



## HYPERALLERGIC

### Review: Angela Dufresne Tells a Different Story

By John Yau  
February 20, 2021

*"I cannot think of another narrative painter as expansive, surprising, funny, unsettling, tender, wacky, challenging, theatrical, and radically imaginative as Angela Dufresne."*

A lot of narrative painters have gained attention over the past decade, but I cannot think of one who is as expansive, surprising, funny, unsettling, tender, wacky, challenging, theatrical, and radically imaginative as Angela Dufresne. A longtime veteran of the New York art scene, she has exhibited regularly since the beginning of this century. However, this is the first time I have seen a substantial group of her large paintings in an exhibition with her small ones.

In *Angela Dufresne: Long and Short Shots*, her debut at Yossi Milo Gallery (January 14 – March 13, 2021), the artist exhibits two dozen works that run the gamut in size from 12 by 9 inches to 9 by 12 feet. This range enables the artist to stretch out and show her dexterity with paint. It is in the large paintings that Dufresne is able to attain a convincing cinematic space — creating a sense of continuous perception that collapses near and far — rather than conventional pictorial space in which clarity diminishes the further away objects get.

Dufresne's masterful translation of cinematic space into a painting's flat surface is immediately apparent in "Sex Monster Sea Monster" (oil on canvas, 80 by 108 inches, 2020), which was the first painting I saw when I walked into the gallery. On the adjacent wall is "Gena Rowlands" (oil on canvas, 80 by 120 inches, 2020), a close-up view of the movie actress. Together, they signaled that I was about to go on a wild ride.

As the exhibition's title suggests, the paintings alternate between close-up views of a face — usually the blond Rowlands — and distant views of a clearly defined space brimming with all kinds of figures, from a row of naked boys gleefully peeing from a balcony to a variety of sea life cavorting among humans who seem perfectly at home underwater.

Dufresne applies the paint differently for her "long and short shots," ostensibly crowd scenes and headshots. In the first "Gena Rowlands" that I saw, she used a loaded brush and confident, unhesitating movements to emphasize the reverse S flip of the actress's hair, as well as her red lips and inward-looking eyes.

Dufresne does not repeat the same expression, hairdo, or position of the head in any of the exhibition's six "Gena Rowlands" paintings (three large and three small). This suggests that each of us is a changeable being who contains, to quote Walt Whitman, "multitudes."

In "Sex Monster Sea Monster," Dufresne lays down a washy field of meandering brushstrokes in rust brown, turquoise, and blue. The watery strokes echo the subject matter, the shifting currents of an underwater domain populated by an outlined Amtrak train filled with passengers, partly visible in the painting's upper right quadrant.

Filling the rest of the painting, which comes close to an all-over composition, are Dufresne's linear overlays of sea

# M + B

creatures and humans engaged in various activities, from raking a skull to scuba diving; on the right, a woman in her underwear looks up at a grinning shark. Meanwhile, the rust brown and turquoise evoke the watery domain, and the detritus we might dredge up from a harbor.

The interaction between the ground and the figures is slippery and shifting. The brown and turquoise brushstrokes can briefly parallel a figure's contours before changing direction. Nothing seems fixed; everything is in motion.

In this science-fiction domain, where all manner of life cohabits in a visual hubbub, Dufresne achieves an open-ended narrative in which her delight in invention supersedes any story we might come up with.

No matter where we begin looking, our eye is likely to settle on a complete detail, such as the tiny figures scattered along the painting's bottom edge or the faces and bodies seen in the spaces between bigger figures or made by the contours of the large sea creatures and humans. The outlines of some figures are thick and bold, while others are painted with a thin stroke. Faint lines evoke faces and limbs peering through the washy ground. It is astonishing how many different sized, clearly defined animal and human figures Dufresne can get into a composition and still make the scene feel airy and open.

In "Golden Showers of Love" (oil on canvas, 108 by 144 inches, 2019) — the most outrageous work in the exhibition, which I would like to see installed in the lobby of the Museum of Modern Art — the washy ground consists of pale yellows, light greens, and faint cerulean blues. As in "Sex Monster Sea Monster," the colors echo the subject, which is a row of naked young boys standing on a second-floor, iron-gated balcony happily pissing into bowls being carried by various adults on the street below.

Does the piss become a precious elixir? It certainly seems so, though Dufresne — to her credit — never tries to explain what we are seeing. The scene is celebratory and guiltless.

A cat-like creature painted in thin lines is integrated into the building's architecture above the boys, and presides over the composition. While the boys and the adults below occupy the middle third of the painting, there are plenty of other vignettes and details to dwell on, such as a monkey riding a dog, jockey-style, in the painting's lower right-hand corner. In a car stopped before the crowd collecting the pee in similar bowls, the driver reads a book.

Another detail viewers might notice as they scan the painting is the word "Dhalgren," which is written on a balloon-like form. Dhalgren is the title of a 1975 science fiction novel by Samuel R. Delany about Bellona, an American city cut off from the rest of the country for unknown reasons. This isolation allows Delaney to create an alternative world, something that Dufresne also does in her work.

In Dufresne's alternative worlds, guilt, shame, and self-hatred are no longer operating principles. The prelapsarian society she creates is incorruptible and joyous, but not sugarcoated.

The upper left corner of the atmospheric yellow and blue "Opera for the Forlorn" (oil on canvas, 84 by 132 inches, 2019) contains a movie screen cropped by the painting's top and left edges. According to the onscreen title, the audience is about to watch Miklós Jancsó's *The Red and the White* (1967), an anti-heroic film about the Russian Civil War that used cinemascope and the long shot in a novel way, which called into question what was happening.

While we, as viewers, see the screen with the two mounted soldiers in the foreground, everyone within this multi-tiered painting is looking toward us, or elsewhere. The scene seems to be a stage setting in the round. In the center, two people support a gender fluid figure standing on a table situated on what could be a balcony or part of the stage. Gender fluidity in Dufresne's work replaces the binaries of male and female. The painting's multiple focal points shift with ease as our attention wanders over the surface, seeing various entry points into the composition. Directly below the movie screen is a banner that reads, "Next Week/The 2020's/Dolly Parton/Dying Day." Is this an announcement for a forthcoming stage production, musical performance, or a competition of some kind?

# M+B

What other artist can achieve this kind of shifting and ambiguous space in painting, where everything can be conceived in multiple ways? The fluidity of Dufresne's spaces and identities are directly in touch with seismic shifts taking place in society in the ways that identity is perceived and expressed. An ambitious artist who has pushed her work into fresh territory over the many years have written about it, it is clear to me — and, I think, to anyone who looks at it — that in her crowd scenes Dufresne has defined a festive, episodic, multilayered space all her own.