

## EXHIBITIONS

### Women Artists

“Celebrating Women Artists,” at Arcadia Contemporary in New York City this spring (April 23–May 20, 2015), presented a half-dozen intriguing talents, three from the United States and one each from Canada, Argentina and Australia. All could be loosely defined as figurative, but they exhibit considerable range in mediums and style. Imagination trumps realism.

The Australian painter Dianne Gall creates 1940s time capsules with a slightly sinister undertone, as settings for solitary women caught up in some drama that resonates with emotion but does not follow a straightforward narrative. The title of *Cornered* (2015) suggests a film noir scenario: a woman stands in the corner of a bourgeois room, hemmed in between a window and a decorative wall treatment. She wears a strapless, dark green dress and black pumps, but the artist has cropped her head out of the picture. Because we cannot see her face, we cannot know her feelings and motivations. The vintage fashion and décor Gall uses add weight to the atmosphere. The red fleur-de-lis rug in *Cornered* and the lamp-lit green wall in *Violet Blonde* (2014) have a fusty respectability that seems claustrophobic. The dark-haired woman in *Glimpse* (2014) hesitates on the threshold between two rooms, her back to the viewer like a Caspar David Friedrich figure. The period décor is impeccable, yet the scene is an artful fiction. Gall chooses strong, almost acid colors and makes a centerpiece of a scalloped mirror that reflects one room into another; a lit sconce generates strong chiaroscuro. The woman, in a draped white dress, cuts a figure of near-classical gravitas.

Nancy Depew wields a formidable technique in the traditional genres of still life and landscape. Her deep-



Dianne Gall, *Cornered*, 2015

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woods scenes of rocks and streams call to mind *sous bois* painters such as Gustave Courbet and Asher B. Durand, and her close-ups of flowers—such as the iris on satin in *Sway* (2014)—have a palpable sense of dewy freshness. But she also combines the figure and flowers in a way that explores the iconography of beauty. In *Merge* (2014), Depew presents a short-haired blonde nude lying, her back to us, in a bed of chrysanthemums—pink, lilac and ivory blossoms. The model's weight and the texture of the flowers are convincingly captured, yet the setting is artificial: the flowers are too dense for nature; the nude might be a fairy princess or an alabaster odalisque. In *Inside Out* (2015), Depew reverses the figure. The artist observes realistic details with clarity and intensifies our perception by putting them in a fictional context. *Mercy* (2013) depicts a nude woman from the back: the curves of her hips and shoulders form a striking arabesque shape, complemented by tall irises that share the frame. The flat black backdrop further accentuates the aesthetic power of the formal shapes. Depew's models, like Gall's, retain their air of mystery.

Alessandra Maria crafts exquisite works on paper using graphite, carbon pencil, gold leaf and black ink. It is good to see an illustrator recognized as a skilled and imaginative artist. Alessandra Maria surrounds the faces of her models with leaf and butterfly forms and overlays them with lace-like webs of pattern. The young women she depicts have a hieratic quality, like *symboliste* prophetesses, and sometimes an erotic vibe. Scrims of pattern veil the faces. In *Finish* (2015), the woman—with closed eyes—seems to salute the viewer with a religious gesture as she half-emerges from a tall stand of reeds. The brown tonalities of the drawing are exquisitely modulated. In *Moirai* (2015), named for the Greek Fates, a triple manifestation of a dark-haired girl is overlaid with



Romina Ressia, *The Fish*, 2015 (Photograph)

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stylized butterflies and arcs of white dots. The naturalism of the faces coexists perfectly with the decorative abstraction of the design elements. Alessandra Maria's influences include Leonardo's drawings of waves and mountains, Japanese prints and Gustav Klimt's Byzantine-inflected fin-de-siècle compositions. Even images as straightforward as her close-ups of chrysanthemums have an eerie delicacy, suggesting mythological botany.

Of the three remaining artists in the Arcadia exhibition, two are sculptors. Deon Duncan, an American like Depew and Alessandra Maria, makes bronze statues in a more-or-less classical manner, but her background does not fit the norm of atelier training. She spent time in the Peace Corps and worked in what she calls "eco art" in Ecuador. She discovered the figurative Western tradition by experimenting. Duncan's athletic figures, such as *Interval* and *Clarity* (both 2013), have a streamlined look, more Art Deco than classical, but speak eloquently for the strength and symmetry of the human body.

The Canadian ceramic artist Jess Riva Cooper makes busts of women that juxtapose smooth, glossy, white surfaces and sculptural foliage excrescences: imagine eighteenth-century objets d'art invaded by rapacious flowers, leaves and thorns, colonizing the refined young ladies, in disturbing natural colors. Cooper's *Viral Series II—Green Buds, Crocus* (2015) raises issues of nature and civilization, often considered complementary in idealized art. The artist explores the fault lines under the mental construction. Her unusual choice of medium is refreshing, aesthetically appealing and apt to her themes. Interestingly, she traces her refined ceramics to the clay from which the folkloric Golem was fashioned.

The final participant in the show, the Argentine photographer Romina Ressaia, has a background in avant-garde fashion work, but has been focusing on fine art photography, using *art* with a double meaning. Her images echo the iconography of Renaissance painting, and her compositions are constructed with an awareness of harmony, balance and chiaroscuro. Her models—modern young women—wear Elizabethan regalia, as in *The Queen* (2014), or seventeenth-century garb, as in *The Fish* (2015). Yet, in spite of their constrained demeanor, they hint at quiet rebellion or the ironic distance of modern hindsight. *Double Bubble* (2014) captures a woman, in Puritan black and white, chewing gum, an act of cheeky defiance. All of these artists playact, to some extent, diving deep into alternate worlds. Arcadia Contemporary, 51 Greene Street, New York, New York 10013. [ArcadiaContemporary.com](http://ArcadiaContemporary.com)

## Romantic Art, 1760–1860

"The Critique of Reason: Romantic Art, 1760–1860," at the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven, Connecticut, frames the Romantic break from Enlightenment order, balance and restraint not as a simple repudiation of