

# HESSE FLATOW

Buhe, Elizabeth. "Maureen St. Vincent: Ripple Hiss." *The Brooklyn Rail*. Online. December 15, 2022.



**ArtSeen**

## Maureen St. Vincent: *Ripple Hiss*

By [Elizabeth Buhe](#)



Maureen St. Vincent, *Price's Daughters*, 2022. Soft pastel on paper with artist frame, 37 x 44 x 3/4 inches. Courtesy the artist and HESSE FLATOW, New York. Photo: Chris Grunder.

Maureen St. Vincent's six pastel drawings (all 2022) now on view at Hesse Flatow are surreal, grotesque, and seductive. Amoebas squirm and snails slide. In *Biancabella and the Snake*, a slender onyx serpent

# HESSE FLATOW

Buhe, Elizabeth. "Maureen St. Vincent: Ripple Hiss." *The Brooklyn Rail*. Online. December 15, 2022.

winds through a landscape of puffy pink or yellow biomorphs, its body cleaved improbably by an undulating vulva hovering at compositional center. In *Price's Daughters*, a braided umbilical cord penetrates a six-fingered shell while its twin's upper lobe bears a butterfly-shaped hole. Through this puncture an orange-trimmed background spills forth its blue insides, confounding the laws of space. Here, base organisms are pristine: nowhere do we find a slime trail's glimmer.

St. Vincent spins through many such conceptual and formal inversions in these drawings, each of which is crowned by a hand-made, birch-composite frame that the artist designs, has fabricated elsewhere, then paints herself. The frames' symmetrically curved shapes sometimes echo abstracted bisections of human body parts—heart, throat, butt, penis—or otherwise generically natural forms on scales at once molecular and full-size. St. Vincent wields this mutability of signs to her advantage, pursuing a capacious thematic terrain that the framed drawings forge into a conceptual whole. Look once and we are in Henri Matisse's *Joy of Life* (1905–06). Look again to find in its place a weird landscape of reproductive organs. What first seemed an anthropomorphic sponge now reads as an erect slug. The works are willfully slippery, both ontologically and in the things they represent. Try to describe one and see.

Artist frames have been a hallmark of St. Vincent's work since 2018, born of experimentation in the studio and a pivotal visit to the Jewish Museum's 2017 exhibition of paintings by Florine Stettheimer, who was known for highly decorative frames. At up to eight inches wide on a side and painted in flaming orange or saccharine lilac, St. Vincent's frames are here bolder than ever before. By foregrounding the architecture of her surroundings, the artist probes the nature of her drawings' space and works through the various visual metaphors suggested by the outlines of the frame's internal edges. The slightly swollen interior rectangle of *Mom's Jewels* recalls a vintage television's convex screen, for example, while the twinned oval apertures of *Price's Daughters* evoke both the doubled reflections of fairytale mirrors and the binocularity of vision itself.

# HESSE FLATOW

Buhe, Elizabeth. "Maureen St. Vincent: Ripple Hiss." *The Brooklyn Rail*. Online. December 15, 2022.

This latter trope seems especially apt because it allows St. Vincent to extinguish any expectation that visual scrutiny should result in immutable truths like those gained by looking through a microscope. It allows us to see that her worlds operate according to entirely different laws than those of positivist certainty and accompanying assumptions about bodily normalcy. St. Vincent replaces—and displaces—the authorized point of view with the unpredictability of her shape-shifting things' next moves. More antiseptic representations of reproductive organs would demythologize female bodies, but here we find characters in a narrative. Tumescant and ripe, they might in a moment fold into decay. Or they might swell, burst, and release a thousand offspring. With this volatility they protect their power, deploying as a particular armor the refusal to disclose the nature of their systems.



Maureen St. Vincent, *Mom's Jewels*, 2022. Soft pastel on paper with artist frame, 23 x 22 x 3/4 inches. Courtesy the artist and HESSE FLATOW, New York. Photo: Chris Grunder.

Thus St. Vincent grants her organisms autonomy within the amorphous terrain circumscribed by the dyads they spawn: endearing and gross, inside and out, gendered and not, evil and pure, humorous and serious, rococo and classical. There is a politics to making art that depicts non-sentient beings with self-sufficiency; even more obviously so in substituting snail-infested grapes for ovaries (as in *Cleopatra's Ovaries*) in the same year the Supreme Court overturned the right to abortion. Yet it isn't at all clear that those snails are a menace, which suggests the more significant and more subtle principle upon which St. Vincent's works turn: they derive potency from operating on that razor thin edge where generalized suggestions become specific and therefore personal to each viewer. This is both the anthropologist's



# HESSE FLATOW

Buhe, Elizabeth. "Maureen St. Vincent: Ripple Hiss." *The Brooklyn Rail*. Online. December 15, 2022.

task of making the strange familiar and a prime lesson of abstraction, which St. Vincent adopts profitably within the language of representation.

The drawings at Hesse Flatow are the least anthropomorphic ones she has made, the fluidly looped thighs of *Sister Slip* the sole indication of her prior works' more forthrightly human bodies and feminine accoutrements. Keeping so many competing tensions in balance prevents the work from shading into sentimentality and didacticism on the one hand, or decoration on the other. This is no easy feat, and in its achievement the works drip with implication and promise.



Maureen St. Vincent, *Sister Slip*, 2022. Soft pastel on paper with artist frame, 45 x 34 x 3/4 inches. Courtesy the artist and HESSE FLATOW, New York. Photo: Chris Grunder.

---

## Contributor

**Elizabeth Buhe**

**Elizabeth Buhe** is a critic and art historian based in New York.