FLORA
YUKHNOVICH
FÊTE
GALANTE
FLORA YUKHNOVICH (B.1990) graduated three years ago from City and Guilds of London Art School (2017), and has since been meticulously honing her painterly explorations of eighteenth century rococo art history through a committed studio practice and series of residencies.

_Fête galante_ emphasises a uniquely French dimension to Yukhnovich’s contemporary rococo. Recent residencies in Italy have helped her clarify what the rococo was for Paris as compared to Venice, the site of her next show. Over time, the differences have become manifest as two distinct compositional directions: one, the epic, _trompe l’œil_ ceiling frescoes of Tiepolo; and two, the bodily eroticism and pastoral foliage of Fragonard. It is the latter that dominates her aesthetic thinking on this occasion at Leeds Arts University.

_Une fête galante_, literally “elegant festival” or the “gardens of love,” was a genre coined in 1717 to accommodate Antoine Watteau’s reception piece into the French Academy because it neither fitted stylistically into conventional aesthetic categories nor into the traditional hierarchy of genres: history painting, portraiture, still-life and landscape. Yukhnovich’s paintings often oscillate between abstraction and figuration, and rarely attempt to fit neatly into a single classification. Indeed, many of the artists who have exhibited at Leeds Arts University Gallery could be described as “category errors” (Nicola Dale, Yoko Ono, Ilana Halperin, Samra Mayanja, and Mieke Bal to name a few), those whose research-practices do not fit the status quo and approach the world from alternative perspectives.
Yukhnovich’s interests extend to the twentieth century figurative abstractions of painters Joan Mitchell, Helen Frankenthaler and Dorothea Tanning, as well as the more historically recent corporeal concerns of painter Cecily Brown. Tanning’s epic *Chiens de Cythère* (*Dogs of Cythera*) (1963) owes its own aesthetic debts, not only to Watteau’s famous *fête galante*, *Embarkation for Cythera* (1717), but also to large scale history painting which she would have witnessed in French art museums. Yukhnovich’s visual research is similarly art book and museum-based, The Wallace Collection in London being a particular point of reference. Glimpses into her working methods of observation and repositioning can be found in her many smaller studies on paper.

In a literary vein, Yukhnovich has been delving into the eroticised fairy tales of Angela Carter. While Carter’s writing is often cited for its championing of the female gothic, Carter asserted that: “the short story is not minimalist, it is rococo” (1980). For example, in ‘The Bloody Chamber,’ Carter’s Bluebeard-type villain owns an extensive picture gallery which includes “his marvellous inheritance of Watteaus, Poussins and a pair of very special Fragonards, commissioned for a licentious ancestor” (2007, 17). Elsewhere, Carter’s highly somatic ‘The Snow Child’ (1979) bestows an eccentric palette that conjures a naked girl. Such ekphrastic writing and subversive femininity provide useful departure points for Yukhnovich.

Enchanted islands like *fêtes galantes* are recurrent motifs and serve as exuberant metaphors for her painterly imagination. In “The Enchanted Island” chapter of Philip Pullman’s epistemological dreamscape, *La Belle Sauvage* (2017), a malevolent and beautiful temptress, Diania, wet-nurses baby Lyra with fairy food in order to claim her for her own. At first sight, this strange passage appears to offer a caesura or fantasy interlude to the rest of the text. Yet, as rococo scholar Mary Sheriff argues: “far from being escapist reveries, representations of the enchanted island embodied those concerns in an especially powerful way that mobilised fantasy and directed readers and viewers toward particular moral, political, and cultural identifications” (2018, 2). This is true too for the paintings of Yukhnovich which critique the commodity cultures of eighteenth century France and twenty-first century England.

**Further Reading**

Study, 2020
Oil on paper, 21 × 14.5 cm

Study, 2020
Oil on paper, 21 × 14.5 cm
It’s Better Down Where It’s Wetter, 2018
Oil on linen, 230 × 230 cm
If All the World Were Jell-O, 2019
Oil on linen, 180 × 250 cm
Butter Wouldn't Melt, 2020
Oil on linen, 210 × 180 cm
Study, 2020
Oil on paper, 14.5 × 21 cm

Study, 2020
Oil on paper, 14.5 × 21 cm
A Glass and a Half, 2018
Oil on linen, 160 × 260 cm
Study 2020
Oil on paper, 21 × 14.5 cm
Study, 2020
Oil on paper, 14.5 × 21 cm

Study, 2020
Oil on paper, 21 × 14.5 cm
Warm, Wet N' Wild, 2020
Oil on linen, 210 × 180 cm
I’ll Have What She’s Having, 2020
Oil on linen, 170 × 220 cm
Fête galante is virtually untranslatable into English but was a new genre created by Watteau in the 1710s for the very specific needs of his elite clientele and pursued with success by his followers, Nicolas Lancret and Jean-Baptiste Pater. In some sense Watteau’s achievement lies behind all subsequent French painting in that century. Your own work shares Watteau’s concern for the contemporary moment and also his ironic detachment. When did you first discover his work and become interested in the possibilities of the French rococo?

My route to Watteau was through Fragonard, whose work first piqued my interest in eighteenth century art. I was drawn to a strange sense of familiarity that I felt when I looked at his paintings — I recognised the colours and the feeling, not from art history but from stylistic similarities to fairy tales, the toys I grew up playing with and so many prints and designs which were related to a nostalgic idea of femininity. The paintings seemed loaded with connections to my own life, in a way that really surprised me. So I have been tracking the rococo aesthetic back from the present day to its source in the eighteenth century, exploring its connection to ideas about women, finally arriving at Watteau and the fête galante.

Fêtes galantes depict scenes of play and seduction between richly dressed men and women in lush, glowing, fantasy garden settings. For this show, I have been exploring the sexual politics at play in these scenes, looking at Watteau and his followers who further eroticise the genre. I have taken the fête galante, where women are the object of male desire, as a starting point. Then, drawing inspiration from Katy Perry’s California Gurls music video, which I think offers a tongue in cheek, twenty-first century
exploration of the same themes, I attempt to reclaim and repurpose the genre to create a place of female pleasure, play and humour.

Early consumers of fête galante imagery privileged a concept of honnêteté, a code of noble conduct, a mode of being that prized ambiguity and malleability and the hiding of transparent meanings behind seductive surfaces. By the end of the eighteenth century nobility had shifted to mean plainness and bluntness and David’s austere neoclassicism epitomises this change. With that shift rococo art became condemned. It was the same moment that sought to limit the influence of women in the public sphere and artistic establishment in France. Does recovering the language of rococo art feel like embracing and critiquing an art that objectifies women or in some way recovering an art that offered a broader concept of gender roles?

I think the rococo style is still associated with a negative view of women as superficial and lowbrow, left over from the end of the eighteenth century, a message that is reinforced by its contemporary uses. In my work, I try to embrace the aesthetic and all that is coded feminine about it, but revise it to align it with a view of women which feels closer to my experience. That might be by undermining certain aspects which I find problematic or in other cases by drawing out positive, forgotten elements from the real rococo and its moment in history. So certainly, there is a sense of the real rococo offering a new perspective, one which is surprisingly representative of many of our present-day values.

At the same time, it is undoubtedly an art that objectifies women. The often highly sexualised female form is such a key part of the rococo aesthetic. Many of the popular narratives seem little more than vehicles for painting naked women. So naturally, these figures enter my paintings and it’s impossible not to think about the notion of objectification, both in the act of painting the figures and in the way a painting might be viewed. I do try to restore their agency by abstracting, breaking down the boundaries of the looked-at, solid figure, suggesting instead a pervasive, all-over sense of something uncontainable which permeates the paint on the surface. In a way, I’m using the excess of the rococo to suggest that there is ‘too much’ to be contained.

There can’t be many movements in art as hated and misunderstood as the ‘rococo.’ The entire concept of a ‘rococo’ style is the product of its critics like Diderot who associated it with artifice and the lack of truth, of promoting private vices over public virtues, and blurring the boundaries between the sexes. Their association between rococo and femininity, and all the eighteenth-century’s pejorative ideas around women—frivolous, false, trivial and so on—has been pervasive ever since. But before there was a ‘rococo’ of this kind, there was simply a ‘modern’ style that was profoundly contemporary. How do you see your work as critiquing those concepts of femininity that became entrenched in the eighteenth century?

Those thoughts about women are obviously extremely reductive and dehumanising. I want to use paint in a way which speaks of something bodily and therefore universal, which I hope might inspire some kind of empathy. In It’s Better Down Where It’s Wetter for example, I wanted to make something which simultaneously references the delicate, ornate gilding of the rococo, but also the power and sinew of the body. To me, there is something corporeal about paint and I’m interested in the way a painterly gesture can talk about the physical experience of touch in a visceral way, breaking down the distance between the viewer and work.

Much of your work evokes the art of François Boucher who in particular is denigrated yet his work seems more timely and modern than ever. It belongs to a historical moment that did not see or represent strict divisions between genders and who could depict both the female and male body as erotised. How do you see your own experiments with the politics of rococo aesthetics in relation to Boucher’s own moment?

It seems to me that contemporary expressions of the rococo are aimed mostly at women and often carry hyper-feminine connotations (just think of Disney princesses or Victoria’s Secret). It’s very interesting that there’s so much more ambiguity at play within its actual historical origins, and it is yet another way in which the rococo style has been distorted. I definitely want to re-establish that ambiguity in the work I make.

One way I try to do this is by searching for a language which sits between figuration and abstraction. I like the idea of combining these two art historical moments which have become highly gendered: the pretty rococo imagery and the machismo of abstraction. But really abstraction and figuration don’t feel separate to me. They are two different points in the same process, part of a spectrum which ranges from very loose, abstracted marks through to tightly articulated figuration. I do want the resulting paintings to remain open and ambiguous despite their figuration. The viewer has to fill in the looser areas in their mind and I hope that leads to a multiplicity of different readings.
You have described the “guilty pleasure” you feel when making your paintings. What is it that inspires the guilt as you work?

From an academic standpoint, I can look past the unfair bad reputation of the rococo but at the same time I am aware of how it is perceived in a wider cultural context. It is a signifier for a particular type of hyper-girlishness which, despite being something I enjoyed hugely as a child and which I take a lot of nostalgic pleasure from now, is certainly not how I would like to present myself in the world.

I think it is an important part of the idea of taste: that there are things we judge to be in good taste which we feel proud of because they represent values that we would like to align ourselves with, but we also have secret bad-taste pleasures which we conceal. So I suppose it’s more like shame than guilt — shame in the pleasure I take in things widely considered to be lowbrow or in poor taste. I find this a very productive kind of shame when I’m painting. The discomfort is endlessly interesting to me and I look for source material which delights me in a simple or nostalgic way against my better judgment. The conflict can act a bit like a motor, driving the work forward.

Your work is uncompromising in its concern for visual beauty and you have described the fleshy and visceral nature of your painting. The lack of completeness in your pictures requires the viewers to participate in them, it is impossible to be a passive consumer in front of one of your canvases. They assume a complicity on the part of the viewer who must engage actively in order to appreciate them and this, as you have said, implies some erotic element in itself, a seduction. Why do you think this aspect of rococo aesthetics, once so appreciated, makes contemporary viewers so uncomfortable?

The appeal of beauty is very basic, it’s unsophisticated, which paradoxically is what makes it so challenging. Perhaps because beauty is now so often used as a tool to sell us things, it can feel somehow cheap or untrustworthy. So in a way, it inherently brings with it a dynamic of resistance and temptation which is the nature of seduction. For me, enjoying beauty or sentimentality is often about letting go of ‘good judgement’ and allowing myself to revel in uncultivated pleasure for a moment. It’s a state of mind that I try to hold on to when I’m painting.

The great French theorist Roger De Piles upturned academic convention when he gave preference to colour in painting over line for colour’s ability to represent not just visible form but the invisible realm of emotion and feeling. Colorito describes the painterly use of colour in the hands of the artist for this purpose as opposed to raw colour. This Colorito is a hallmark of your own work and in the understanding of De Piles it is a positive quality but it has been persistently gendered as feminine and therefore condemned by rival theorists. Do you see your work as an attempt to recover the preeminence of these qualities and their capacity to communicate intellectual ideas?

Line speaks to me of delineation and separation, associated with rational measured thinking, whereas colour is contingent, relational and its openness appeals to me. When I use line, it is often to bring in an element which feels more artificial or constructed, usually referencing graphic imagery. Whereas colour underpins the entire composition. I find it a much more powerful tool for creating associations to other images or paintings which is such an important part of my work. Correctly matching a colour combination can make something instantly recognisable, but because it doesn’t rely on detail, it can also remain quite elusive, becoming a sort of known unknown.

Italian critics of the eighteenth century used the word fiorito to mean a florid style: one that is excessively sweet, artificial and ornamental. Your works in response to the rococo seem to push fiorito to its extreme limits and explore the point at which sweetness can no longer be tolerated before becoming oppressive. How do you find that point and avoid pushing beyond it?

At first, it can be difficult to lean into the sweetness. Part of me naturally recoils from the potential cheesiness of it, but once I’ve given myself permission, it’s wonderful to luxuriate in the vibrant colours and the creaminess of paint. I think that inner conflict keeps things in check. Each painting also takes about a month to make and I am constantly adding and taking away. The beauty of working with oil paint is that I can continuously revise. I can always take a step back if I’ve gone too far.
MATTHEW HARGRAVES specialises in the history of British art, especially the art of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He is the author a variety of publications including Candidates for Fame: The Society of Artists of Great Britain (Yale University Press, 2006); Great British Watercolors from the Paul Mellon Collection at the Yale Center for British Art (Yale Center for British Art, 2007); Varieties of Romantic Experience: British, Danish, Dutch, French, and German Drawings from the Collection of Charles Ryskamp (Yale Center for British Art, 2010); and A Dialogue with Nature: Romantic Landscapes from Britain and Germany (Paul Holberton, 2014). He is Chief Curator of Art Collections, Yale Center for British Art.

CATRIONA M'CARA is University Curator at Leeds Arts University. She has published extensively on the art and literature of Dorothea Tanning and Leonora Carrington with a particular interest in feminist-surrealism in contemporary practice. She recently curated 31 Women (January 2020) at the Sedona Arts Center, a contemporary version of Peggy Guggenheim's 1943 show. Catriona has written a range of catalogue essays for commercial galleries and public museums, including: 'Kaleidoscope Eyes' for Dorothea Tanning: Unknown but Knowable States, Gallery Wendi Norris, San Francisco (2013), and 'Millennial Rococo' for Flora Yukhnovich: Sweet Spot, Parafin, London (2019).

FLORA YUKHNOVICH
BORN 1990, NORWICH, UK
LIVES AND WORKS IN LONDON

Education
2016–17 MA Fine Art, City and Guilds of London Art School, UK
2009–10 Foundation in Art and Design, Kingston University, UK

Solo Exhibitions
2020 Victoria Miro Venice, Italy
‘Fête galante’, Leeds Arts University, Leeds, UK
2019 ‘Sweet Spot’, Parafin, London, UK
2017 Brocket Gallery, London, UK

Selected Group Exhibitions
‘Telescope’, curated by Nigel Cooke, Jerwood Gallery, Hastings, UK
2018 ‘Dialogues: New Painting from London’, GASK — Gallery of the Central Bohemian Region, Kutná Hora, Czech Republic
‘The Great Women Artists x Palazzo Monti’, Brescia, Italy

Selected Collections
The Government Art Collection, UK
David Roberts Art Collection, UK
Flora Yukhnovich — *Fête galante*  
28 February – 9 April 2020  
The Blenheim Walk Gallery  
Leeds Arts University  
leeds-art.ac.uk

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