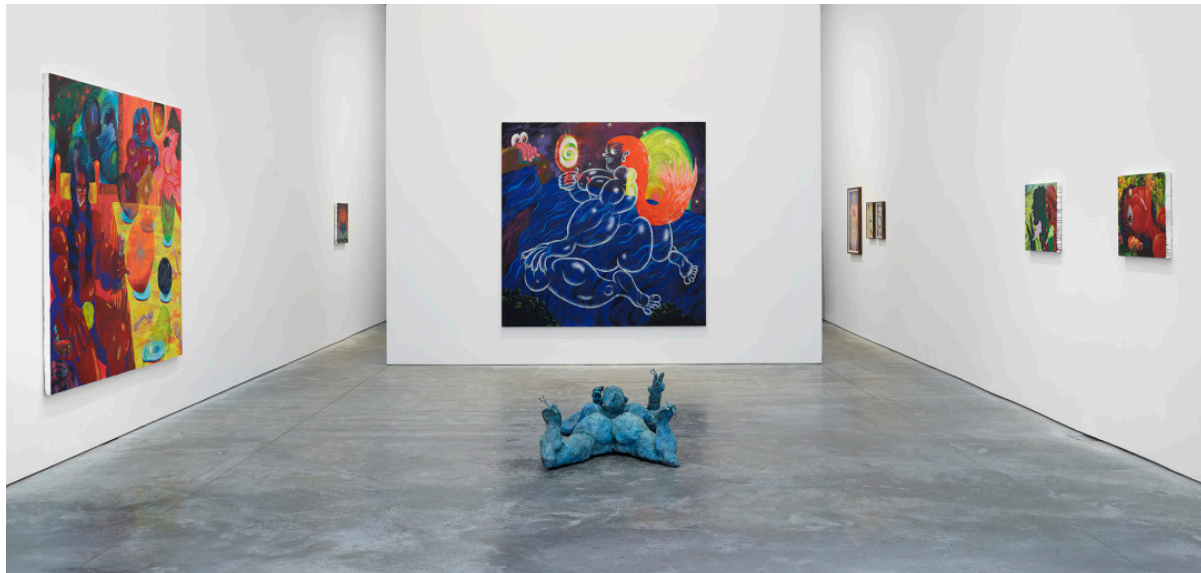


Morgan Presents

Essay published in the artist's monograph, coinciding
with the exhibition *The Softest Place on Earth*, 2020
pp.89—96



I Wonder What The Neighbors Are Up To?

Ana Benaroya has answered a question that mystifies us from our early childhood through our grey-haired years: *I wonder what the hell the neighbors are up to?* This group of new work continues the examination Benaroya embarked upon in her exhibition *Teach Me Tonight* earlier this year. Yet rather than a call and response relationship, this second chapter relates to the first by building on its foundations and proceeding to give us a tour of the building.

Benaroya's title for this show, *The Softest Place on Earth*, responds to Gustave Courbet's seminal 1866 work *L'Origine du monde* [*The Origin of the World*], one of the most challenging and provocative works of the nineteenth century; a work that defies categorization, simultaneously provocative yet natural, both striking and delicate. Benaroya's title concurrently references her own *Origins of the World* (2019), a work that featured in the first of these exhibitions, thereby etymologically grounding the relationship between the two shows and encouraging us to consider them as one body of work.

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Through creating a legible link between the exhibition title and Courbet's work, Benaroya underscores her engagement and fascination with the thematic intertwining of sexuality, fertility, femininity—and perhaps the risqué. In this second chapter, Benaroya seems to have arrived at the conclusion for her exploration: namely the recognition that womankind exists within a duality.

Benaroya asserts that women, and only women, occupy a dual existence of both creating life and living life—and essentially, that they occupy these roles concurrently. This presentation of women's duality permeates the group of paintings, yet manifests itself individually from work to work. The central red figure in *Bathtime Stories* reads her book closely, holding it up with her left hand, while simultaneously writing with her right: presenting a particular moment of consumption and creation. The somewhat bizarre yet undeniably impressive act, of reading and writing simultaneously, is also an implicit act of defiance; a statement that while women consume and create culture, they are rarely granted the mythic elevation of their male counterparts—the artist as *genius*.

In this suite of paintings, Benaroya employs a range of visual language—which we shall group under the collective term 'doubling'—to discuss women's duality as both individuals and as creators of life. Doubling is omnipresent throughout this group of work, yet manifests itself in a plethora of particularities. One of these manifestations includes Benaroya's use of mirroring, or the presentation of reflected characters within individual works; at its most apparent, *Starborn* shows us an offset reflection of two women joining hands to create a new form through their unity. Doubling is not pursued solely for the sake of visual indulgence, but rather to reconsider and refocus our attention on womankind's power for creation—within the terms of each woman's individual activity.

Benaroya enjoys complicating our understanding with the unique personalities of each of these figures, thereby encouraging us to avoid blanket statements and instead focus on the individual. Even Benaroya's use of mirroring is infused with ambiguity. Despite that multiple works, including *Starborn*, *Mother May I* and *The Night is Darkening Round Me*, all present moments of reflection or mirroring, Benaroya makes it clear through the

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figures' interaction—the sharing of an intimate secret, a fleeting touch—that these figures possess distinct identities. *Baby Where You Are* depicts two figures in the midst of a passionate kiss, yet where one figure ends and the other begins remains unclear. Lesbian desire permeates Benaroya's work, throughout both this show and the prior chapter; her figures revel with delight in the company of other women.

Another presentation of doubling includes the sewing of narrative links between pairs of paintings throughout the exhibition. This consideration of how two paintings relate to each other, where one can be read as a portal or window into the other, allows us to take a moment to consider Benaroya's motivations on a macro level. The coupling of paintings occurs both implicitly and explicitly. Implicit coupling occurs through a suggestion of linked content: the sexualized tongue of *The Avid Reader*, which licks the book of the spine as she looks up at the viewer suggestively, can be imagined to extend out of the book and towards the engrossed reader in *Bathtime Stories*. Explicitly, we can identify the shadows of the two kissing figures from *Baby Where You Are* outside the dining room window of *The Red Room*.

Benaroya's use of doubling throughout this group of works occurs in both a positive and negative sense; this is to say that doubling also expresses itself through discordance. Several times within this chapter of work we come across a moment in a painting where both form and content diverge from their surrounding context. Nowhere is this more legible than in *The Red Room*.

The work presents three voluptuous, corporeal figures dining, talking and smoking, alongside a set of disembodied translucent presences, or orbs. These orbs do not neatly belong to the scene; their presence challenges us as viewers not only in terms of their inclusion as content, but also formally, in that the orbs' relative transparency juxtaposes the buxom figures' full curves, and the brushstrokes that substantiate them are rougher and more clearly legible. That these orbs are plated, resembling dessert about to be eaten, further unnerves us once we consider their embryonic quality.

Rather than contorting our perception of these orbs to fit the narrative content of the scene, let us instead consider them on the terms that Benaroya

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has presented them to us: they are pointedly foreign. Their comparative translucence is not coincidental, rather it communicates their embryonic potential for creation—they do not fully belong to the physical realm of the dining figures. Benaroya has physically manifested the dual nature of womankind, by visibly presenting these women’s power for creation within the picture plane.

If we consider the orbs through this lens of duality, perhaps we can begin to reconcile the coexistence of visual similarities to both desserts and embryos—the last thing consumed in a meal, the first stage of life. Within this singular moment these women eat and interact as individual characters, yet these orbs are closer to disembodied deities, reminding the viewer of women’s omnipresent power for giving life.

This theme of creation reaches its apex in the work *It Was Summer, I Was There, So Was She*. Here Benaroya reinterprets Jean-Léon Gérôme’s 1890 work *Pygmalion and Galatea*, itself a visual retelling of Ovid’s Pygmalion from Book X of his *Metamorphoses*. The cyclical retelling of this narrative, from Ovid to Gérôme to George Bernard Shaw, stands as a parallel to Benaroya’s examination of the cycles of creation and consumption—yet here she recasts women as both subject and author.

Ovid’s original narrative, itself deriving from Greek mythology, tells of a Cypriot sculptor Pygmalion, who carves a woman out of ivory and appeals to Aphrodite for a bride in her likeness; upon kissing her lips Pygmalion finds them warm to the touch. By shifting the narrative to one where both sculptor and sculpture are women, Benaroya focuses our attention on women’s power for creation, while simultaneously infusing an autobiographical quality to this mythological tale. We find ourselves returning to the notion of doubling: woman as both author and subject, unified through a singular expression of desire and affection, manifested through a kiss.

In this work Benaroya finds the narrative conclusion to her consideration of every woman’s duality: she imbibes, frolics and loves, while simultaneously possessing a potential for creation, as a giver of life. In the work’s depiction of a woman molding another out of formless clay, presented in this uniquely

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recast female iteration, alongside the idea of falling in love with one's own creation, the painting proclaims Benaroya's thesis with a singular clarity.

When we ask, "What are the neighbors up to?", we are trying to resolve a clouded conception; we hear their footsteps on the ceiling above us, their muffled voices as they speak amongst themselves, we smell the traces of the meals they cook. By visually representing women's unseen powers for creation, presented alongside their quotidian activities, Benaroya adjusts our conception of women. They are both the source and object of desire, in all its forms, but also creators and givers of life, physically, artistically, and maternally.

—Morgan Aguiar-Lucander