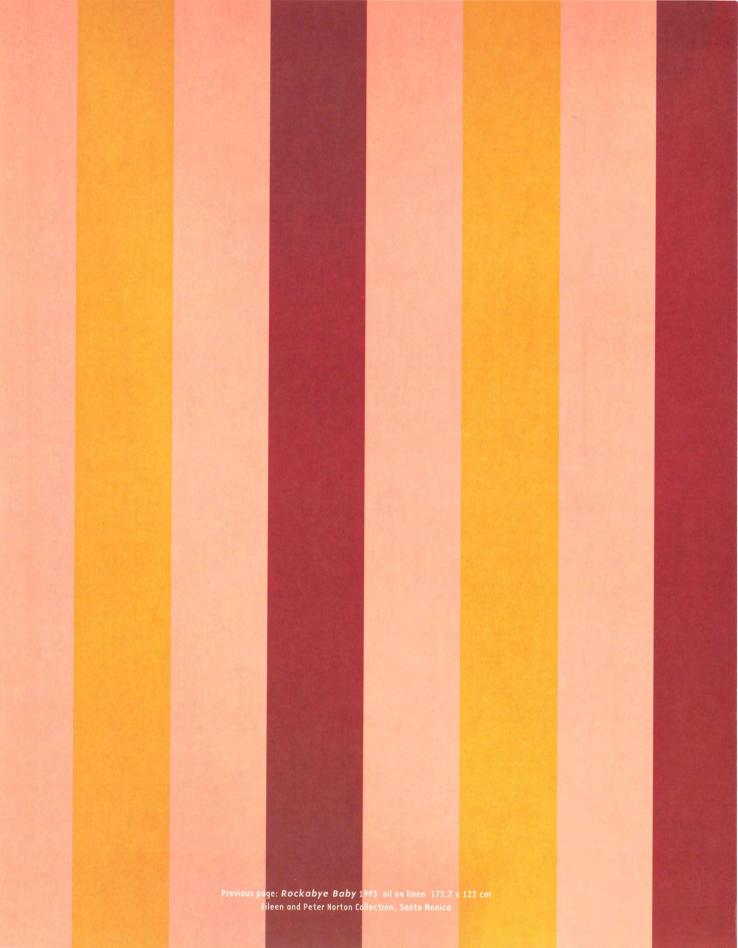








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GEORGANNE DEEN

pain killers

Philip Monk

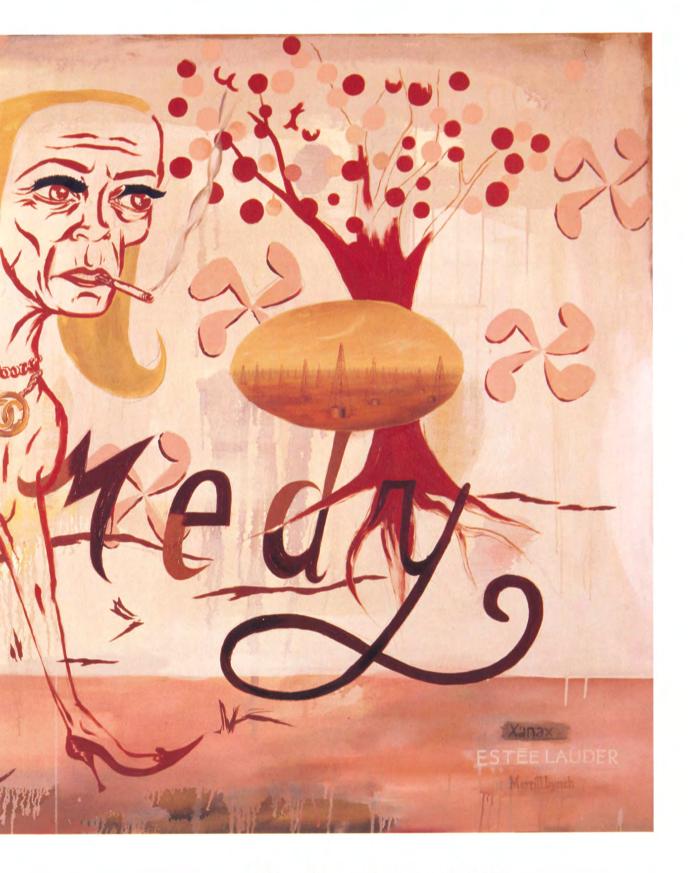


The Power Plant

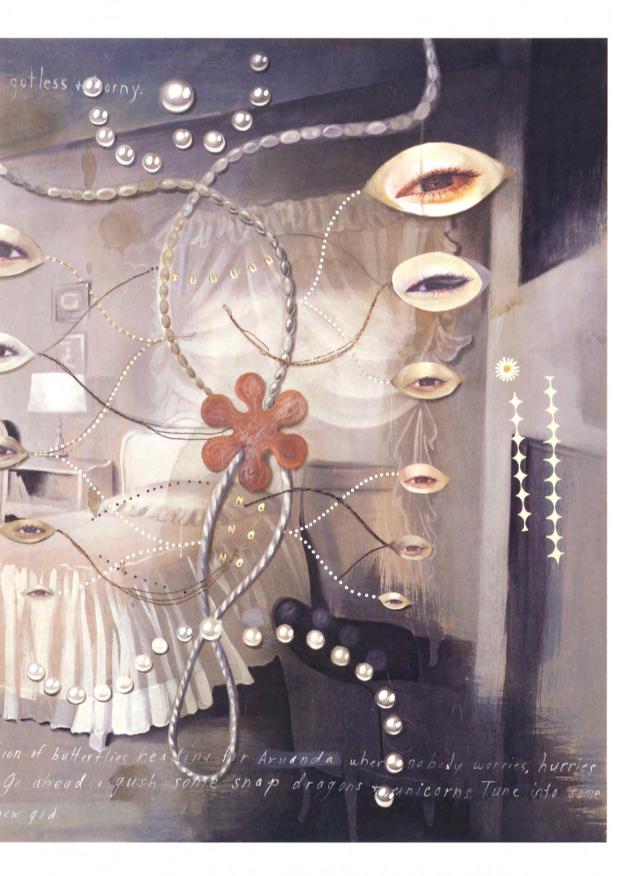
Contemporary Art Gallery at Harbourfront Centre

26 June - 7 September 1998

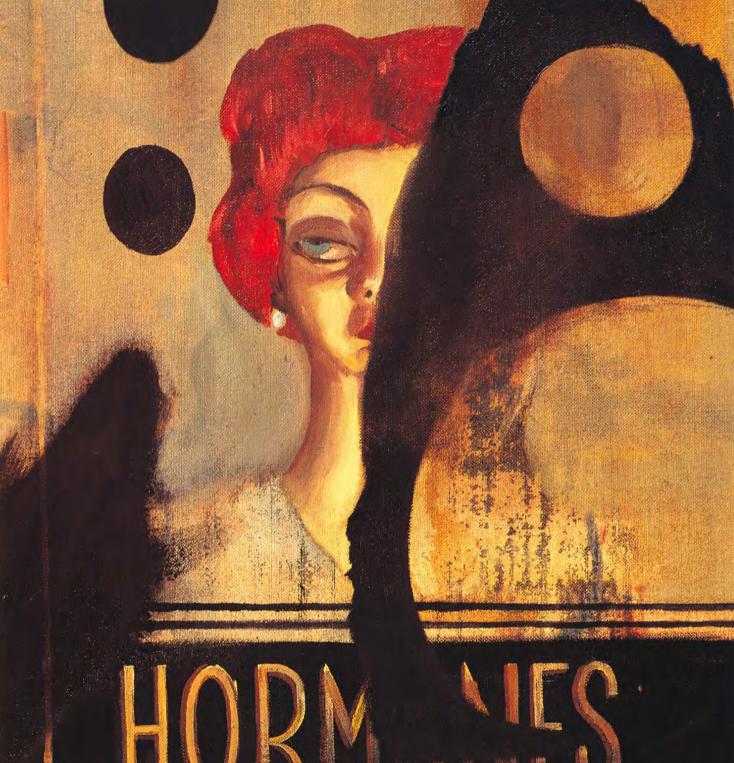




taste acid, angel dustrespeed. I'm Shhhh ... Breathe. PARIS or begs. Light upon a dinner plate you never have to work aga NEW YORK Kettle drums by Shiaparelli.



Thru the Super Mirror 1996 oil and collage on linen 172.7 x 274.3 cm
Collection of Tom Patchett



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pain killers

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Bad Mothers and False Gods: The Paintings of GEORGANNE DEEN

In the midst of her excoriating images of self-exposure, the phrase "thank you" appears in a number of Georganne Deen's recent paintings, as if the artist politely acknowledges our interest as spectators. The words float there ambiguously, like so many of the slogans, logos, emblems, and products that embellish her paintings. So repeated, the phrase seems to be meaningless verbiage, like the "Thank you, have a nice day!" printed on a cash register receipt. Given the nature of these paintings, perhaps the refrain is more like the rattled reply of a rube who has been insulted or a gull who has been duped. Or, more self-consciously ironic, the expression could be shorthand for "Where the *** did that come from?" Actually, Georganne Deen's reply is genuine . . . genuine, if we think of it appended to one of Nietzsche's epigrams: "What does not kill me only makes me stronger"—Thank you! Georganne Deen is not afraid to expose her traumas in her paintings or shy to admit in person any autobiographical facts to fill in the details. But we don't need to know her sorry relationship with her mother, for instance, to recognize her background and to identify with it, even if the artist herself may have suffered "the works," as one writer has stigmatized her upbringing. The bedroom settings of a number of these paintings neatly localize their themes in the family and suburbs. So stageset, the scenes are more than autobiographical: Georganne Deen allegorizes a past shared by a generation. As in many allegories, the privileged narrative here relates to the stages of life. In most of her paintings, time spent usually seems like an adolescent limbo to

their implied subjects. Any passage there is typically of the downward-spiral sort: "let me take you down," one of these paintings ominously quotes.

Like all allegories, Deen's have an iconographic system. Each painting in a series contributes to this whole, elaborating on the series' founding symbols, so to speak. (Each of Deen's series, as well, has its own style or decorative mode.) Her paintings assume this somewhat old-fashioned, anti-naturalistic genre, but only because the allegorical form is so effective for telling stories with images, symbols, and text. With the addition of a number of subsequent works from 1997, the Power Plant presentation summarizes Georganne Deen's last three exhibitions—The Mother Load (1994), The Mind Hospital (1996), and Thru the Super Mirror (1997)—by means of a selection of emblematic works from each.

The only pleasure a melancholic permits himself, and it is a powerful one, is allegory.

WALTER BENJAMIN

Rockabye Baby, Legacy for Womanhood, Mary's Lane: Family Room. Duty/Pretty Miss, and The Learning Tree from The Mother Load exhibition that title so freighted with ambivalent feelings-establish a theme for that exhibition of the burden of inheritance. The artist seems to experience this burden mainly as a lack. We all share this legacy to different degrees, whether it is genetically passed on by Mom and Pop, learned in the family milieu, or offered as support by the customs and traditions of our society. The child is caught in a double bind, forced to conform to that which rejects her. A sense of abandonment is graphically portrayed by Deen in Rockabye Baby (1993)—and the related Legacy for Womanhood (1992)—where the chain-smoking, offspringrejecting, lullaby-fulfilling mother violently hacks off her own limb, which the baby's cradle hangs from, rather than nurture her own child. In The Learning Tree (1993), the intimacy of the motherdaughter relationship is corrupted to "companions in these lies," the bitter fruits of which, depicted in the tree, are passed on from mother to daughter. Meanwhile, what moral guidance the child should take into womanhood is signified in Legacy for Womanhood by various virtues—love, courage, beauty, and truth-that are shown in an allegorical inversion respectively as a bloodspattered toilet from a miscarriage or abortion, a money bag, surgical forceps, and a drug fix. Issue of a self-absorbed mother, this daughter has a dowry of useless accoutrements and rejected values.

Deen's paintings are allegories of origin and identity, along the lines, a century earlier, of Gauguin's symbolist masterpiece Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?

Deen's excavations into the traumas of an adolescence in suburban Fort Worth, Texas, have none of Gauguin's idyllic trappings, though. Despite the cosmetic sheen of her images, Deen paints a corrosive picture of family life and the places we come from. A more contemporary allegorist, given

as well to a more entropic imagination than Gauguin, the late Robert Smithson, liked to give the etymology of suburbia as literally "a city below." Georganne Deen works this subterranean theme. Mining the mother lode unearths a hellish mother load. Deen delves into the underground resources that feed this manic selfishness. In Rockabye Baby, she appropriates the prime Romantic symbol of the tree, and its connotations of nurturing origin, to contrast the behaviour of the unnatural mother. She further undermines the fertile symbolism of the tree by flattening the picture plane to create an illustrational crosssection of the earth. This device turns the picture from a Romantic symbol into an allegorical representation and exposes the dirty secretsvices rather than virtues—festering underground. As Walter Benjamin wrote of the Baroque allegorists, Deen "drags the essence of what is depicted out before the image, in writing, as a caption, such as, in the emblem-books, forms an intimate part of what is depicted." So in the painting we find both visual and verbal representations of "confusion," "waste," and "blind cruelty." As these artists of sixteenth and seventeenth centuries did, Deen likewise appends an "explanation" to the bottom of her memento mori. More or less autobiographical, it embroiders her history into the lyrics of the lullaby:

Rockabye Baby in the trees, in the hills, on top of tha heap Your daddy's Rich & your mama's goodlookin But she drinks too much & takes pills & her house is on fire & you weigh too much & you cry too much & she has a new boyfriend & You look like your dad who has a New wife & a daughter that's better than you So Rockabye Baby You're gonna take a fall but it won't be far from the tree & you'll try to get up & you'll try to get away But you'll find that you're chainganged to her DNA & your sentence is: life (but it's always Death Row) & your good behavior is rewarded with mockery, your tears with ridicule & your anger with jeers But hush little Baby now don't you cry cause you're gonna learn how to lie & go blind & dumb & Blond & Forget what you were cryin about VERSUS: Get up on all fours & Howl from Vertebrae to vertebrae Howl From Nerve to Nerve Get those Synapses Saluting your Will Like a speedboat
To Love Like a Siren Tell Her Goodbye.

Mary's Lane: Family Room (1993) shifts the scene from the dyadic relationship of mother-daughter to its context, the suburban teenager's bedroom, the vein American horror flicks readily tap. This painting presents an adolescent fright show by registering pubescent anxieties. Instead of guidance, the adolescent is offered false choices by consumer society as if thrown into a forest of signs. The libidinal licence of the marketplace stands in as a displaced authority for parental absence. Decorative cartouches that are also product insignia—those of the luxury department store Neiman Marcus, or the top-of-the-line Cadillac—masquerade as jewellery pendants; but these lures mask the determinism of biological destiny for the female child visible to her in the natural world. Her genetic horror is that she is not just "chainganged" to her mother's DNA, but also condemned to continue the female line, with the dread of consequence we have already read into the other paintings.

It is not that Deen's paintings offer coherent allegorical systems so much as they present recognizable figures that stand in for

characters we all know, as if they were caricatures from Saturday-morning, or Sunday-evening, cartoons. While the subjects of her paintings are personal, they are of private issues publicly understood. After all, there are only so many psychological dynamics initiated by familial structures.

So paintings such as The Divine Anti-Comedy (1995) and A Child's Garden of Criticism (1996) from The Mind Hospital exhibition somewhat depersonalize her family story, while still making reference to it, in more formal and hieratic presentations of its imagery. The paintings set up the cast of characters of both matriarchal and patriarchal

lines. In the quasi-mythic *The Divine Anti-Comedy*, with its Roman and Dantesque references, we recognize the bitch mother with her ubiquitous cigarette, fashionable heels, and Chanel necklace, whose only nurturing is the bitter

spotlight thrown on the vignette of sibling rivalry. The nuclear family is completed in the painting by a visual synecdoche for the fittingly absent father in the oil-field image suggesting the fantasy catch of a Texas

oilman by the predatory female. "The divine anti-comedy"

title inscribed on the painting is an example of allegorical inversion, as the subject gains psychic control through language over the domination by the other, the selfaggrandizing mother. Small victory. The child is side-swiped

in A Child's Garden of Criticism by the serpent in the garden, namely the father's hydra-headed family, whose crude commentary we can read in cartoon thought bubbles. The aim of The Mind Hospital seems to be to turn this external, then internalized, onslaught of criticism into the self-care of self-understanding. If the "mind hospital" is the head, the painting—a sick painting—offers a "spatial" image of its psychological dynamics as an allegorical representation.

If the paintings of *The Mother Load* raged against the mother with the sotto voce irony of the daughter blown up to the full scale of a rhetorical image, there is now in *The Mind Hospital* an ambiguity whether language or image refer to the mother or the daughter. Perhaps finally the daughter has absorbed the "lessons" and legacy of the mother, even to the self-medication implied in these paintings. Who surrenders to the cosmetic packaging of *I Give Up*: the daughter, or the organs of the alcoholic mother?

The exhibition Thru the Super Mirror, its title an ironic conflation of Lewis Carroll's fable and Lacanian psychoanalytic terminology, once again dramatizes the bedroom as a site of fantasy and the symbolic region, in retrospect, to work through trauma. This is no intimiste interior but rather a crucible of mental conflagration on the order of Delacroix's Death of Sardanapalus, even though Deen's interiors neatly retain their flounces and frills. Who says that teenage consciousness cannot partake of the same splendour and excess of destructive impulses? Actually, the bedroom is the place of the adolescent's final seduction. Two of the three major paintings of the exhibition, Little Bang (1996) and Thru the Super Mirror (1996), depict bedrooms that are the mirror reflection of each other (based on the one actually shared by Deen and her older sister). A battle for the soul is waged there. As if navigating between Scylla and Charybdis, the drug-fractured consciousness of the adolescent vacillates between the reality given at the top of the painting Thru the Super Mirror—"I taste acid, angel dust, and speed. I'm driven by greed. I'm gutless and horny"—and the fantasy played across the bottom—"Go ahead & gush some snapdragons & unicorns. Tune into some kettle drums by S[c]hiaparelli. You're Springing Eternal. You are the heart of a new god." Little Bang literally spells out a narrative, elsewhere presented allegorically only negatively, of a reconciliation of sorts, this time with the father. Across the bedroom

backdrop, and accompanying self-abusive rude caricatures of herself, a text starts on one side of the painting—"the way I felt about myself for not being whatever it was you wanted me to be / such a fucking drag / it seemed like such a waste"—and ends on the other—"but eventually it all made perfect sense / thank you."

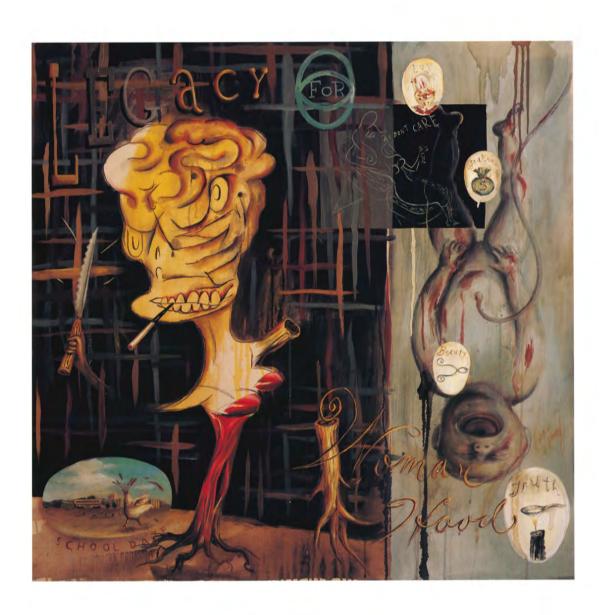
Having made peace with her upbringing, Deen's rethinks her legacy as trophies. So the small paintings *Heirloom Balls* and *Loss (ha ha)*, both from 1996 and whose imagery can be seen as details in a couple of the larger works, now stand as honoured parlour portraits of father and mother, the artist acknowledging inheritance of her father's balls and her mother's mordant humour.

With the inclusion of *God Save the Queen* and *But the King Knew Her Not* (1997), painted by Deen in response to her parents' deaths, the Power Plant exhibition completes a cycle from rage to mourning. The narrative wrap-up implied by reconciliation should not suggest that all



Georganne's problems are exorcised. Other paintings in the Thru the Super Mirror exhibition reworked her subterranean theme but shifted its terrain from the family to the surrogate authority of the pop idol. The background to Gods (Spring Eternal) (1996) might be Demeter's recovery of her daughter, Persephone, from Hades' underworld, but the painting's visible allure is the siren songs of contemporary false gods, PJ Harvey and Nick Cave being then currently available models.

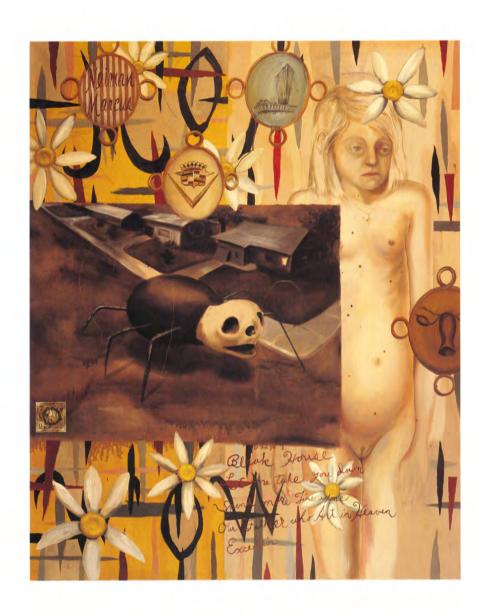
The two Gods paintings, the other being Gods (harry heckle & bait), act out, as it were, a good-cop bad-cop routine. The one offers himself or herself as disposable goods to be enjoyed and thrown away: new ones spring up every year. The other criticizes and attacks, but by so doing offers a foil for one's identity to assert itself. The female subject in Gods (harry heckle & bait) talks back to the rock god with his pan-pipe microphone, but not without saying—of course—"thank you."



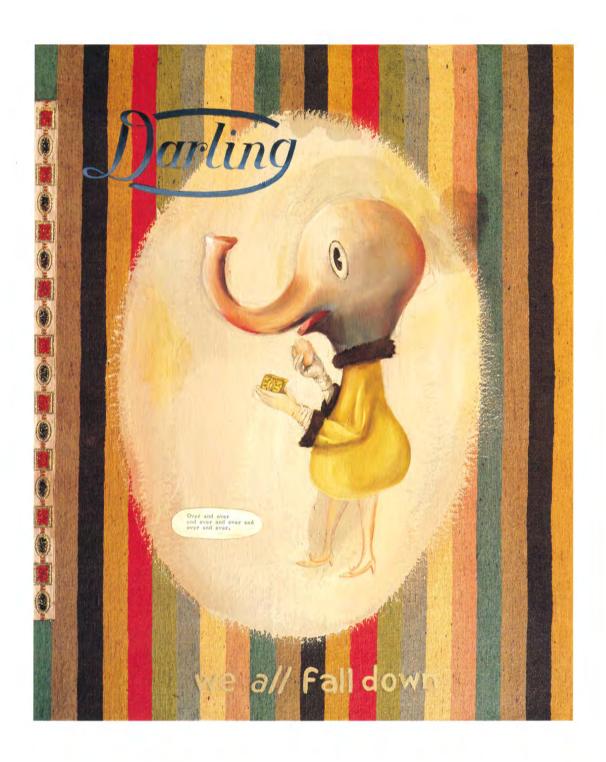


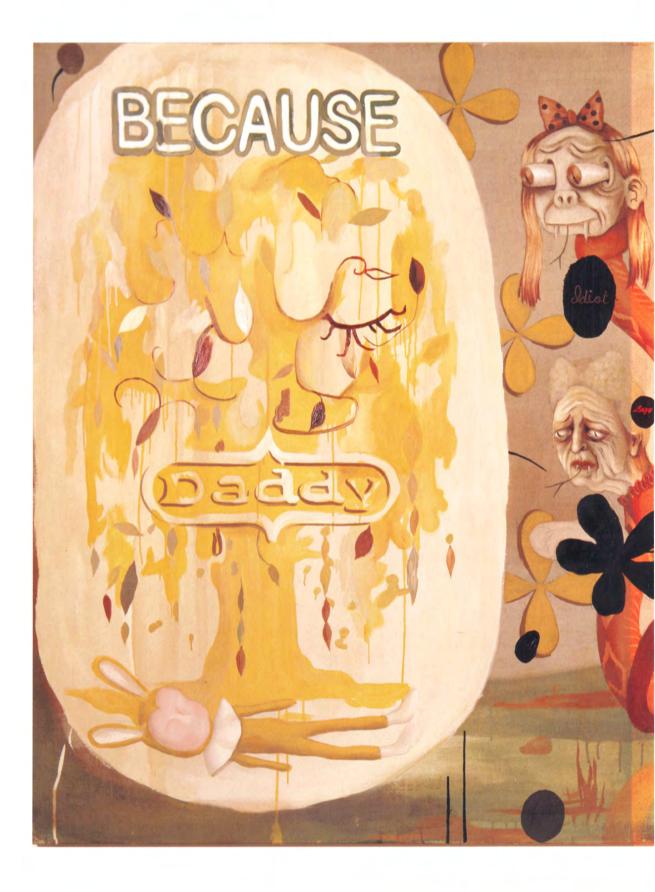






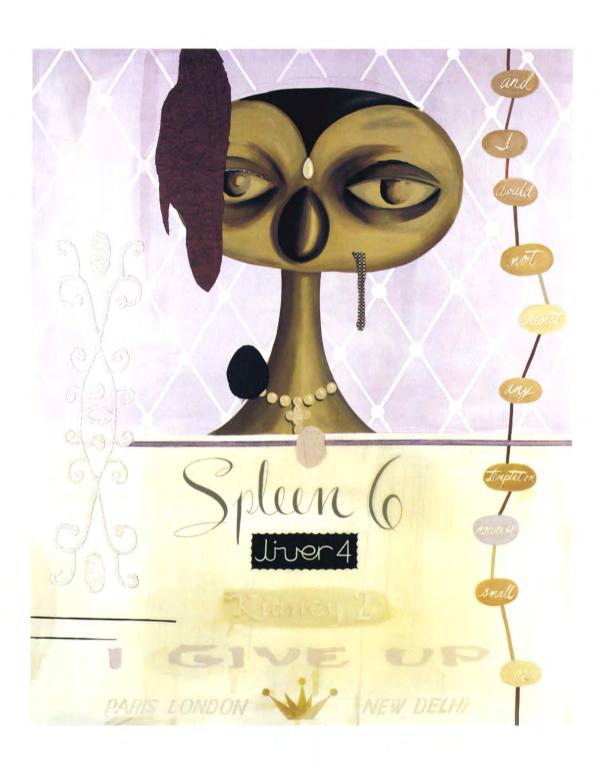


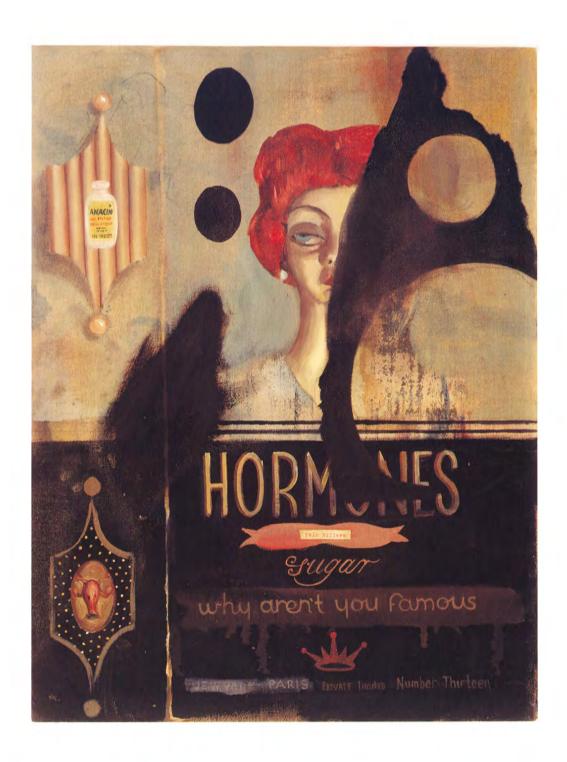


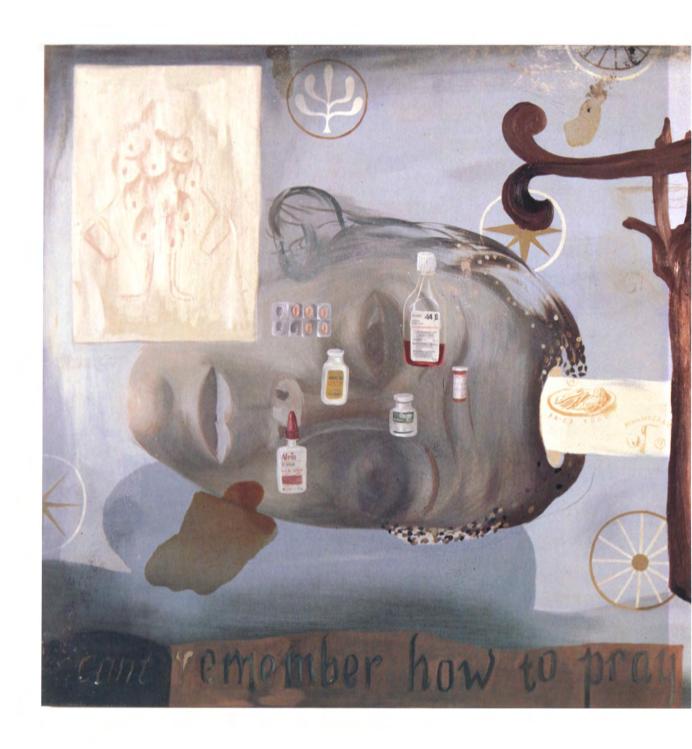




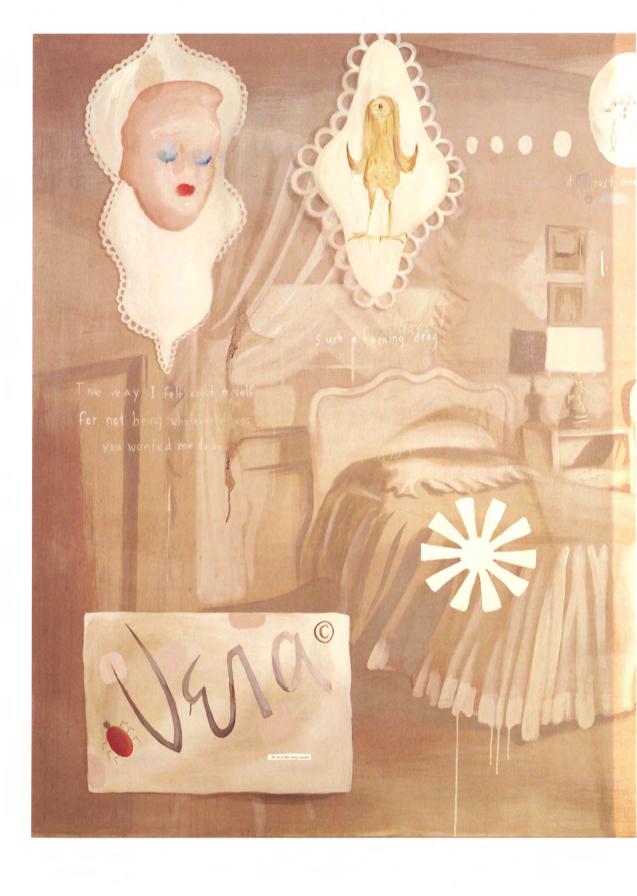
A Child's Garden of Criticism 1996 oil and collage on linen 152.4 x 243.8 cm Eileen and Peter Norton Collection, Santa Monica





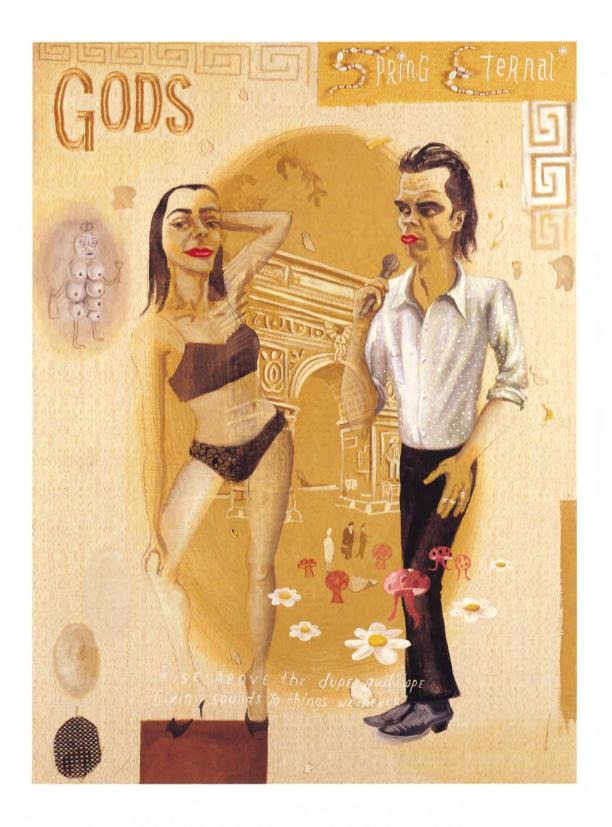


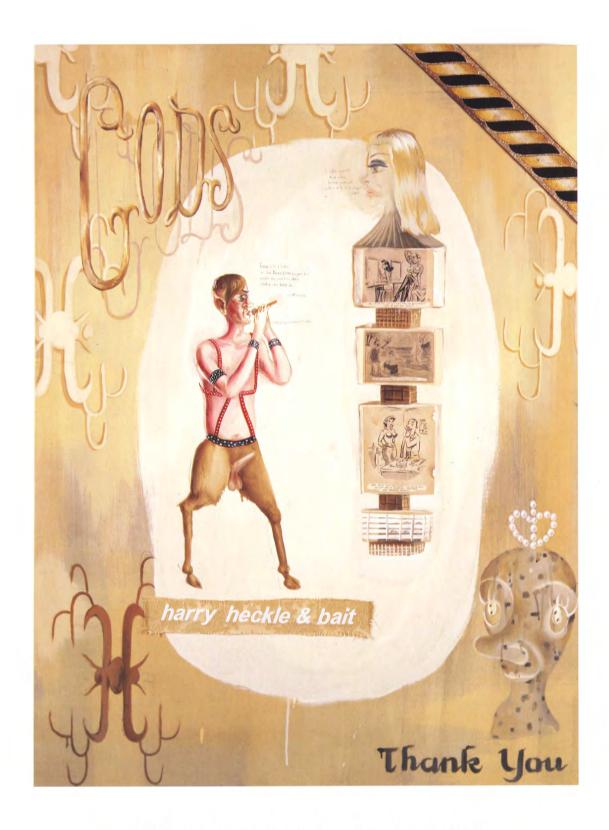






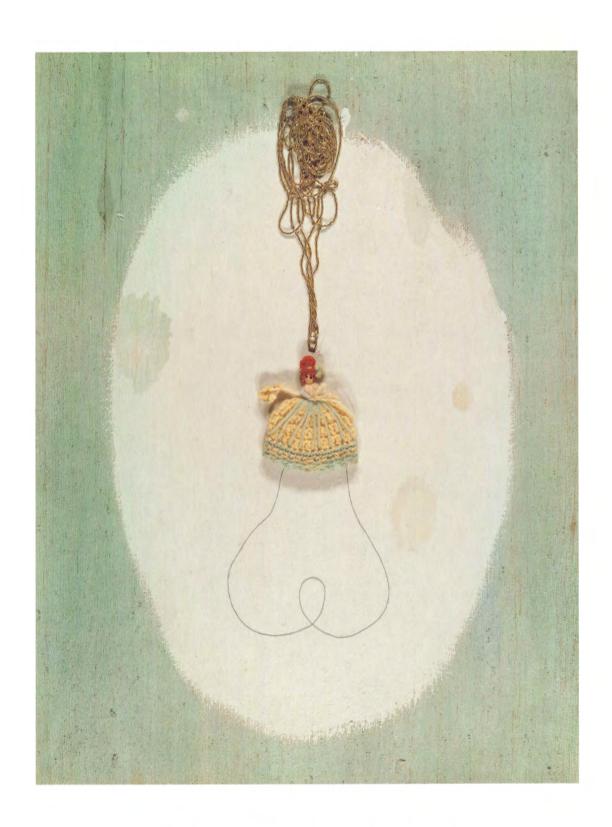
Little Bang 1996 oil and collage on linen 172.7 x 274.3 cm Courtesy of Christopher Grimes Gallery, Santa Monica



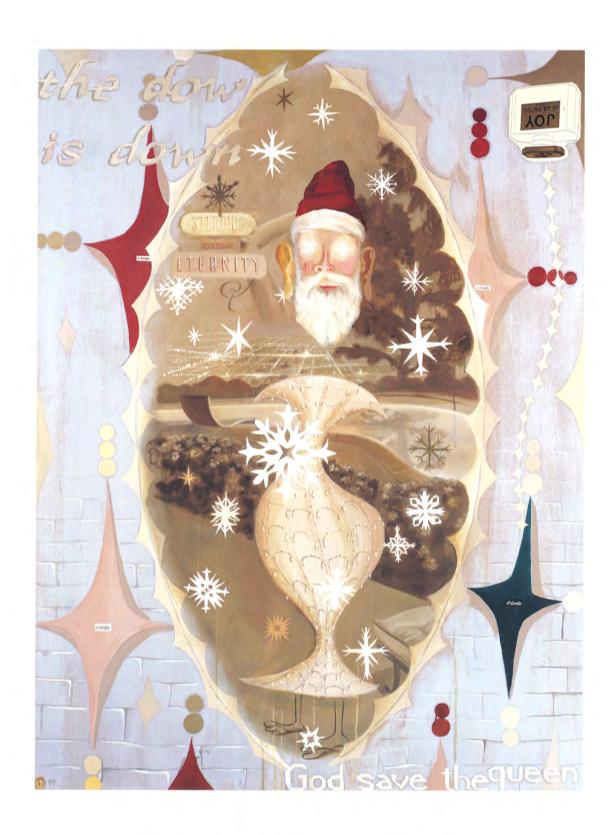




Loss (ha ha) 1996 oil and collage on silk 61 x 45.7 cm Eileen and Peter Norton Collection, Santa Monica



Heirloom Balls 1996 mixed media on silk 61 x 45.7 cm Eileen and Peter Norton Collection, Santa Monica



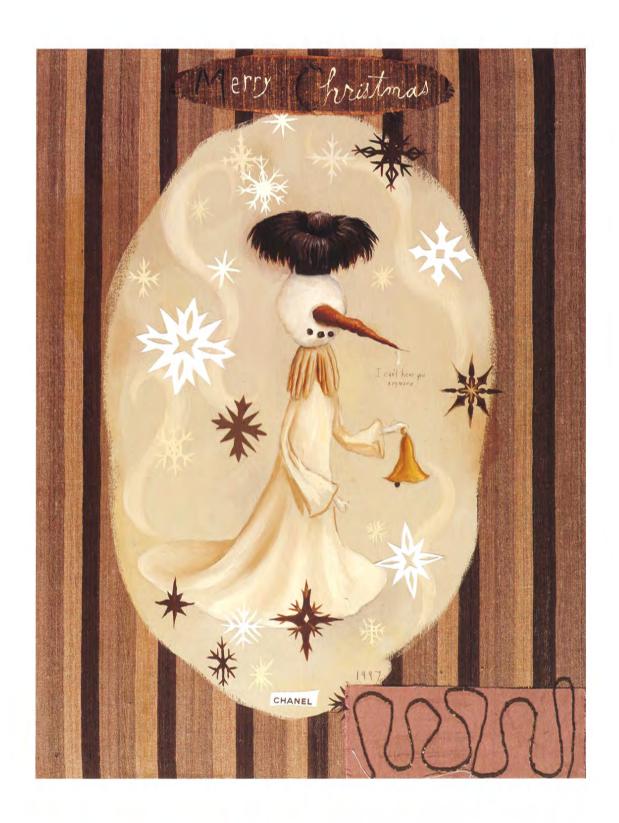




The Dow Is Down 1997 oil and collage on silk 61 x 45.7 cm Courtesy of the artist



That Is All, You May Go 1997 oil and collage on silk 50.8 x 38.1 cm Courtesy of the artist





EXHIBITION LIST

Legacy for Womanhood 1992 oil on linen 122 x 122 cm

Samantha Harrison and Bari Kumar, Los Angeles

Duty/Pretty Miss 1993
oil and collage on canvas
76.2 x 203.2 cm (diptych)
Courtesy of Christopher Grimes Gallery, Santa Monica

Rockabye Baby 1993
oil on linen
172.7 x 122 cm
Eileen and Peter Norton Collection, Santa Monica

The Learning Tree 1993
oil on linen
122 x 147.3 cm
Rich Moore and Robin Marchese, South Pasadena

You that way, We this way 1995
mixed media
68.6 x 111.8 cm (framed)
Courtesy of Christopher Grimes Gallery, Santa Monica

Mary's Lane: Family Room 1993 oil on linen 147.3 x 122 cm Collection of Jeffrey Kerns, Los Angeles

Lucha 1995
oil on silk
50.8 x 40.6 cm
Collection of Jeffrey Kerns, Los Angeles

We All Fall Down 1995 oil on silk 50.8 x 40.6 cm Courtesy of the artist

The Divine Anti-Comedy 1995
oil on canvas
152.4 x 243.8 cm
Eileen and Peter Norton Collection, Santa Monica

A Child's Garden of Criticism 1996
oil and collage on linen
152.4 x 243.8 cm
Eileen and Peter Norton Collection, Santa Monica

I Give Up 1996
mixed media on canvas
152.4 x 122 cm
Courtesy of Christopher Grimes Gallery, Santa Monica

put out to nurse (aiding, auxiliary, friendly) 1996 oil on canvas 122 x 243.8 cm Courtesy of Christopher Grimes Gallery, Santa Monica

Little Bang 1996
oil and collage on linen
172.7 x 274.3 cm
Courtesy of Christopher Grimes Gallery, Santa Monica

oil and collage on linen
132 x 96.5 cm
Courtesy of Christopher Grimes Gallery, Santa Monica

GODS (Spring Eternal) 1996
oil and collage on fabric
132 x 96.5 cm
Collection of Heidi Steiger, New York

Heirloom Balls 1996
mixed media on silk
61 x 45.7 cm
Eileen and Peter Norton Collection, Santa Monica

Loss (ha ha) 1996
oil and collage on silk
61 x 45.7 cm
Eileen and Peter Norton Collection, Santa Monica

But the King Knew Her Not 1997 oil and collage on linen 152.4 x 111.8 cm Collection of Hilary Beane, Los Angeles

God Save the Queen 1997
oil and collage on linen
152.4 x 111.8 cm
Courtesy of Christopher Grimes Gallery, Santa Monica

Merry Xmas (I can't hear you anymore) 1997 oil and collage on silk 50.8 x 38.1 cm Collection of Mick Haggerty

That Is All, You May Go 1997 oil and collage on silk 50.8 x 38.1 cm Courtesy of the artist The Dow Is Down 1997 oil and collage on silk 61 x 45.7 cm Courtesy of the artist

Companions in Rigor Mortis 1992 gouache on hand-made paper 34.3 x 22.9 cm Eileen and Peter Norton Collection, Santa Monica

Legacy for Womanhood 1992
gouache on hand-made paper
33 x 25.4 cm
Eileen and Peter Norton Collection, Santa Monica

Rockabye 1992 gouache on hand-made paper 33 x 25.4 cm Eileen and Peter Norton Collection, Santa Monica why aren't you famous

BIOGRAPHY

Georganne Deen was born in Fort Worth, Texas, in 1951. She attended East Texas State, lived in New York between 1975 and 1980, then moved to Los Angeles to attend California Institute of Arts in Valencia. She continues to reside in Los Angeles.

Aside from solo exhibitions at the Christopher Grimes Gallery in Santa Monica (1994, 1996, 1997), selected group exhibitions include Codex USA, Entwistle, London, Double Trouble: The Patchett Collection, San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art (1998); Art and Provocation: Images from Rebels, Museum of Contemporary Art, Boulder, Nu Glu, Joseph Helman Gallery, New York (1997); New Pop, Museum de Fortuny, Venice (1994); Comic Power, Exit Art, New York, Kustom Kulture, Laguna Art Museum (1993); Bad Influences, Otis Art Institute, Los Angeles (1987); American Pop, La Foret Museum, Tokyo, Social Distortion, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (1986); Western Exterminators, Zero One Gallery, Los Angeles (1985); and Comic Relief, Hallwalls, Buffalo (1983).

Ralph Rugoff and Christopher Knight have written about her early work for Los Angeles newspapers. Noteworthy articles include Charles Desmarais, "Georganne Deen," *Grand Street* 49, 1994; Jody Zellen, "The Mother Load," *World Art*, Summer 1995; Soo Jin Kim, "Georganne Deen," *Art Issues*, Summer 1997; and Shana Nys Dambrot, "Georganne Deen," *JUXTAPOZ*, Fall 1997. Smart Art Press in Santa Monica published a monograph on Georganne Deen, with essays by Michael Duncan and Amy Gerstler, to coincide with her 1997 exhibition at Christopher Grimes Gallery.

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