

CULTURED

YOUNG ARTISTS 2023 ART

How a Cult 1968 Novella Inspired 26-Year-Old Painter Olivia van Kuiken

The artist is hard at work in the studio, preparing for an outing with Château Shatto in time for Frieze Los Angeles.

Ella Martin-Gachot

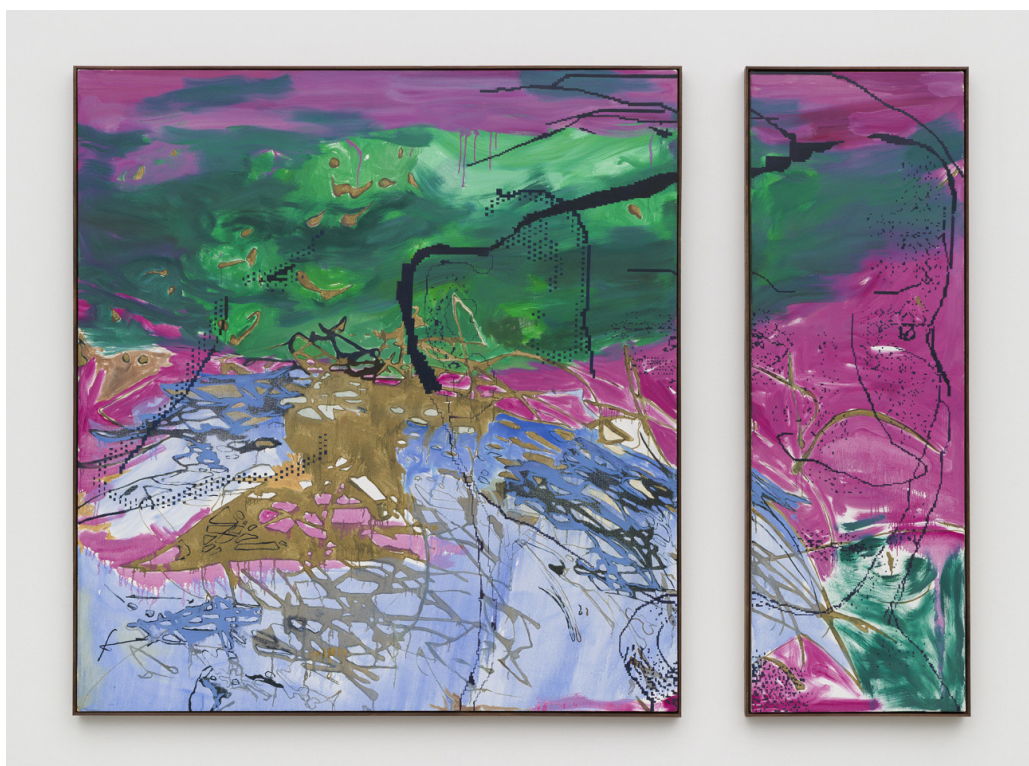
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“The character is contemplating her pregnancy, like, ‘Do I give myself an abortion with a knife? Do I jump out the window?’” explains Olivia van Kuiken.

The 26-year-old painter is giving me her elevator pitch for *The Trumpets of Jericho*, an experimental fable about an expectant young woman trapped in a tower. Its author—Unica Zürn, a Surrealist renegade often overshadowed by her other half, Hans Bellmer—wrote the text after giving birth to two children and going through a self-induced abortion.

Zürn and the 1968 novella have been a compass of sorts for Van Kuiken since she first discovered the book as a freshman at Cooper Union. She turned to them once again this year in preparation for her first solo show with Château Shatto, which will open in time with Frieze Los Angeles in February.



Olivia van Kuiken, *Ear Birth 2*, 2022. Image courtesy of the artist and Chapter NY.

From her own turret in Queens, a second floor studio overlooking a mom-and-pop auto shop, the artist points to the themes—bodily alienation, linguistic abstraction, the “edges of experience”—that continue to rivet her and translate easily to her narrative-allergic body of work.

As a high schooler in New Jersey, she found solace in black-and-white darkroom photography, hoping to follow postconceptual doyenne Liz Deschenes's footsteps. The figure eventually made its way into her work, but Van Kuiken isn't interested in dwelling on its subjectivity.



Olivia van Kuiken, *Make me Mulch! (Hodler, Woman on her Deathbed)*, 2023. Image courtesy of the artist and Chapter NY.

“When people are in my paintings, they’re like placeholders,” she explains. “Like bathroom signs, almost.” (The depictions of women on their deathbed that framed her solo show at [Chapter NY](#) earlier this year typify this depersonalization; in her panoramic treatment of their corpses, they became more landscape than life force.)

Text, too, has surfaced in recent works, like a gestural hurricane of a painting stamped with “UNICA” in Cooper Black font. Looking at it across the studio, Van Kuiken says she’s aware the lay viewer won’t recognize her cherished inspiration’s first name. That’s the point.