Sangram Majumdar, "Interview: Victoria Roth at Brennan & Griffin," *Two Coats of Paint*, 9 May 2019.

Two Coats of Paint

INTERVIEWS

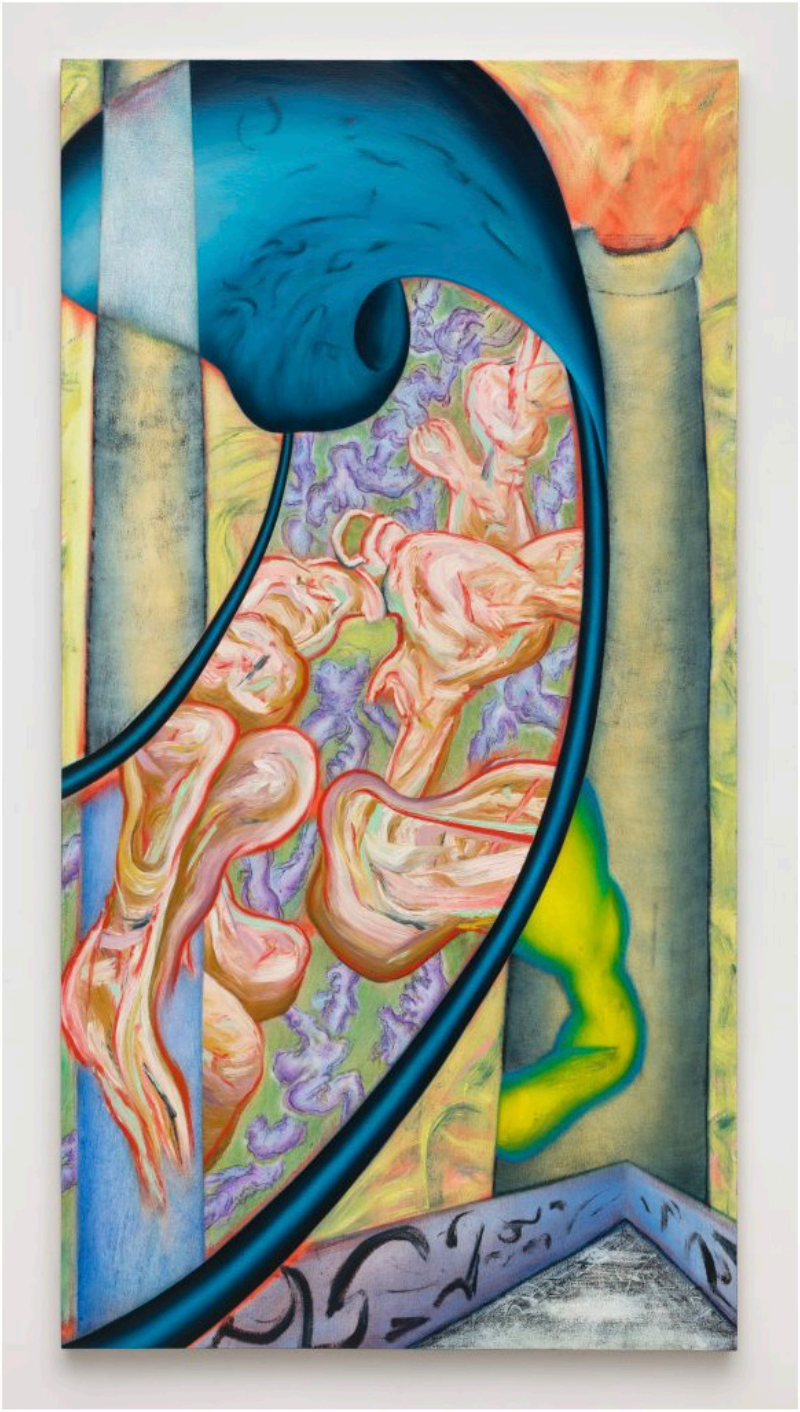
Interview: Victoria Roth at Brennan & Griffin

May 9, 2019 8:02 pm



Victoria Roth, Entrance, 2018, oil on canvas, 72×60 inches
(All images are courtesy of Brennan & Griffin)

Contributed by Sangram Mujumdar / A couple weeks ago, on a rainy spring evening, Victoria Roth and I met up in her studio to continue a discussion that we had started nearly a year ago about her paintings. Over the course of our conversation we talked about her new format, pictorial space, dance, the intense physicality of painting, but we always kept circling back to ideas about the body. The paintings are on view at Brennan & Griffin through May 26.



Victoria Roth, Smokestack, 2019, oil on canvas, 80×42 inches

"luscious dark green for smushy areas with yellow and gold accents for pleats in coats." – Victoria Roth

Sangram Majumdar: It was early last summer when I saw this new format, the vertical. Victoria Roth: Everyone's reaction is the format, because I didn't decide to make just one painting in that format, I pretty much made the whole show with that size. Except for one, which is called *Entrance*, actually. The big off-square one with the mass at the bottom, that one was made exactly a year ago, before I started the vertical series, not knowing when the show would be. But it's an important one, actually.



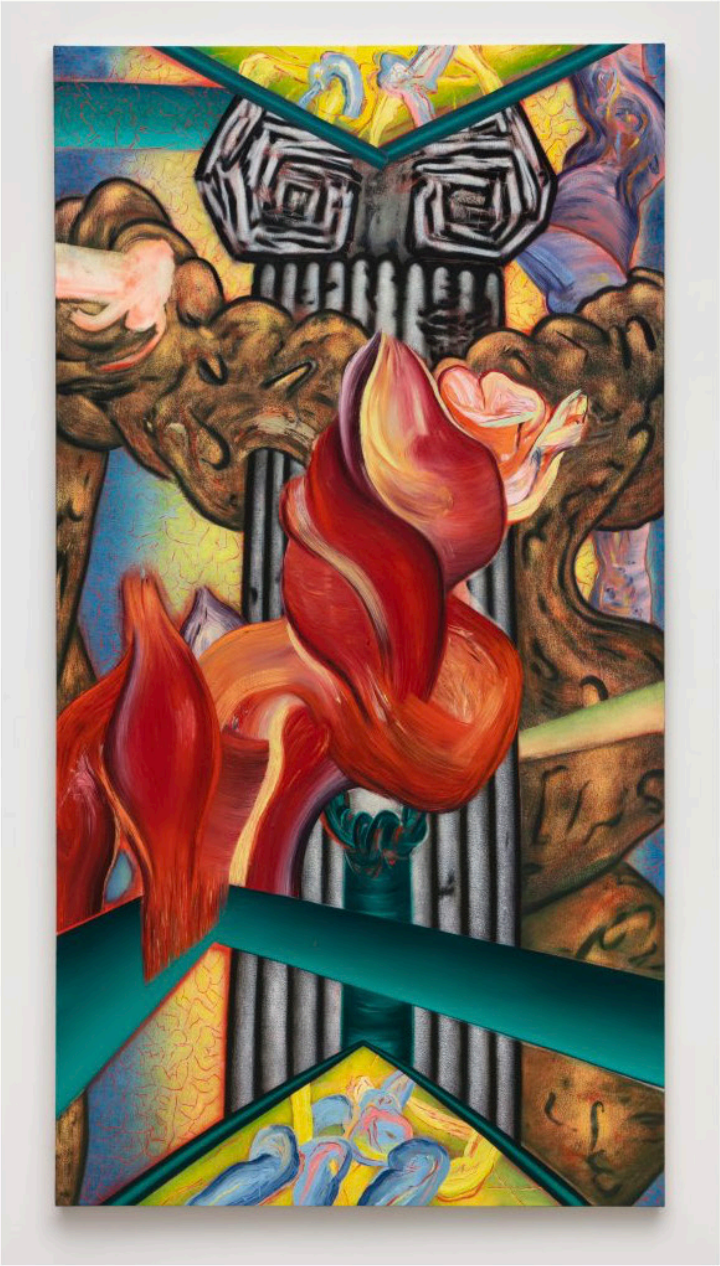
Victoria Roth, Installation view.

SM:It's an entrance into this body of work.

VR: Yes, and also because it has that black mass, it leads you into the painting. *Entrance* is a metaphorical, symbolic title of sorts. But I think the format is something that people have been immediately reacting to, because I really took a stance and wanted people to feel their own body. So there's this back and forth between that awareness, or maybe you're about to enter a space.

SM: There's that threshold.

VR: The threshold. The paintings with the columns and the smokestacks, with more recognizable elements, those are the ones where that happens. It feels like we've stepped back and we're on this edge, because it's a combination of being in a more pictorial and architectural space. We're looking at it from the outside. We're on that cusp of being in it.



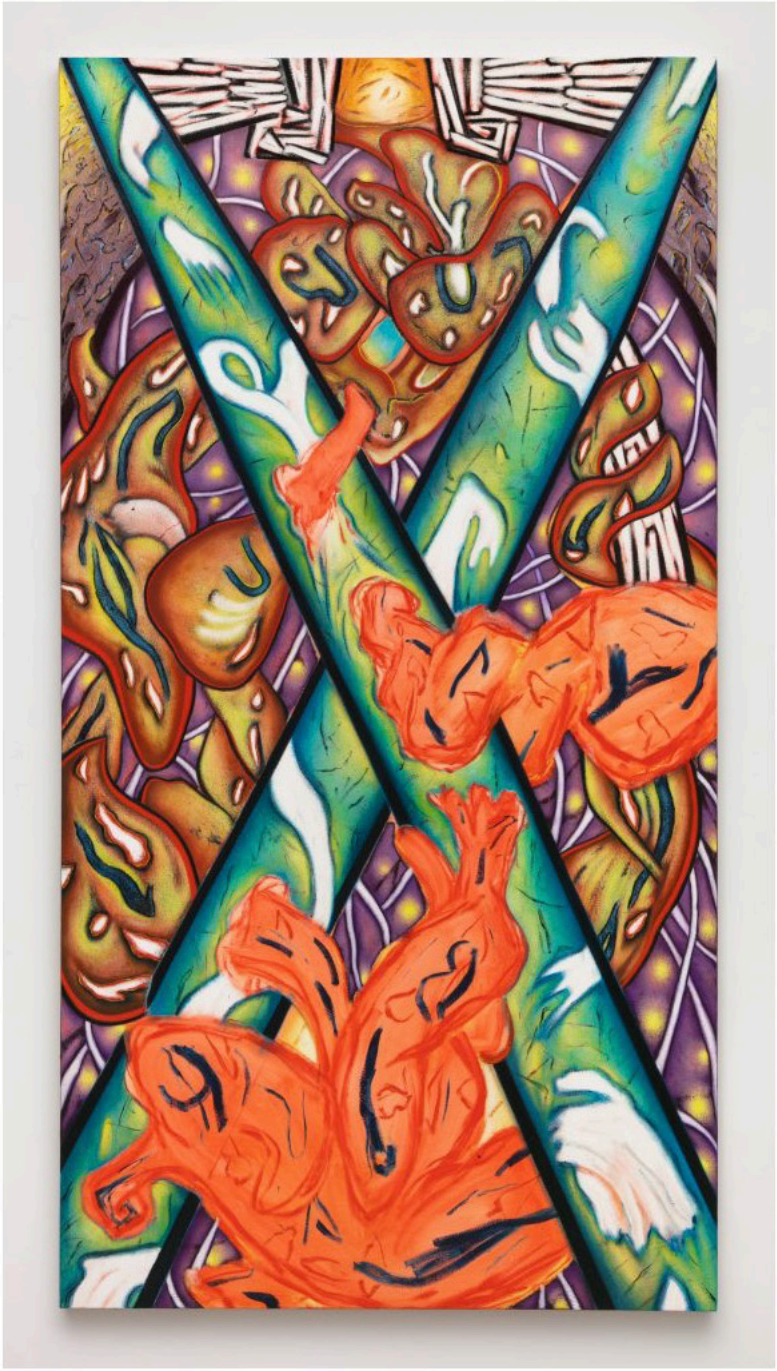
Victoria Roth, Ionic,2019, oil on canvas, 80×42 inches

SM: In these, the architecture seems to be on the other end, so I feel like I'm getting a glimpse into the other side. It's a weirdly circular space, as if the architecture refers to something we recognize.

VR: I'm intrigued by what you said about that circularity of the space, because those paintings that have those rigid structures, they're like structural elements in the painting, but they also happen to be round structures that you can turn around. What I'm trying to impart with these paintings is that they do have that inner logic. In a way they are choreographing, dancing their own logic and evolving within the frame.

SM: It's interesting you said dancing, because then space can be seen as a circular space, like a stage. And the smokestack or columns become corollary to the body again. Or I can imagine somebody standing next to that column looking this way, so suddenly it becomes this strangely shared space.

VR: Hmm, cool. I like that image.



Victoria Roth, X, 2018, oil on canvas, 80×42 inches

SM: *Smokestack* is also the only painting where there's an action depicted. You're presenting an event as it unfolds.

VR: I hadn't fully intended it to be a smokestack initially. It happened while I was making it and then I left it. When I plan my paintings, I plan them with small drawings, but obviously there's always leeway and improvisation when I'm making the oil paintings. So, in *Smokestack*, I had initially thought of those two main columns. I wanted them to be tubular. At first, I was thinking that there was going to be something coming out, something erupting out of that column thing, but I hadn't fully figured out what yet. I was going to make it a bit more material, actually, with thicker paint. Somehow I left the top part of the column open and then that's just how it worked itself into the composition. I stopped it in that action.

SM: It feels like you want this play between two different types of bodies. On one hand there are references to nerves, scrims, ropes. Things that are of and within a body in shape and character. And there are things that are built, like an Ionic column or a smokestack.

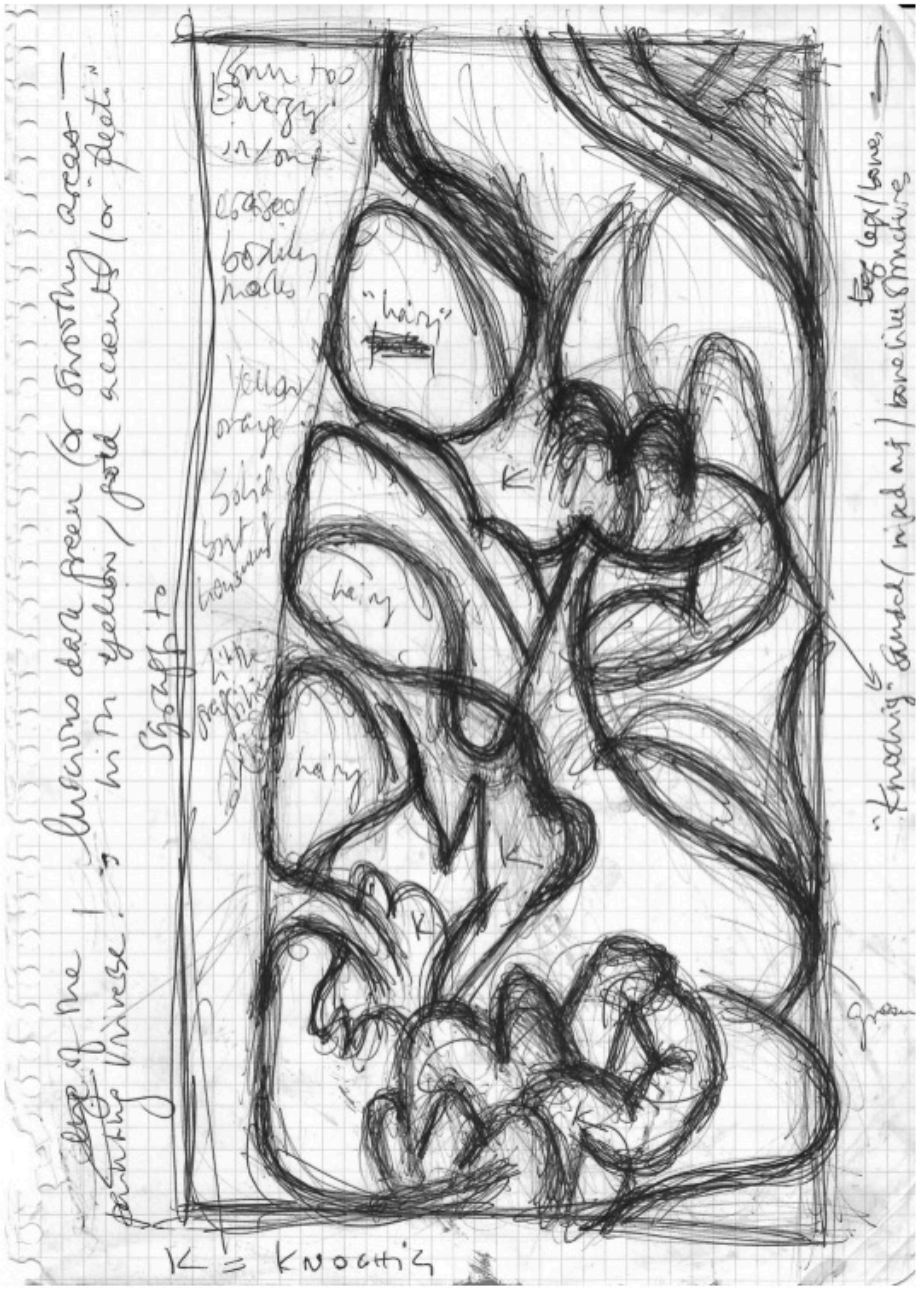
VR: It all started with the "X" painting. It's an anchor for the rest of the show where these organic, bodily, twisty shapes are literally embodied with different kinds of materiality through my wiping or through the thick, juicy paint that I've been having a lot of fun bringing back in. I really wanted these organic, squishy, bulbous shapes, whatever you want to call them to be literally interacting. I've been thinking of them as piercing, traversing, or being held in suspension between columns.



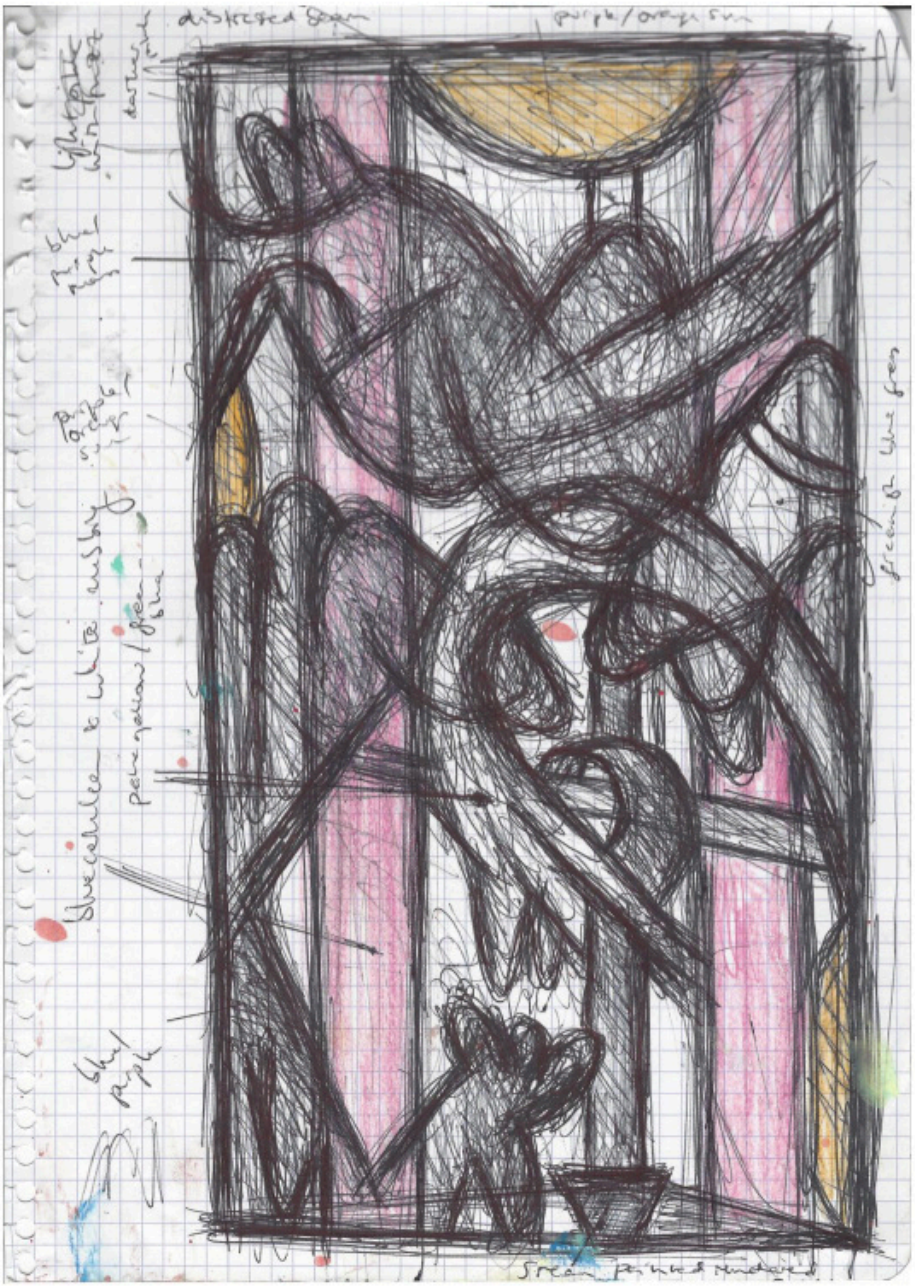
Victoria Roth,Filigree, 2018, oil on canvas, 80×42 inches

SM: So, maybethe use of architecture sets up something to play off against.

VR: Yeah, which is why "X" was an interesting departure for me, because it set up this very graphic shape, like this central vertebrate, nerve or structure, but it's also an obstruction to the viewer. It dominates the whole composition, but then, of course again, it's like the main pull for all these shapes intertwining and doing whatever weird things they are doing with it. I'm interested in the tension, the friction, but also the symbiosis between those elements and the structure, how they're adapting one to the other.



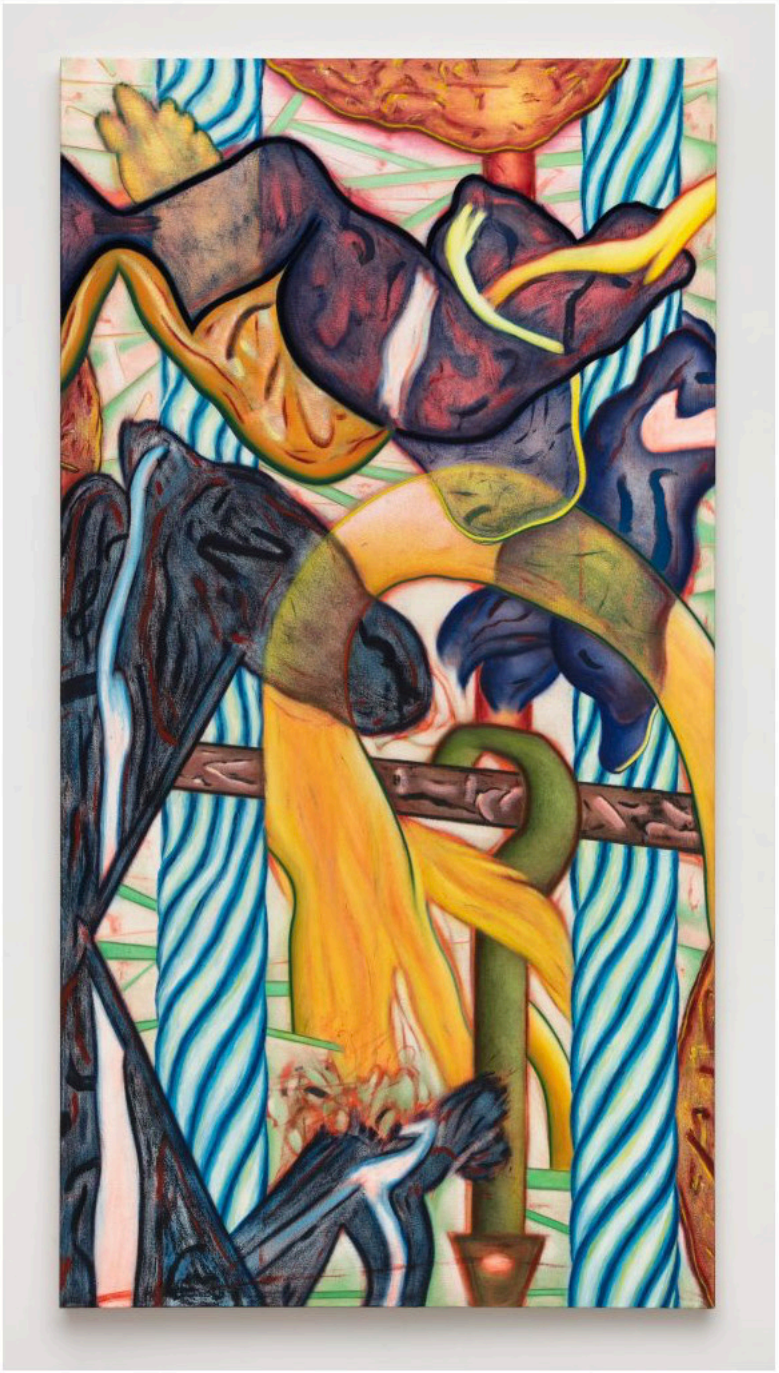
Victoria Roth, Study for Filigree, 2019, pen on paper, 9×12 inches
(Image courtesy of the artist)



Victoria Roth, Study for Buckle, 2019, pen and colored pencil on paper, 9×12 inches
(Image courtesy of the artist)

SM: Another clear reference to the body happens via drawing. Can you talk a little bit about your thought process, especially in the small pen drawings?

VR: Yes, so these are great examples because they refer directly to two of the paintings in the show. This left one here was my sketch for *Filigree*. This other one, for *Buckle*, is more formed. The sketch for *Filigree* is a much looser, open-ended drawing.



Victoria Roth,Buckle, 2019, oil on canvas, 80×42 inches

SM: Your lines keep coming back around, like they are searching out for some type of a form. And there are these words, phrases written all around the images.

VR: I'm writing all these notes on top of them, these ideas or placeholders for things that might or might not take place in the paintings. So, here I have all these notations, this letter K acting as a key (looking at the drawing). K for "knochig" which is bone-like, bony, of bone. It's in German. It's very much in your throat. It's like in French, our "R"'s are very much in the back of our throat.

And here, there's these "windows" in the drawing (once again looking at a section of the drawing) I've labeled as "hairy." Here, to come back to the filigree one, I wrote, 'luscious dark green for smushy areas with yellow and gold accents for pleats in coats."

SM: It's like you're calling up a palette of textures and surfaces as you're coming up with these forms that move between the organic and the structural. Also, this was not something I was thinking about earlier, but when we're talking about interiority within the body I realized that there is no reference to gender.

VR: Thank you for bringing that up because I was rereading a text I had written a few years back, one of my artist statements in which I mention exactly that. I was using the word "beast" to describe the "beingness" of my shapes and then there is also a line that says, "these non-gendered bodies." So I think the paintings are really conjuring that sense, that feeling of body without making them specifically gendered. I'm really interested in something that is not necessarily human, because I am trying to craft something that is in a way, other.

SM: Alongside conversations about the body I know sports have factored heavily in your life.

VR: I've danced ever since I was really, really young. I had classical training, and in college, modern contemporary dance was a huge part of my life experience. I remember graduating from undergrad thinking, "I really want to do something with dance and painting and combine them."

Then I moved to Berlin. I was always focused on painting, obviously, but I kept asking myself how dance and painting could coexist, cohabitate in my work. I think it's taken me a while to reclaim the dance part. And then, I think a lot about muscle memory and in the paintings, I can now bring back these muscular shapes. I think that's how I've brought back the dance element, through the large format, through the intense physicality of making them. I don't dance anymore in terms of taking classes on a regular basis, but I go see a lot of dance in New York.

SM: Do you think something opened up in painting for you when you stopped dancing?

VR: Yes, eventually. At first it felt like a loss or like a part of me had died through the relinquishment of the practice. But then it came back. It took a few years because I had to go through other motions in painting first where I was working small and compactly, but then, I think it's just all those years of training.

SM: Like, it's in your DNA–

VR:In your DNA, in your musculature. And to come back to the idea of the circular, the movement inside this static two-dimensional thing we do, it's actually almost cinematographic. I like to think that the paintings keep expanding and unfolding.

SM: Right. You have to imagine, in a way, that you're in a VR space.

VR: Which are my initials, by the way.