

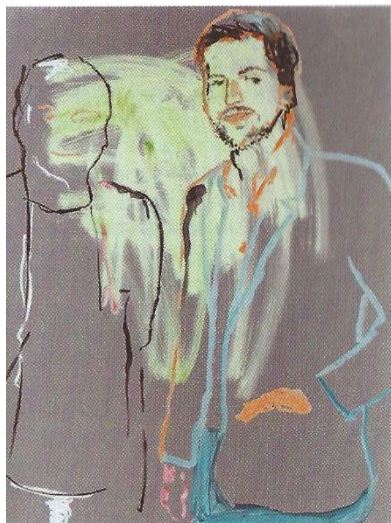
# Reena Spaulings

MUSEUM LUDWIG, COLOGNE

Beau Rutland

# ARTFORUM

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From left: Reena Spaulings, *Advisors* (detail), 2016, metal table; fourteen paintings in acrylic on Dibond, each 34 × 26". Reena Spaulings, *Latest Seascape #1*, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 55 1/4 × 78 1/4". Reena Spaulings, *Bonjour! 1-3*, 2017, oil on Dibond and mixed media. Installation view. Photo: Britta Schlier.



**AFTER MORE THAN A DECADE** of caustic yet playful teasing of the contemporary art apparatus, Reena Spaulings has been granted a retrospective—sort of. To offer some historical background for the uninitiated: In 2003, writer John Kelsey and artist Emily Sundblad opened Reena Spaulings, a gallery on New York's Lower East Side, which has since launched the careers of many influential artists. In 2004, artworks made by Kelsey and Sundblad under the moniker "Reena Spaulings" began appearing in group shows. Audiences then learned a great deal about Reena—as both artist and gallery are usually known—through the book *Reena Spaulings* (2005). Though officially authored by Bernadette Corporation—an already mythic '90s art/fashion collective of which Kelsey is a member—the narrative was infamously written by 150 individuals in B.C.'s circle. From time to time, other artists have helped contribute to Reena's artistic production.

Over the past decade, few artists or galleries in New York have continuously held the attention of the art world the way Reena Spaulings has. Blending cynicism and sincerity, Reena has offered timely responses to various issues that have long enlivened and/or bedeviled contemporary art: the artist-dealer, collaboration, self-reflexivity, market reflexivity, and the possibilities and limits of institutional critique, among others. Kelsey and Sundblad's fictional front woman has followed the path of Rose Sélavy and then forged ahead, finding new ways to deploy the artistic alter ego as provocation and diversion; as a

trickster whose position between creator and creation destabilizes both of those constructs and the systems in which they are embedded. Every aspect of Reena Spaulings is imbued with a mimetic quality, calling into question whether her iterations of things we know—an art gallery, an art career—should be considered authentic, although nothing they do feels simulacral enough to be comfortably called *inauthentic*, either.

This ambiguity was elegantly performed in "Reena Spaulings: Her and No," organized by Anna Czerlitzki. The exhibition—a smartly installed, concise showing of just four groups of paintings—belonged to the series "Here and Now," Museum Ludwig's effort to upend the formulaic institutional approach to presenting contemporary art. With the succinct removal of two letters, "Her and No" informed the visitor of the artist's core principles of wit and contradiction. Fittingly, the presentation went wryly against the grain of the conventional institutional survey. Familiar works were included, but virtually all in the form of new versions—or, to borrow Sturtevant's preferred term, "repetitions." For instance, some viewers might have felt déjà vu contemplating the pointillist landscapes that show Herzog & de Meuron's New York condo tower 56 Leonard, which closely echo Reena's 2008 paintings of the very similar-looking New Museum. The repetitions afforded visitors the chance to see key examples of the artist's work while simultaneously providing Reena's dealers with new inventory. Reena always assumes a savvy audience, and it's safe to surmise that viewers were expected to perceive the latter benefit—an acknowledgment of market realities similar in spirit to Louise Lawler's ingenious disclosure-as-object label in her recent MOMA retrospective.

And yet, a bit perversely, the repetitions that collectors would presumably have found most enticing were not included. With its tightly edited selection of works, "Her and No" brought discipline to the artist's roving output, which seemed deceptively sober here. Aside from the recent eye-catching abstractions painted by Roombas, many of Reena's best-known works—for instance, the canvases fashioned from the sullied tablecloths of art-world dinners—were absent.

From the beginning, Reena's multifaceted identity has afforded Kelsey and Sundblad the opportunity to mine the various roles each plays within the art world (which, in Kelsey's case, includes the role of contributing editor of *Artforum*), and the degree to which any given subject is granted agency. The relationship between artist and collector was lightly mused on in *Bonjour! 1-3*, 2017, large-scale slapdash paintings that enmesh imagery loosely based on Courbet's *The Meeting* (1854) with the addition of more current signifiers like fidget spinners and a *Texte zur Kunst* journal tote bag. *Advisors*, 2016, an updated version of Reena's mid-2000s portraits of art dealers, attests to the consigliere-like status of art advisers to the museum patron, the most valued position today. Within weeks of the show's opening, one of the advisers depicted had placed "Advisors" in a notable private collection.

Ultimately, "Her and No" offered a tidy account of Reena Spaulings the artist, though it might have been a little too taciturn about the theoretical, economic, and

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social apparatuses that Kelsey and Sundblad have thoroughly limned over the years. These complicated and messy concerns, so critical to the project that is Reena Spaulings, seem to have been reserved for discussion in the exhibition's catalogue, to be published next year—a deferred continuation of the show's dialectical maneuvers. If the exhibition's reticence was mildly frustrating to fans, it was also perfectly in keeping with the refusals and problematizations that have kept Reena's work vital and interesting all along. □

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Visit our archive at [artforum.com/imprint](http://artforum.com/imprint) to read Bennett Simpson on Bernadette Corporation and Reena Spaulings (September 2004).