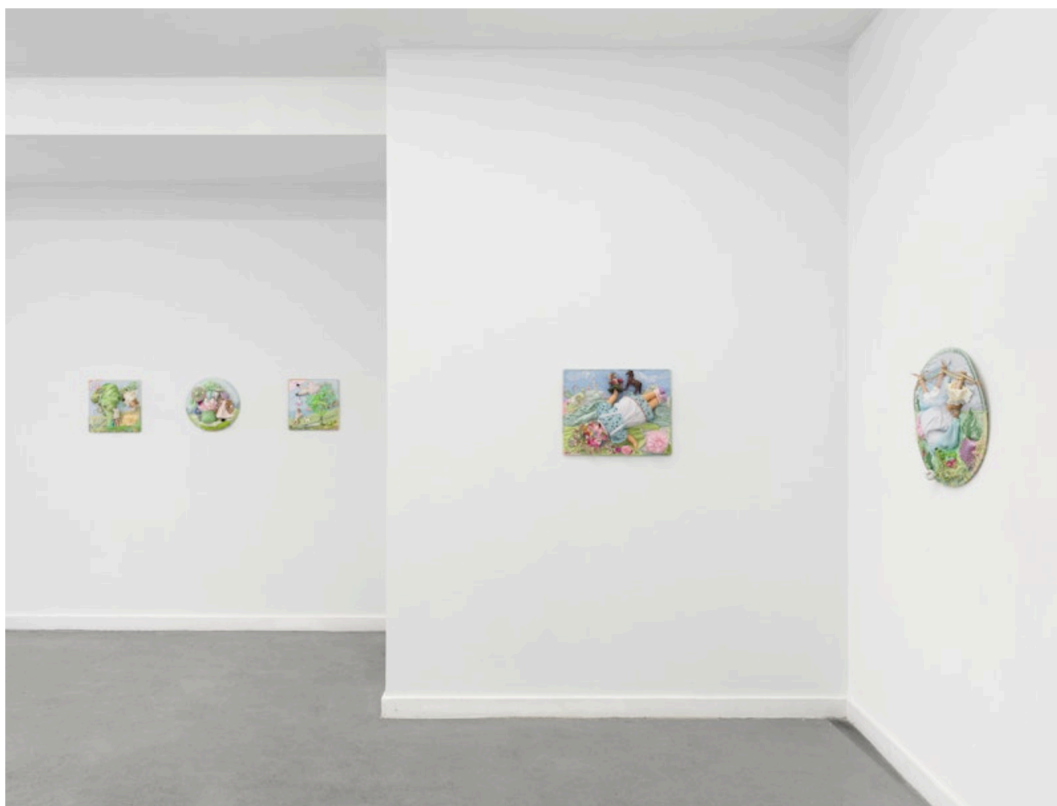


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ArtSeen

Bonnie Lucas: *Small Worlds*

By [Vittoria Benzine](#)



Installation view: *Bonnie Lucas: Small Worlds*, Trotter&Sholer, New York, 2024. Courtesy the artist and Trotter&Sholer. Photo: Shark Senesac.

Little portals into the chaotic core of childhood playtime comprise *Small Worlds* at Trotter&Sholer, the latest solo show by New York-based, mixed media artist Bonnie Lucas. The noted feminist and early Guerilla Girl has

worked out of her Nolita walkup for nearly fifty years, dismembering and reassembling what she calls “feminine frou frou”—99 cent store novelties, from coin purses to bedazzled birds, all geared towards young girls. After decades of diligent collecting, her home studio is flooded with the stuff. *Small Worlds* presents two series that elaborate on techniques and themes from varied periods of obscurity and acclaim in Lucas’s career. During the 1970s she made creamy yarn paintings and collages with lots of negative space, then bolder collages with denser thickets of purchased objects in the 1980s. Lucas went on to juxtapose sharp-edged scenes depicting the thornier side of girlhood’s rose garden with soft oil palettes during the 1990s. In *Small Worlds*, Lucas brings together those earlier efforts, continually recontextualizing manufactured frippery with a child’s glee, and women’s work.

Ten plaster pieces made around 2016-17 glimmer against the gallery’s white-painted brick walls, each one a loose mosaic of girlhood ephemera. Most are accented with oil paint, lending atmosphere and narrative depth to the vignettes. Two pure abstractions, *Special Things* (2016) and *Favorite Things* (2017), read like odes to collecting as they organize princess paraphernalia into clusters. The former features beads contained inside a doll’s baby bottle, evoking a formative experience Lucas had while looking into the empty backpack of a doll her grandparents brought home from abroad. “I’ll never forget that feeling,” she says. “I sensed that the dolls weren’t really that interesting, if they made a doll with a backpack and didn’t put anything in it.” Five tightly packed, slightly larger tableaus ring the remaining wall space, their tufts of satin catching the light while bound and exposed baby dolls throw dramatic shadows. Lucas painstakingly sewed each lush cacophony onto pizza trays of varying dimensions, which she acquired from restaurant

supply stores on the Bowery in New York's Lower East Side neighborhood. Though all were made between 2008-10, this is the first time they have been exhibited.



Bonnie Lucas, *A Dancer and her Dog*, 2008–2010. Purchased Objects and fabric sewn onto metal base, 13 x 13 inches. Courtesy the artist and Trotter&Sholer.

Those earlier assemblages all feature a doll in a state of catastrophe. Sometimes their bedraggled misses make for obvious centerpieces, but

elsewhere that provocative motif rather subtly compliments a more idyllic focal point. *A Dancer And Her Dog* (2008–10), for instance, features a ballerina on a sunny walk, about to spot Hello Kitty hanging from a keychain above her head. Closer inspection, though, shows the cartoon character dangling from a headless doll jammed in the branches of a green yarn tree with a button frisbee lodged in its boughs and a beaded melon patch flourishing below. Critics have called Lucas’s proclivity for binding her dolls and pinning their dresses above their inverted heads “disturbing.” But even the disturbing parts of Lucas’s technique reflect the real, sometimes brutal ways young girls often play.

Her work has also been occasionally referred to as “Jungian” because, for Lucas, art is more a matter of playing than planning. *NYC Girl* (2016) took shape when she tried pouring plaster into an empty ice cream container. The resulting oval of material became a character whose mouth, made from a toy car, Lucas found while sorting through her relics. That same year also famously marked the height of “Girl Boss” culture. Girls who grew up playing with both Hot Wheels and Barbies aspired to win men’s games as women, and felt confident that they could do so. Although the motor-mouthed *NYC Girl* sports bows and pink curlers made from pencil erasers, her leering glass eye is unsettling.



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Of course, many “Girl Bosses” simply offloaded the necessary tasks of life, deemed “women’s work,” to more disenfranchised women, without advocating that it’s all, in fact, valuable “people work.” More recently, as the TikTok “tradwife” trend gave way to what *Glamour* magazine called the “Soft Girl Revolution” last year, some women revolted against Girl Boss values by giving up their hard won workplace successes for homemaking. Lucas’s series are sendups of capitalism’s dehumanizing hierarchies, beyond the way she transforms consumer detritus into treasures. At the same time, the works center on her genuine adoration for womankind, in all its contrasting—and contradictory—facets. The commentaries implied by details in one work negate the next. That colorful discordance may deter viewers who don't truly love women. For the rest, there’s wonderlands within.

Contributor

Vittoria Benzine

Vittoria Benzine is a Brooklyn-based journalist and essayist covering contemporary art with a focus on storytelling, counterculture, and chaos magic. She is a regular contributor at *Maxim*, *Artnet News*, and more.

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