

Susan Eley

Fine Art

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

JANUARY 1, 2023

***Fire & Flurry***  
**Deirdre O'Connell & Jackie Shatz**

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Susan Eley Fine Art, NYC  
190 Orchard Street, New York, NY, 10002

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January 4—February 11, 2023  
Opening Reception: Thursday, January 19th, 6-8PM

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Susan Eley Fine Art is pleased to announce the opening of *Fire & Flurry*—an exhibition of recent paintings and sculptures by Deirdre O'Connell and Jackie Shatz. This is the second exhibition at SEFA's new Gallery on the Lower East Side since our relocation from our Upper West Side space, founded in 2006 by Susan Eley. SEFA NYC is located at 190 Orchard Street, just south of Houston Street. This space is in the heart of the LES arts district, and we are honored to join this vibrant creative community.

*Fire & Flurry* will open to the public on Wednesday, January 4th. There will be a reception at the LES Gallery with both artists present on Thursday, January 19th from 6-8PM. Hours for SEFA NYC are Tuesday-Saturday, 11AM-6PM. Our location in Upstate New York will continue its regular hours and programming at 433 Warren Street, Hudson, NY. Our next exhibition at SEFA Hudson opens on January 5th, and this show will feature new works by Mike Childs and James Isherwood.

Both artists' series in this exhibition were previously presented at SEFA Hudson with much success. *Fire & Flurry* is an opportunity to bring their work to a new audience in downtown NYC. Additionally, presented in this new conceptual context—O'Connell's and Shatz's oeuvres enrich the reading of their works. They depict strong and singular beings—perhaps intimately scaled talismans. Collectively, they unite totemic figures, radiating their ethereal—almost goddess-like—energies.

On the first floor of the Gallery, the mixed-media paintings of O'Connell intermingle with the ceramic sculptures of Shatz. They are grouped organically, where gilded actresses converse with ancient figures. In the space downstairs, O'Connell's series of "Eves" lines one wall; their distinctly feminine traits are both echoed and abstracted by Shatz. Her clay sculptures are suspended on the facing wall—mysterious entities made of the earth. The ornamentation, sheen and individuality of O'Connell's subjects contrast with the rawness and rough hewn texture of Shatz' ceramics.

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Deirdre O’Connell’s figures on wood panel and on paper, are adorned with metallic leaf, lace, fabric, beads and more. The women stand strong and confident. Hung in dynamic groupings or clean lines—they are sisters of sorts, facing the world together. Rendered in full frontal bearing, the “Eves” are often unabashedly nude with direct eye contact and unapologetic expressions: hands lay over their chests in prayer, exclaim above their heads or rest aside their faces. Each woman has unique costuming or props: extravagant headwear, a snake or floral wrapping around the body that hugs their full hips. Gold lacy belts—a mixed media element—drape across their abdomens and breasts. Several women have apples on their heads, referencing the Garden of Eden, and many wear masks, a nod to the Pandemic.

Recently, O’Connell has focused on portraits of individuals. Her newest paintings feature the characters within her daily life: writers, producers, actors and more. These people are significant to the artist, who is deeply enmeshed in the New York City theater world. Yet, their decorative qualities endow them with a pure visual pleasure, able to be appreciated by all. *Heidi* reclines on a couch against a leafy wallpaper; *Marin* contorts upward with her black boot in the air; *Annie* confronts the viewer with a wise maternal gaze.



*Fire & Flurry* marks Jackie Shatz’s second exhibition with Susan Eley Fine Art. Following her debut with the Gallery in Summer 2021 in *Earthen Energies, Ancient Roots* at SEFA Hudson. For Shatz, artworks will be drawn from her series of earthenware sculptures. Her ceramics, which she considers both paintings and sculptures, are intimately-scaled. They hang on the wall, casting dramatic shadows that shift as the light changes throughout the day. Shatz’s works primarily depict human and humanoid forms that seemingly dance, twist and contort. Grouped together, the biomorphic shapes are leaning, reaching, floating and bending—as if engaged in an exuberant waltz. Often rendered in neutral tones, Shatz’s figures evoke the earliest human creations—sculptures of female goddesses. They appear to reference works such as the famed Venus of Willendorf, a Paleolithic “Venus figurine” carved in stone, or perhaps early Minoan and Cycladic sculptures of fertility goddesses from Ancient Greece: smooth, graceful, natural—an elegant icon, yet an animated one.

In her home and studio in Tappan, NY, Shatz has shelves of her ceramics—both completed pieces and the “scraps” that she will employ in her constructions. There is a kiln in her garage, and every piece has a truthful, handmade quality that reflects the intuitive approach of the artist. For Shatz, her figures are mystical entities. The ambiguous beings occupy a liminal space: between past and present, between human and animal, between animate and inanimate,

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between body and soul. The bright scarlet head of *Flower Girl* mingles with the suspended, abstracted horses rendered in a neutral palette. *Mothwoman* leans toward *Little Eve*, her pale green snake fused within her reclining body. The aptly titled *Leafwoman* rests on her own—a hybrid of Shatz’s inspirations, shaped and colored by her intuition.



The aesthetics and influences of O’Connell and Shatz reflect those described in the writing of Hélène Cixous, the French writer, playwright, philosopher and feminist. In her text about contemporary artist Nancy Spero, Cixous refers to the “Woman-cast” of Spero’s figurative artworks. Through her depictions of strong women rooted in classical mythology, Spero moved beyond history and beyond space, as there was “no point in using the old stage.” Cixous writes:

*Where do the acrobatic flights take us? To the borderless depths, without bottom, without age, where, by gyrating on the tightrope and soliciting lost and recovered time, by conjuring millennia past and future, by prophesizing the end of terror and the birth of a new body, they manage to hallucinate the return of the good goddess... Unliked, absolute coming from all countries, naughty, How delicious and gracious they are, those bodies that resist being thwarted.*<sup>1</sup>

Press Release Text by Liz Lorenz, Assistant Director

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<sup>1</sup> Cixous, Hélène, “Spero’s Dissidences,” *Museu d’Arti Contemporani de Barcelona*, 2008, p. 146

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## DEIRDRE O'CONNELL

### BIOGRAPHY:

Deirdre O'Connell was born in Philadelphia and raised in Pittsfield, MA. She is a self-trained artist, who attended the Studio School, NYC in 2003. Since 2007, O'Connell has been featured in numerous solo, two-person and group exhibitions at SEFA's New York City and Upstate locations. She has also exhibited her work at the Gallery at Jimmy's Number 43, NYC and the Broderick Fine Art Gallery, Freehold, NY.

Deirdre O'Connell's series of small paintings, shown since 2007 with SEFA, are inspired by the works of Russian playwright Anton Chekhov. O'Connell's passion for Chekhov's texts is more than that of an avid playgoer. O'Connell is a well-known actress who has appeared in many Chekhov productions as a stage and film actress. O'Connell moves her characters from stage to the canvas, giving them an eternal role in a perpetual performance. The artist's paintings evoke Medieval icons in their small scale, golden hues, built up paint, flat perspective and deliberately distorted anatomy.

More recently, O'Connell has created a series of individual women, triggered by the 2016 election of Donald Trump and the ensuing Women's March on Washington, leading to her current body of work of portraits of women colleagues, friends and family.

In 2022, O'Connell won the Tony Award for Best Performance by an Actress in a Leading Role in a Play for the production *Dana H*. The New York Times wrote in a review: "It is, or at first appears to be, a rather basic documentary work, which consists almost entirely of a recorded interview with the title character. The subject is Dana Higginbotham, a Florida hospice chaplain—and the playwright's mother—who was held hostage for five months by a psychotic client, and who is indeed telling her own story. But while it is Higginbotham's voice we hear, she is not the woman who appears onstage. We see instead the wonderful actress Deirdre O'Connell, who mouths, with near-perfect specificity, what is said on the recording. It is, in other words, a deliberately limited performance, stripped of a whole layer of interpretation that O'Connell might bring to the part if she were allowed to speak it herself."

### ARTIST STATEMENT:

*"Making is a form of protection." - Liza Lou*

With a few exceptions, I have always felt hesitant to paint portraits of people, especially close friends and family. It felt like a responsibility that I wasn't sure I was up to. So, until this newest

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series of works, most of the people I painted were ultimately from my imagination—a safer road somehow.

Around the middle of the pandemic lockdown, when there was so much wonderful unbroken time for painting, I was also getting smacked around by the loneliness we were all experiencing—the isolation. Making the portraits displayed in *Fire & Flurry* was like pounding a little window in the wall of that isolation. A way to think about my friends and family and to be considering their faces and their hands and their bodies and their gazes. A way to be in a room with them again.

I found myself thinking about what would be a good gift for the person that I was painting. A nice fainting couch for an overworked mother. A trip to Paris, France and a cigarette break. A dance party in the snow with your baby on your back. It was a bleak time, and we all needed some pleasure.

I often started with found photographs that had nothing to do with the person I was making the portrait of. Then, I asked friends to send me screenshots of themselves to draw from. And sometimes (rarely), I got to actually sit and draw the person in good old fashioned person.

There was a lot of sketching and printing the sketches and cutting out those printouts—collaging them and painting over those and scraping them away—then painting on top of that until something emerged from the mess.

I have to thank the damn pandemic. Without it, I would have felt too shy to make these. With it, they were the only thing to do.

—Deirdre O’Connell, 2022

**Excerpt from Artist Statement on the “Eves” series:**

I thought the world was turned upside down when I started this body of work right after the 2016 presidential election. Little did I know. I had gone to the Woman's March in Washington, D.C. and stood in a huge crowd of women silently looking through a chain-link fence at the White House in the distance. That was when I first thought of what I wanted to make; a quiet, fierce row of ladies, a wall of protection, a wall of Eves.

The initial drawings began as many drafts on paper that I photographed on my iPad, worked on with a painting app, printed out, drew over again and finally cut out and glued onto wood as the first of many layers of acrylic paint, water soluble crayons and pencils, gold and silver leaf, fabric and lace, glitter and jewelry that make up the work. Each painting goes through many stages, and I find myself going back and forth between working digitally and detailed handwork with the elements.

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While working on them, I thought a lot about depictions of Eve, icons and altars. I thought about hiding and revealing, protecting and challenging. Some began with a specific protection, spell or hope in mind; protection from a violent man, help in getting or not getting pregnant, relief from sickness. Some revealed their meaning to me slowly, some are still a mystery.

The work of making them was a salve in a hard but galvanizing time. I hope that looking at them offers up some of that. I've been painting these outraged, quiet, protective, slightly obsessive pictures of Eve for four years now. How oddly fitting that this show will finish up this November when maybe she can breathe a sigh of relief.

—Deirdre O'Connell, 2020



## JACKIE SHATZ

### BIOGRAPHY:

Jackie Shatz is a sculptor, painter, teacher and lecturer. She attended Bennington College and earned a BFA degree in painting (*magna cum laude*) and an MFA degree in sculpture from Hunter College, NY. Shatz feels that her recent pieces exist between painting and sculpture; stillness and movement; and figuration and abstraction. The dimensions of her sculptures allow one to look into an intimate space. The artist believes that her works reflect the scale and narratives of Ancient and Medieval art. Shatz currently lives and works in Tappan, NY.

Shatz's work has been displayed in numerous solo and group shows. Recent presentations at New York City galleries include exhibitions at June Kelly, Monique Knowlton and Kouros. She has also curated and organized many exhibitions, including *CollageLogic*, which was last presented in 2012, at Hampden Gallery, at UMass, in Amherst, MA. Shatz is a recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Individual Fellowship, a Craft Alliance New Techniques grant and several NYFA SOS grants. She has been artist-in-residence at the Kohler Arts/Industry program, where she created a series of music box sculptures and has collaborated on sound and sculptural installations for Glyndor Gallery, at Wave Hill and on Governors Island—all in NY. Shatz has taught and lectured at many educational and cultural institutions, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Her work has been reviewed by *The New York Times*, *The New York Daily News* and *The Village Voice*, among other notable publications.

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**ARTIST STATEMENT:**

My wall sculptures involve suspended states of being and the permeable nature of time. The images of swimming, floating and "about to" gestures imply anticipation, hesitancy, anxiety or relief from anxiety. I did not set out to express specific qualities - they emerged from the selection of the figures and the creation of the pieces themselves. The meanings are hidden like the meanings in dreams.

These works ride the edge between painting and sculpture; between stillness and movement; between the figurative and the abstract. The dimensions of the sculptures allow one to look into an intimate space; they owe a debt to the scale and narratives of archaic and Medieval art.

These sculptures are part of a continuing series of reimagining symbols of the past about forces of history and nature and creating contemporary sculptural archetypes. They forge a bridge between past icons of art by reimagining them as icons with contemporary relevance. Ideas of transformation, anthropomorphism and myth are implied.

—Jackie Shatz, 2022