

CINDY PHENIX. "MAGISTIC REACH AND TRUST" (2023).  
OIL AND PASTEL ON LINEN. 96" X 144."  
COURTESY THE ARTIST.



*Cindy Phenix*

THAT  
GLIMMERING  
PROMENADE  
APOCALYPTO

*Written by Madeleine Schulz*



STARTS WITH a scene. Or rather, an idea of a scene. It might be inspired by a photo; a personal anecdote; oftentimes a book. The studio bookshelves are stacked high, copies lie atop Montréal-born artist Cindy Phenix's paint-splattered surfaces in her Chinatown, Los Angeles studio. We stop next to a textbook-looking volume about Oceans. She's just bought it. "Recently, I've been really inspired by water," Phenix says.

From the concept of a scene, Phenix takes to her laptop to make tangible her ideation. For this, the artist pulls from her own archives. "It's years and years of different files," Phenix says. She's got books to inspire her, and a lengthy iPhoto gallery to match.

Phenix, represented in Los Angeles by Nino Mier Gallery nods to "Theatrum Mundi"—"the theater of the everyday world; all the world's a stage," she says with a smile. The Baroque-era metaphor seeps into her work, manifesting in complex scenes of the everyday, with an element of the nonsensical complicating the view. The viewer, just like a member of the public attending a performance at London's Globe, is present in the work, pulled between the happenings inside.

Shipwrecks, thunderstorms, and colorful panoramas—three key scenes within the practice of "Theatrum Mundi"—manifest, in various ways, in Phenix's work. Her pieces, as of late, are imbued with explorations of water and oceans. Mermaids swim through the paintings. A man struggles in the water. Women watch. Storms abound, be it in the form of a black hole, or the chaos of the work itself. And, of course, there's color. So much color.

"It leads me to think about humans, the everyday, how we're like the actors of everything happening in our lives," she says. "The theater has a script that you're supposed to follow. What happens when you don't?"

Through this scene-constructing, Phenix creates a narration. It's not always

linear. Recently, it's one of apocalypse; or, at least, it stems from the idea of the end of the world. An end that is actively caused by humans (she points to one painting in which people are poisoning and peeing in the water). Apocalypse can be personal, too. Phenix is currently ruminating on a piece about the loss of a loved one (her grandmother recently lost her husband). Inside one's own experience, it feels like the end of the world.

Phenix's works are rhizomatic; there's no one entry point, nor is there a singular narrative to follow—instead, there are a host of different "micro-scenes" within Phenix's pieces, together constructing a narrative that can be read in many ways. Different people will relate to different parts of the piece; different people will notice different elements of the story entirely. "It's a constellation, visually," the artist reflects. In "Redistribution of Sensible," for instance, the initial idea stemmed from a photograph of people building the Apollo 11. "They're assembling a spaceship," Phenix says. "What could happen to that?" The viewer's eyes are pulled to the left, where one can see figures opening a portal: "Oh, by accident, they're opening a portal, a black hole. How will people react?"

Phenix looks to scholar Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto*. It's a rejection of boundaries; an argument for the breakdown of these boundaries between humans and machines. There are no linear power structures in her pieces; no one placement of a given figure or scene indicates higher status.

The viewer doesn't know where to look, because they're not told where to look. They're pulled in different directions, likely to discover something new each time "it's chaotic," Phenix says with a smile. Even years later she finds elements she'd forgotten were there since creating them in paint.

It's not just Phenix's paintings that are theatrical, but her process as well.

Once working on canvas, she maps out the piece, marking it with tape—just as one might go about blocking a stage. Phenix uses a variety of mediums to put together the scene. Pastels; large, thick brush strokes of 50 percent oil, 50 percent wax. They jut out from the canvas as if teasing the viewer; daring them to touch. "You kind of want to eat them," Phenix laughs. The brushes are large, as are the movements. "It's super physical," she says. "I always say 'it's like you're breaking the painting.'" It's a matter of fixing and balancing—oil paint; transparency; brush marks; more pastel.

Phenix is currently exhibiting at Victoria Miro until March 31st. Only we're standing in her studio, looking at the pieces on show. The exhibition is entirely digital, taking place on virtual reality and 3D exhibition ecosystem Vortic. It's Victoria Miro's third virtual exhibit, and is rendered like the physical gallery.

The process of digitizing was not entirely unlike Phenix's own method of creating a painting; the team spent two days in her Chinatown studio taking close-up photographs of the micro-scenes (or pieces of them). They then assembled these to represent the full pieces online; a collage of a collage.

The accessibility of exhibiting online was a draw for Phenix. In an art world premised on exclusivity, anyone with a laptop can log on and view the work. Each is also accompanied by an audio element. "I did poetry for the narration," Phenix says. "In a gallery, you don't have the artist there every day." It's an added level of access, not just in terms of seeing the work, but being privy to a level of understanding of a given piece typically reserved for those who've studied art history, or can afford to immerse themselves in the space.

During her master's degree at Northwestern, Phenix had a seminar on Picasso. She recalls his analytical cubism, wherein figures are fragmented and multi-layered, as in the works of Georges Braque



CINDY PHENIX. "OWN DESTRUCTION" (2020). GOLD LEAVES, PAPER, OIL AND PASTEL ON MDF. 96" X 48." COURTESY NINO MIER GALLERY.

and Juan Gris. It's from this cubist form that Phenix's own practice, in part, stems. "These characters that were fragmented, composed of different objects, become these types of monsters." The characters were always inside, Phenix notes. "Even with the fragmentation, you can always see a corset, or a newspaper, or an armchair." Elements to denote the private sphere.

In her own work, she takes this concept of monstrosity, and explores what it means for monsters to not know their own power by virtue of being stuck inside—by bringing them out. "My collage became more intense, I started painting more landscapes, bringing the monster figures outside." As Haraway breaks down the boundaries between human and non-human, Phenix engages in a similar deconstruction.

In doing so, she's thinking about monsters as a new form of collectivity. "If you have a collection, it's not about the best element," she says. "It's about what is different, what is strange—when I was a kid, I had a pencil and eraser collection!" (A sign of what was to come.) "That creates a strength and power." It's idealistic; a yearning for a collectivity that is severely lacking in the individualized world in which we're operating.

Phenix's fragmented, monstrous figures interrogate the definition of a monster. It's evolved, she says, from the likes of Frankenstein to associations with men in politics in cultural terms today. She recalls a painting inspired by Brett Kavanaugh amidst the lead up to his confirmation into the Supreme Court. In another vein, she looks to mythology. "You have witches, mermaids—female monsters that are terrible. Like Medusa. You know she was basically raped, slut shamed by Athena and transformed into a monster where nobody

could look at her?" she asks. "It's too sad." She's a Gorgon—a snake-haired Greek figure villainized by patriarchal forms of knowledge production.



CINDY PHENIX. "PLASMIC LIFE DANCING" (2022). OIL AND PASTEL ON LINEN. 96" X 48." COURTESY NINO MIER GALLERY.

Phenix's fragmentation is her own interpretation of Tentacular Thinking, another Haraway-ism that informs her practice. A rejection of human exceptionalism and individualism, Tentacular Thinking encourages a movement in multiple di-

rections, a new, multi-stranded means of knowledge production. An eight-tentacled octopus. The octopus makes an appearance in "Shifting Shapes Covering," brought into existence by surrounding figures in a garden, playing and bringing seashells and flowers together to create an image of tentacles. A version of this octopus is featured in one of Phenix's recent fabric works, "wrecking the ship," as Phenix puts it.

The artist's works frequently converse with one another, albeit not always in such a direct manner. Phenix points to the rocket ship in the Apollo 11 painting (recall the black hole micro-scene), and a portal in a different work—"which is also a black hole," she says.

Amidst the organized chaos of Phenix's fragmented works, there's room for movement, for growth, for change. This, too, is reflected in Phenix's process of creation. She finds herself referencing her collages more than when she started. In her early days, she says, she'd hardly look at the collage once she began painting. "But as the paintings are evolving, and the narration in the work is becoming important for me, I have my collage print [the whole time]." The collage colors are also more intentional, lending themselves to referentiality.

That said, Phenix has been playing with process more, and leaning into flexibility. A sort of improv, if you will. The pieces are exhibitionist, they're abstract, and they're not always meant to make sense. Like the water she's painting, Phenix's process is fluid. It's this process after the mapping that takes the pieces further. "With painting, my goal is to not control everything," she says. She'll imbue the work with color and narrative, in essence, setting the stage. And let the chaos speak for itself.



CINDY PHENIX "UFOLD" (2023). OIL AND PASTEL ON LINEN. 30" X 24." COURTESY THE ARTIST.