

# ***Rachel Feinstein: Maiden, Mother, Crone***

November 1, 2019 – March 22, 2020

**The Jewish Museum, New York**

## Exhibition Wall Texts

# *RACHEL FEINSTEIN: MAIDEN, MOTHER, CRONE*

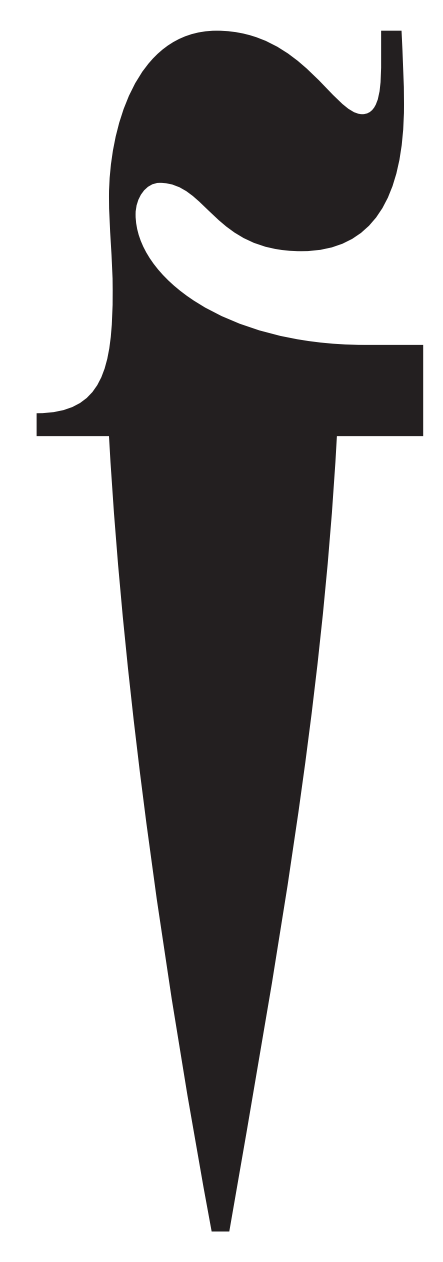
Rachel Feinstein's art is defined by dualities: her investigations of masculinity and femininity or good and evil are echoed in her formal explorations of balance and precariousness or positive and negative space. Her subjects, too, are drawn from oppositions and tensions: religion and fairy tales, high European craft and low American kitsch, her needs as an artist and the needs of her family. She explores these conflicts through characters borrowed from biblical and folk sources as well as objects from material culture, deconstructed and reimagined, suggesting that there is no fact without fiction, light without darkness, tranquility without chaos.

Feinstein's process similarly embraces divergent methods and materials. Her three-dimensional objects evolve from two-dimensional sketches translated into small handmade maquettes, which are then exploded to larger-than-life-size scale and fabricated in wood, metal, or ceramic. Traces of an object's hand-drawn origins may survive in a monochromatic palette, compressed depth, or sweeping, organic lines. Her polychrome figures are as painterly as they are sculptural, composed with bright hues and subtle tones built up with layers of pigmented synthetic resin.

Each of the exhibition's spaces contains elements reminiscent of stage scenery—a theatrical curtain, video, and panoramic wallpaper. These echo Feinstein's early experiments with performance, in which she positioned herself as both the subject and object of the viewer's gaze. Feinstein's art follows myriad lines of inquiry, but the idea of the feminine is central. She has made a sustained examination of the many ways this concept is manifested culturally. Female protagonists and figures proliferate in her work and bind it together across diverse media.

The exhibition's title names three consequential stages in a woman's life, a progression from youth to old age that also signals her accumulation of knowledge and complexity. Here, Feinstein is thinking of the neopagan deity the Triple Goddess—a simultaneous embodiment of maiden, mother, and crone—in whom past and present, inexperience and wisdom, fragility and power are inextricably entwined.

Kelly Taxter  
Barnett and Annalee Newman Curator of  
Contemporary Art



Feinstein studied religion and studio art while an undergraduate at Columbia University. She frequently turns to narrative subjects: figures from the Hebrew and Christian Bibles appear alongside protagonists from Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale *The Snow Queen* or fantastical characters inspired by her personal history and family. These collisions initiate a line of questioning: why do we regard some stories as factual and others as fiction? What purposes do stories fulfill, and who is the audience?

Sacred texts, popular storytelling, and art are potent transmitters of knowledge and power; all have long been used to educate (and control) girls and women. Feinstein herself worked as a fashion model throughout her teenage years; at a young age she became acutely aware of the power of her own image as well as the negative repercussions of striving for ideals of perfection. She questions and complicates the persistent female archetypes circulating in popular culture.

Mirror is a frequent material in Feinstein's art; for her it symbolizes both vanity and *vanitas*, the fleeting nature of life. For example, her paintings of older women costumed as eighteenth-century *grandes dames* capture the viewer's image within their frames, connecting the distant past with the present, and pointing to our own inevitable futures.



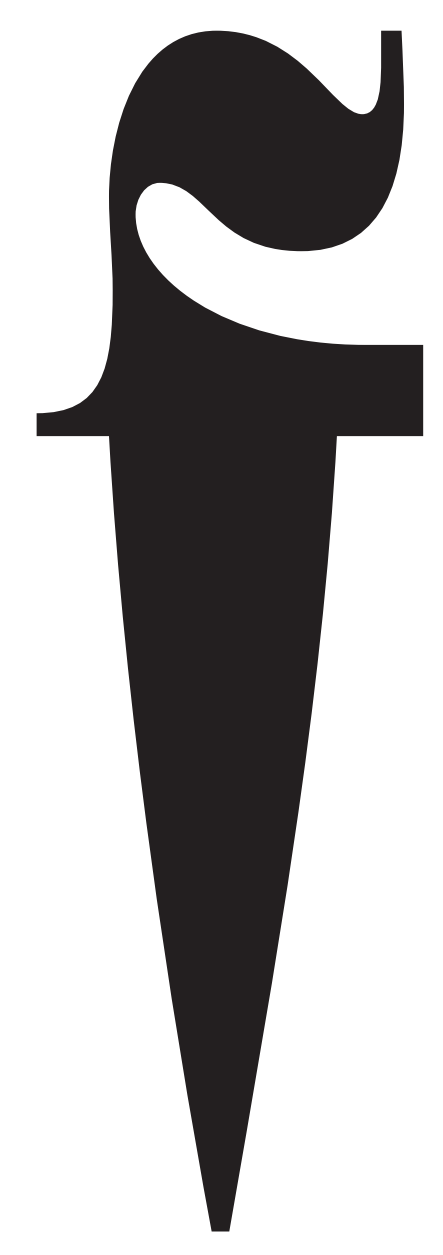
The sexually charged works in this darkened space meditate on lust, love, and coupling—at once empowered, aggressive, playful, and conflicted. They express a spectrum of desire and draw from myth, popular storytelling, and everyday life.

The video *Spring and Winter*, among Feinstein's earliest works, features a trio of characters—a paper doll, a young maiden, and an old crone—all played by the artist. Feinstein's narrative has an ambiguous tone; it was inspired both by the true story of a romance between Arthur and Nan Kellam and by the violent original version of the fairy tale *Sleeping Beauty*.

The Kellams lived in blissful isolation for thirty-five years on Placentia Island, off the coast of Maine. After Arthur's death Nan lived there alone, and her commitment to solitude intrigued Feinstein.

To create the video's set Feinstein completely transformed her apartment with garbage bags, spray paint, and fabric, temporarily usurping reality with fantasy. *Spring and Winter's* sinister elements evolved from a performance she enacted in 1994: for six weeks she slept during the day in a Manhattan gallery, lying beneath an undulating bedspread topped with a grotesque castle. The discomfiting scene was inspired by the source of *Sleeping Beauty*; Giambattista Basile's *Sun, Moon, and Talia* (1634) centers on a girl raped, not rescued, by a king.





Feinstein reveals what lurks beneath a gilded surface. She grew up in Miami in the 1980s and her work is deeply informed by the foreboding undertones of the city during that era, the encroachment of its lush tropical landscape on crumbling Art Deco architecture, and the insinuation of a thriving drug culture into everyday life.

*Panorama of Rome* is a wallpaper designed by Feinstein, based on her forty-foot painting on mirror of the same name. Encircling this space, it offers views of the city punctuated by ancient ruins. Panoramic wall coverings were a popular decorative trend in upper-class early nineteenth-century homes, a means to create a window onto the world while signaling the resident's culture and wealth. The gesture of bringing the outside in extends through the room: the pathways created by the sculpture platforms evoke the geometric design of a Baroque Italian garden, dotted with statues and follies. Yet this scene is not entirely picturesque. Feinstein taps into the dark resonances of luxury; for her, the absolutism and exuberant decadence of the aristocracy—as expressed in palaces, furniture, and art—foreshadowed the rise of Fascism, which devastated Europe in the twentieth century. The objects gathered here allow strength and weakness, beauty and decay, chaos and order to coexist.

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#RachelFeinstein

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