



INTRODUCTION

Nino Mier Gallery is proud to announce a solo presentation by Celeste Dupuy-Spencer in the Statements sector of Art Basel 2022. *The shape of the rock that's hurling towards the sea* comprises an ambitious four-panel oil on linen polyptych standing at 114 $\frac{7}{8}$ inches tall and 210 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches wide, situated above a bisected wooden door and flanked by a smaller oil on panel work depicting an embracing Jesus and Judas. Dupuy-Spencer understands the project as the unalloyed transfiguration of a primal rage, a feminine rage—a rage induced by man's sequestering of power, an effort which was a central concern in the shaping and reshaping of our world via philosophy, violence, and dominance for millennia.

While making the painting, I stared at the blank panels day after day, replaying the violence which was embodied in the policies being pushed through which stripped women's rights to their own bodies, rhetoric from church leaders calling for the execution of LGBTQ people via firing squad, the delusion of white supremacy going prime time, mass extinctions, the images and stories from Bucha. There was no painting that I could justify making, no clever ideas or painting techniques to employ. I felt like I was experiencing the death of art in a way that artists experienced after 1945. There can be no art while these things are occurring. Only rage.

- Celeste Dupuy-Spencer

Integral to the project is an interrogation of the status of art in a system that threatens collapse due to sustained violence against the environment and against the disempowered majority of people across the globe. Like artists and writers working in the wake of World Wars I & II such as Otto Dix, Georges Perec, and Barnett Newman, among many others, Dupuy-Spencer negates the ability of art to speak to a contemporary viewership about the realities of our shared world. To this end, she created something “vulgar, violent, and angry”—something which bars aesthetic appraisals and private epiphanies. *The shape of the rock that's hurling towards the sea* is therefore not art, but, in the artist's words, is “a curse”.

The shape of the rock that's hurling towards the sea represents the creation of life on Earth and its radical destruction. Dupuy-Spencer churned through literature, art history, philosophy, mythology, psychology, and the occult while bringing the painting to life. The polyptych's left wing is a visual compression of evolution, from the development of the first multicellular organisms through the present, while the center panel and right wing depict an apocalypse helmed by a medusa-like demon bearing the face of Aileen Wuornos, who was sentenced to death via lethal injection in 2002. The demon, which personifies eons of rage and disappointment, is also Armageddon itself. If its body is Aileen Wuornos, and its psyche is Medusa, its soul is Babalon, goddess of creation as well as the apocalypse. Babalon's duality of destruction and generation is referenced in graffiti on the bisected wooden door, nested in the bottom



section of the center panel. The scrawled text reads: “<<<ARARITA>>> / there is no distinction between / one thing and any other”.

Medium, form, and architecture – rather than just composition and content – are critical features of the project’s scope. Most essential to the painting are the didactic similarities between church altarpieces and the public murals produced under the Works Project Administration of the American midcentury. Dupuy-Spencer harnesses the discursive power of such works in *The shape of the rock that’s hurling towards the sea*.

Constructed to fit over and around the top section of a door, the polyptych’s form most closely alludes to the WPA murals found throughout the United States, “rooting the work in the here and now,” per Dupuy-Spencer. One of the New Deal projects during the Great Depression in the United States was the Federal Art Project of 1935-1943. For this project, one percent of each public building’s construction was devoted to the funding of public art. Over 1,200 murals were painted in post offices around the country, representing scenes of quotidian American life in a social realist style. The subjects, viewers, and artists of these public murals, found framing the top of post office doors, were typically from the same community. As the artist notes, “the murals can be found in countless towns and small cities scattered throughout every state, and each one can feel like they are thousands of miles away from any Manhattan gallery”.

Just as the New Deal murals were essential to the architecture of post offices, altarpieces of the Italian Quattrocento by artists such as Correggio and Giuliano da Rimini were essential to the architecture of Catholic churches. Paintings representing scenes from Mary, Joseph, and Jesus’s lives, as well as narrative cycles of the lives of the saints, comprise the panels of such altarpieces, designed to channel the gaze of churchgoers to the alter and, positioned at a high angle, up to the heavens in prayer. Though each member of the congregation would have an individual relationship with God, the tools to cultivate such a relationship were shared among them, crystallized in the form of the altarpiece. Dupuy-Spencer is not only interested in this mode of viewership, but in the altarpieces’ ability to serve as visual symbols for entities so big they escape representation. But whereas God, morality, and the afterlife fixated artists of the Renaissance, Dupuy-Spencer takes as her subjects the hyperobjects of racialized and patriarchal violence, climate change, and other unrepresentable, existential crises of our era.

The polyptych is read from left to right across the panels. The first panel on the far left is read from bottom to top; the center panel is an invocation; the innermost right panel is a single moment; and the outermost right panel is read from bottom to top.

Celeste Dupuy-Spencer (b. 1979 New York, NY; lives and works in Los Angeles) received a BFA from Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York in 2007. Dupuy-



Spencer has had recent solo exhibitions with Nino Mier Gallery, Los Angeles, US; Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin, DE; and Marlborough Contemporary, New York, US. Dupuy-Spencer was included in a 2022 survey exhibition at the Fort Worth Museum of Art, Prospect.5 New Orleans, the Hammer Museum's 2018 edition of Made in L.A, as well as the 2017 Whitney Biennial. The artist's work is represented in public collections including the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, US; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, US; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, US; the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, US; and the Aishti Foundation, LB.

LEFT PANEL

The left-most panel of the polyptych, read from bottom to top, represents the evolution of life on Earth, ending in our contemporary era. The panel's bottom depicts the Great Oxidation Event, a moment around 2 billion years ago in which an increase of toxic oxygen both extinguished many anaerobic lifeforms and allowed for the development of multicellular organisms, inscribing into life's beginnings the inevitability of death. Above the algae forests burrows a pre-mammalian animal, "the great-great-great grandmother than every human shares with every other mammal who has ever lived," per the artist, painted in an energized, quasi-Fauvist hand.

A long beam of stark, orange light interjects the top section of the panel, symbolizing, as Dupuy-Spencer explains, "the first moment of human consciousness and agency"—a moment that becomes arbitrary when considered in relation to the billions of years that precede it. This event is condensed by the Adam and Eve myth as well as in George Frederick Watts' *The Creation of Eve* (c.1865-1899), a key referent for the artist.

Adjacent to the orange light, Dupuy-Spencer paints the 18th-19th century Industrial Age through the present. New pollutants proliferate around a freight train, smokestacks, and plumes of fog. A red lion—the alchemical symbol representing death and rebirth—lies decapitated, foreclosing the possibility of purification and regeneration. This is the beginning of an end—humanity's end—as posited by *The shape of the rock that's hurling towards the sea*.

CENTER PANEL

*This painting is an invocation.
It also might be a sigil.*

- Celeste Dupuy-Spencer

INNERMOST RIGHT PANEL

The innermost right panel depicts figures engaging in a frantic scramble for survival. Drawing from Tintoretto's *The Last Judgement* (1562) and Andrea Vicentino's *Battle of Lepanto* (1595-1605), this panel dramatizes the apocalyptic moment through a dense mass of subjects falling through a parting ocean. A chasm forms as men, women, and boats are swallowed by its depths, under which a toothy leviathan lurks. A small sliver of land features marauding border patrolmen on horses, a tongue-in-cheek nod to the foreseen excessive, incessant policing of territories, even on the precipice of their obliteration.

OUTERMOST RIGHT PANEL

Dear Gentleviewer, it is my sincere and humble request that you humor me, the simple painter, and imagine this fourth and final panel as charting the vast unfolding of future ages, and the never quiet hand of Babalon, Dark Goddess of Evolution. I thank you very much for your time. Goodday.

- Celeste Dupuy-Spencer

The outermost right panel, read from bottom to top, depicts the dawn of a new, post-human era in evolution. The bottom represents a small group of the world's last survivors, a group of decrepit, once-powerful men, huddling in a gilded room. The faceless figures in suits turn their backs on the viewer, emphasizing their exclusivity. Francisco Goya's *Scene of Rape and Murder* (1808-1812), Jean-Baptiste Oudry's *Le loup pris au piège* (c. 1700-1755), and George Frederic Watts' *Time, Death and Judgement* (1900) are embedded within the gilded ceilings above them. The men mingle among masterpieces as Hell itself forms above them, imagined by Dupuy-Spencer as a heavily impastoed sewage system. The canvas builds up cigarette butts, band-aids, and other detritus, creating a heaviness that threatens to collapse in on the palace below it. Sitting above the panel's dark, middle stratum is a group of rats—the sole survivors of a mass-extinction event—caring for one another. The consciousness-giving ray of orange light from the polyptych's left-most panel returns here, indicating that these rats have evolved beyond their current capabilities, and speculating hopefully on what lifeforms will supplant the self-destructing and world-destroying human.

JESUS AND JUDAS

Searching for an appropriate definition of evil, we might offer entropy; but to rely too heavily on this would be to fall into another blind. Magic happens at the site of excess, at the in-between points. It flourishes in places where the civilizing impulse,

the cycle of production, is disrupted. Its flourishing serves to further disrupt the cycle. Magic cannot help but place itself in circuit.

It is the falling of the year. Persephone approaches her caves once more. The leaves shrivel and die and rot, and it is beautiful. Now is the drawing of the vacuum and void, the approach of the hibernating sleep of potential. Upon the earth, the spring is the time of activity, autumn the time of slowing. In Persephone's caves, the How is reversed.

The rise of the patriarchy was the alleged valuing of life over death. In monotheism death is destroyed—there is no more death. This is the conquering of the mother, who is God of death--and life. Therefore the immortality of solar theism is a non-life, a rejection of the dialectical movement of the living. For the destruction of death has led us to the destruction of life.

[...]

Our Lady is Goddess of the apocalypse. The rise of religion at the end of the world. Babalon reveals the apocalyptic aspect of time. Everything that is born dies—time is not the vanguard of progress but a spiral, a wave. Our Lady rises like the tide upon the shifting the poles.

- *Approaching Babalon: Essays for the Abyss*, Georgia van Raalte

An 11 by 14-inch painting of a decomposing Jesus and Judas standing in loving embrace flanks *The shape of the rock that's hurling towards the sea*. Here, Dupuy-Spencer considers Judas not as Jesus' betrayer, but as his greatest ally, having set in motion the events which led to Jesus' salvation of humanity. This unorthodox interpretation challenges Judas' frequent disparagement and slandering in Christian doctrine. Dupuy-Spencer understands Judas' vilification as standing in for the broader issue of how we represent evil as unnuanced and enshrined within a few scapegoated individuals. Aileen Wuornos is thereby aligned not just with the Medusa, but also with Judas. This unflinching, sweltering representation of Jesus and Judas' putrefying flesh offers viewers a moment of charged intimacy with its subjects, sidelined from but responding to the sublime annihilation represented in the adjacent polyptych. Freed from the man-made non-place of eternal life, Jesus and Judas' rotting flesh becomes a cathartic release, and their embrace becomes a relief.