

# ARTFORUM



Ella Kruglyanskaya, *White Columns*, 2015, oil on linen, 90 × 72"

Ella Kruglyanskaya  
THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Ella Kruglyanskaya wants to be a great painter, so she says, not "a good woman artist." Although her paintings are largely populated by women and her 2012 exhibition at Gavin Brown's Enterprise was called "Women! Painting! Women!," her subjects may be less important and less unusual than the style in which they are conveyed. "I arrived at my current practice by a method of elimination," the Latvian-born, New York-based artist says. "Gradually I figured out things that I was not interested in. The women came from drawing from the imagination, not from life."

Her words drawing and imagination are key notions for the ten paintings and six drawings—yes, almost all of women—on view in her recent exhibition "Fancy Problems." For example, *Puppeteers with a Big Face* (all works cited, 2015) is a picture of two women—presumably the puppeteers—holding a large drawing of a female face between them. One figure looks sternly out of the corners of her eyes, while the other glances at her. The large, manga-like sketch comprising most of the image is rendered in blue on white ground and depicts another woman looking at the first one. A white, chalklike line on the black ground constructs the bodies of the women, suggesting a quick sketch in contrast with the more detailed quality of their colorfully painted faces. Is the image intended to suggest women taking charge of their own representation, or that both women and their representations are fictions? In *Artist Drawing a Face in Profile*, a painter, oil stick in hand, contemplates the portrait she's been working on, while in *Painter, Exhausted*, the artist sits slumped in her armchair, paintbrush on the floor below her limp arm. Perhaps it's a jibe at Matisse's famous notion of his paintings as an armchair for the tired businessman.

In tandem with her questioning of representation, Kruglyanskaya's imagery is pervaded by a concern with acts of looking. Her women often give sidelong glances, as if to observe their viewers covertly—thereby suggesting their own self-awareness. In *White Columns*, two yellow-legged, fishnet-stockinged women in smocks are partially hidden by seemingly quickly painted pillars. One peers as the other walks by. Are they hiding from each other or from us? Precisely because Kruglyanskaya imagines an all-female world this time, her idea of the gaze is not necessarily oriented toward gender; the scopic act that concerns her is perhaps more related to consuming art—thus her recurrent motif of pictures within pictures, drawings within paintings.

With its bold gestural lines and flat, filled-in color, Kruglyanskaya's style is languid yet brash. The works in this show share a visual language that belongs as much to illustration as to art—recalling a *New Yorker* or *Punch* cartoon even while conjuring references to Alex Katz or to Elvira Bach, a German neo-expressionist who painted confrontational women. There's even a pinch of R. Crumb—another notable purveyor of robust, voluptuous dames—in the mix. But Kruglyanskaya's style transcends both art and illustration in its pared-down embrace of imaginative figures: At the show, it was the singer Grace Jones who popped to mind, an icon whose celebrity is based as much on her bold, defiant image as it is on the pulsing rhythm of her music. She often takes a confrontational stance toward her public, daring us to look. In their own way, so do Kruglyanskaya's women.