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BOLERO

Bolero
Brigitte Ulmer
Louise Bonnet
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artist Louise Bonnet

DISTURBINGLY BEAUTIFUL

Louise Bonnet creates grotesquely distorted bodies with fleshy noses that oscillate between sadness and comedy. The Swiss artist, who lives in Los Angeles, has taken the art world by storm with her paintings—her works now hang in some of the most prestigious museums.

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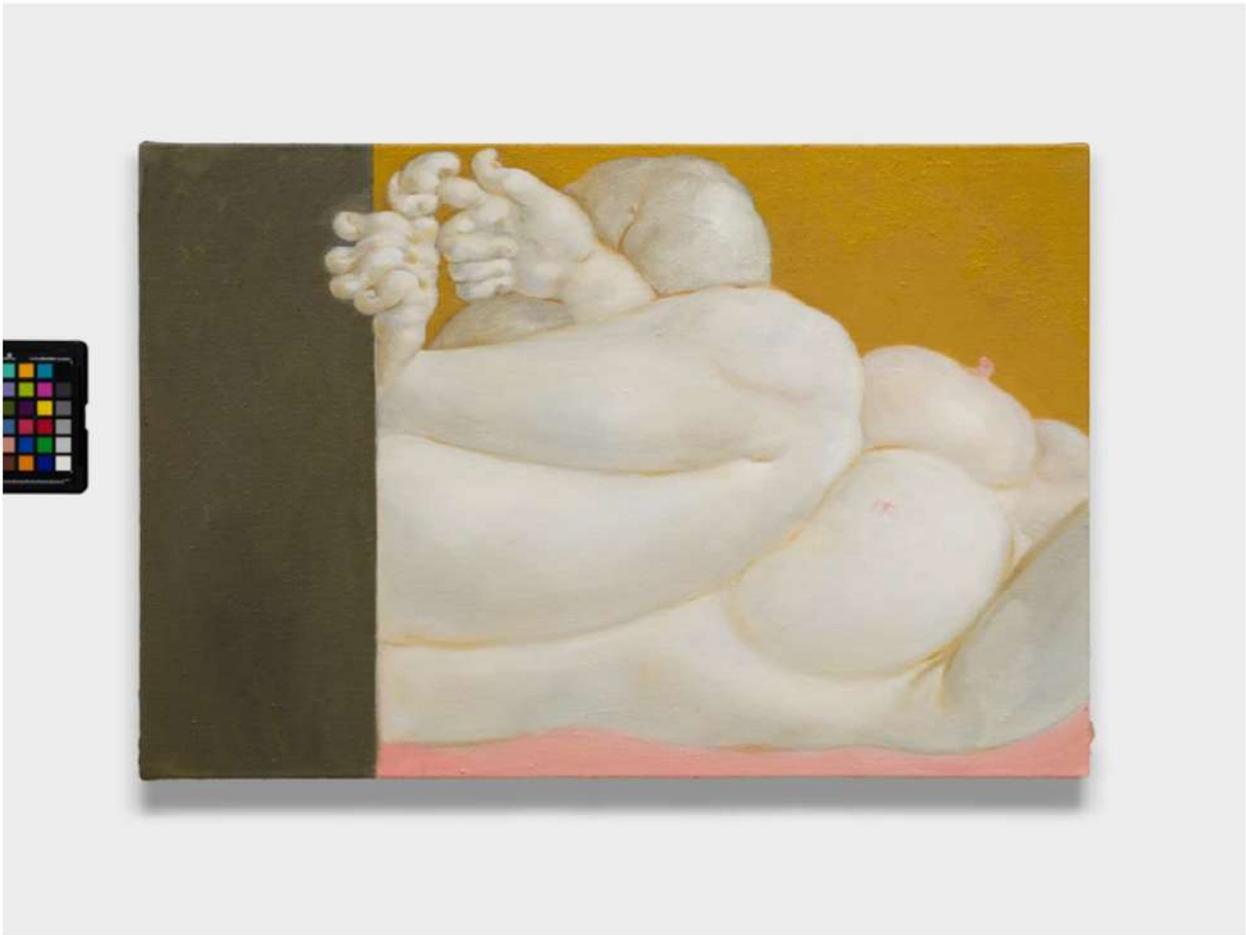
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Bild: Jeff McLane

How do you paint beauty when you distort everything that could be beautiful? Louise Bonnet paints monstrous creatures with proliferating buttocks and dripping breasts. Yet the obscenity of the flesh and the voyeurism it evokes in viewers are more than just tolerable thanks to her masterfully subtle painting style: light, color, and volume are so carefully balanced, the gestures so intimate, that one pauses in awe. Her first oil painting was created in 2013, when she was over 43. Born in 1970 in a Geneva suburb, Bonnet remembers above all the boredom of suburbia and the gray winter months. There was no television at home, but there was classical music, and the bookshelf was filled with volumes on medieval art. Bonnet escaped isolation through drawing, studied illustration and graphic design at the *École des arts décoratifs* in Geneva (now: *Haute école d'art et de design*), and briefly worked as a freelance graphic designer. In 1994, she went to Los Angeles for a year as an au pair—and stayed. "Suddenly I was surrounded by this light," she recalls. "It opened my mind. This vastness, these large spaces, gave me a feeling of freedom." For a while, she worked as a graphic designer for the streetwear label Xlarge. She is married to the co-founder, Adam Silverman, who is now a ceramicist. Only when her children were older did she begin to experiment intensively with painting—and quickly gained attention in the international art scene.



Louise Bonnet «Enclosure 2», 2025. Bild: Louise Bonnet

Bolero, you started out as a graphic designer and are now one of the most sought-after painters of our time. How did this change come about?

Louise Bonnet: For me, it was an organic process. As a graphic designer, I drew lines with a pen; everything was flat. But I was increasingly searching for form and depth. At first, I painted with acrylics, but the revelation came when a friend suggested I try oils. I watched a few YouTube videos to get an idea of what supplies I needed. Then I went to the art supply store and bought everything. After that, it was as if I had discovered fire.

You had no network and no art studies – and yet you landed at the internationally renowned powerhouse gallery Gagosian. How did you manage that?

Luckily, I was old enough to know what was important to me. I knew I wanted to do nothing but paint. So I had to exhibit my work. Because I didn't have a network, I started inviting friends to my studio. I wanted my painting to be seen.

Her friend, the writer Miranda July, recounted how they went through galleries together hoping to make contacts – without success.

Yes, it took a while before I was invited to my first group exhibition. But that visibility is what counts. That's how you get to know people in the industry. If they like you and your art, they tell others about it – and that's exactly what happened.



Louise Bonnet "Figure Holding an Orange", 2023. Image: Louise Bonnet

Following initial group and solo exhibitions in local galleries, Bonnet's career took off rapidly. Since 2020, she has had five sold-out solo shows in Basel, New York, and Hong Kong. With the support of Gagosian and participation in the 2022 Venice Biennale, she achieved international recognition. Today, her works are exhibited in major museums worldwide, including the MOCA in Los Angeles, the Long Museum in Shanghai, the ICA in Miami, and the Moderna Museet in Stockholm.

The bodies you paint often have exaggerated, grotesque proportions. Does this also reflect your resistance to mainstream beauty ideals?

I don't have a political agenda. I paint them because they represent something uncomfortable. My aim is to depict the uncontrollable. I feel that breasts are well-suited for this because they can't be controlled – I find that fascinating. Penises, for example, I would also find interesting because they have a certain comedic quality, but I don't know what they feel like.

Critics have questioned whether your characters might unintentionally reinforce common stereotypes. Are you afraid of misunderstandings?

If someone thinks my pictures reinforce clichés, then I believe they haven't looked closely enough. My work isn't something you can just consume quickly. You have to stand in front of it, take your time, and form an opinion. Besides, the works look very different in person than in photos – this difference is important.

You once said that painting allows you to freeze fear, anger, or death so that they can be viewed from the outside. That sounds very existential.

My paintings deal with unpleasant human emotions – shame, anger, humiliation. Things that make us human. I try to make them visible without letting them overwhelm the viewer.



Louise Bonnet “Pants”, 2025. Image: Louise Bonnet

Her characters often seem isolated. Do they reflect your view of how people interact in the age of social media?

Perhaps subconsciously, yes. But there's also a practical reason: I'm usually interested in a very specific aspect of a character. If I were to add more interaction, what fascinates me would sometimes be lost.

In your last exhibition at the Swiss Institute in New York, you placed a greater emphasis on gestures. I read that you were inspired by Ferdinand Hodler and by the Special Operations Executive handbook, a manual for British spies during the Second World War. How so?

Many years ago, I saw a postcard of a revolutionary painting by Hodler, in which a man is simply putting on a jacket. This gesture alone apparently made such a strong impression on me that I incorporated it into a work years later.

And what about the spies?

I was fascinated by how spies had to behave. How people in such a situation concealed their bodies, altered them, controlled themselves, and practiced new gestures to survive—all these tricks to avoid being noticed, to blend in seamlessly, as if they had always been there. They had to learn not to put their hands in their pockets because that was unusual in France and would have given them away, or to hold their spoons sideways to their mouths when eating soup.

So you're talking about gestures that we have learned over a long period of time and often perform unconsciously.

Exactly. Many of my characters make gestures whose origin we don't understand, but our "reptilian brain" might recognize them subconsciously. Half of what makes the body what it is is what it does—how it behaves, what gestures it makes. I observe this in myself, too, when I'm talking and suddenly make gestures without knowing why. I read in a 12th-century book on etiquette that you're allowed to blow your nose into your hand, but you mustn't look into it afterward because that's considered improper. Etiquette rules change—I found that fascinating.

When do you know that a picture is finished?

If I can live with it, then it's right. It always takes quite a while before I can truly live with a piece of work. That's not always pleasant. A lot of it isn't fun at all. It's hard work and sometimes a little painful.



Louise Bonnet "Pearls", 2023. Image: Louise Bonnet

What does your typical workday look like?

My husband always says that nothing works without rhythm. I try to go to my studio every day, but there are also periods when I work more irregularly. I need both – structure and freedom. When I go to the studio, I'm there from morning till night. Sometimes even longer if I'm in the flow. For me, it doesn't work to just wait for inspiration to strike. Creativity is hard work. You have to show up, you have to start – only then does something happen. Only then does inspiration come.

What helps you get into that flow? Complete silence? Music?

I like silence. Sometimes, though, I listen to an audiobook. Not fiction, because I can't fully concentrate on a story and work at the same time. It has to be something factual that won't distract me. Right now, I'm listening to a lot about the Cold War.

You've been living in Los Angeles for over thirty years now. How has that influenced your view of the world?

I find the people here somehow less judgmental. You encounter fewer barriers, and if there are any, they're easier to overcome. People give you more freedom, more leeway, even when painting. People here don't care what others think. I honestly don't know how that would have turned out for me in Geneva. Everything just felt much more liberating here.

The climate in the US has changed drastically. Are you concerned about restrictions on artistic freedom?

Yes, that's something I'm very concerned about. I know of two museum exhibitions that were canceled—because of their content. It's just crazy. So many things have become more difficult. That made my exhibition at the Swiss Institute in New York all the more impressive. I was amazed by how generous and courageous that institution is. Something like that would hardly be possible here in Los Angeles anymore. It really moved me.

How do you personally feel in the USA?

It's crazy. Nothing has changed for us yet, but overall the situation is pretty shocking. I still love California, though. It's different, somehow more independent. But I'm glad I have my Swiss passport.