

Anton Kern Gallery

Margot Bergman

Rogues Gallery

September 4 – October 19, 2024

Anton Kern Gallery is pleased to announce Chicago-based painter Margot Bergman's fourth solo exhibition in New York. This latest exhibition brings together a selection of paintings spanning thirty years of her practice, to examine the misfit energy that imbues her portraits of imaginary subjects.

Since the 1950s, Margot Bergman (b. 1934) has operated as an independent force within the Chicago scene, working with limited feedback from the outside world. This insulation allowed the artist to tap into her restless psyche, and attack painting with no holds barred. In the freedom of Bergman's compositions, one can sense a spiritual affinity with the breakaway 20th Century European art movement CoBrA, or Art Brut. The distorted proportions and unnatural coloration of Bergman's characters balance aesthetic sophistication with unabashed humor and embrace of play.

Upon entering the third floor gallery, visitors are encircled by a crowd of faces. Some register immediately, while others take a moment to perceive, corresponding to two distinct approaches to imagemaking. In the larger works, Bergman starts with a blank canvas and spontaneously invents faces through urgent brushwork. In the smaller works, she paints into pre-existing compositions, violating the sense of order, to coax her subjects out. Bergman's exacting choices, which alternate between masking and revealing, walk a knife's edge between creation and destruction.

The overpainted canvases represent the earlier examples within the show. These stem from a period between the mid-1990s through the late aughts, during which Bergman used paintings she collected from Chicago thrift shops as the starting point to arrive at her uncanny portraits. In *Pearl* (2010), eyes emerge from a bouquet of flowers, and in *Sandy* (1997), a barn in the distance of a snowy landscape becomes a lipsticked mouth. These painterly instincts recall the childhood tendency to personify objects, or find faces in nature.

In her later works, Bergman's faces are larger, looser, and emotionally raw. Peeks of white primed canvas evince Bergman's swordsman-like brushmarks and the shallowness of the image. The thin passes of paint leave little room for revision. Every decision counts, making the addition of a mustache on *Carla's* (2015) perfectly smooth face all the more satisfying. *Rose Marie* (2019), is devoid of eyes and a nose, and the emotion is carried by the shape of her exaggerated lips, which in turn morph into flowers that spring from her head, harkening back to the artist's earlier interventions within still lifes.

Whether explicitly rendered, or distilled through erasure and contouring, Bergman's choices in proportion and perspective are strikingly consistent from one painting to the next, as is her focus on the most communicative features of the face: the eyes and mouth. Within this basic framework though, there are wild variations that frustrate the tendency to favor perfection, and hold sacred the human condition.

Margot Bergman has exhibited in solo and group shows in the US and Europe since 1970. Her work has been the subject of five solo shows at Corbett vs Dempsey in Chicago (2006, 2008, 2010, 2014, 2018), as well as three solo shows at Anton Kern Gallery (2016, 2019, 2022) and Suzanne Vielmetter in LA (2017, 2019). Her work was also included in *Body Doubles* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, curated by Michelle Puetz (2015). Bergman's first institutional solo show in Europe debuted at the Museum Langmatt in Baden, Switzerland in 2019, and traveled to the Museum Folkwang in Essen, Germany, later that same year. An exhibition catalog was published on the occasion, with texts by Britta Peters (the artistic director of Urbane Künste Ruhr), Markus Stegmann (the director of Museum Langmatt) and John Yau (art critic, New York).



Margot Bergman, *Sandy*, 1997, Acrylic on canvas, 14x 10 inches (35.6 x 25.4 cm)