

Art **Reviews**

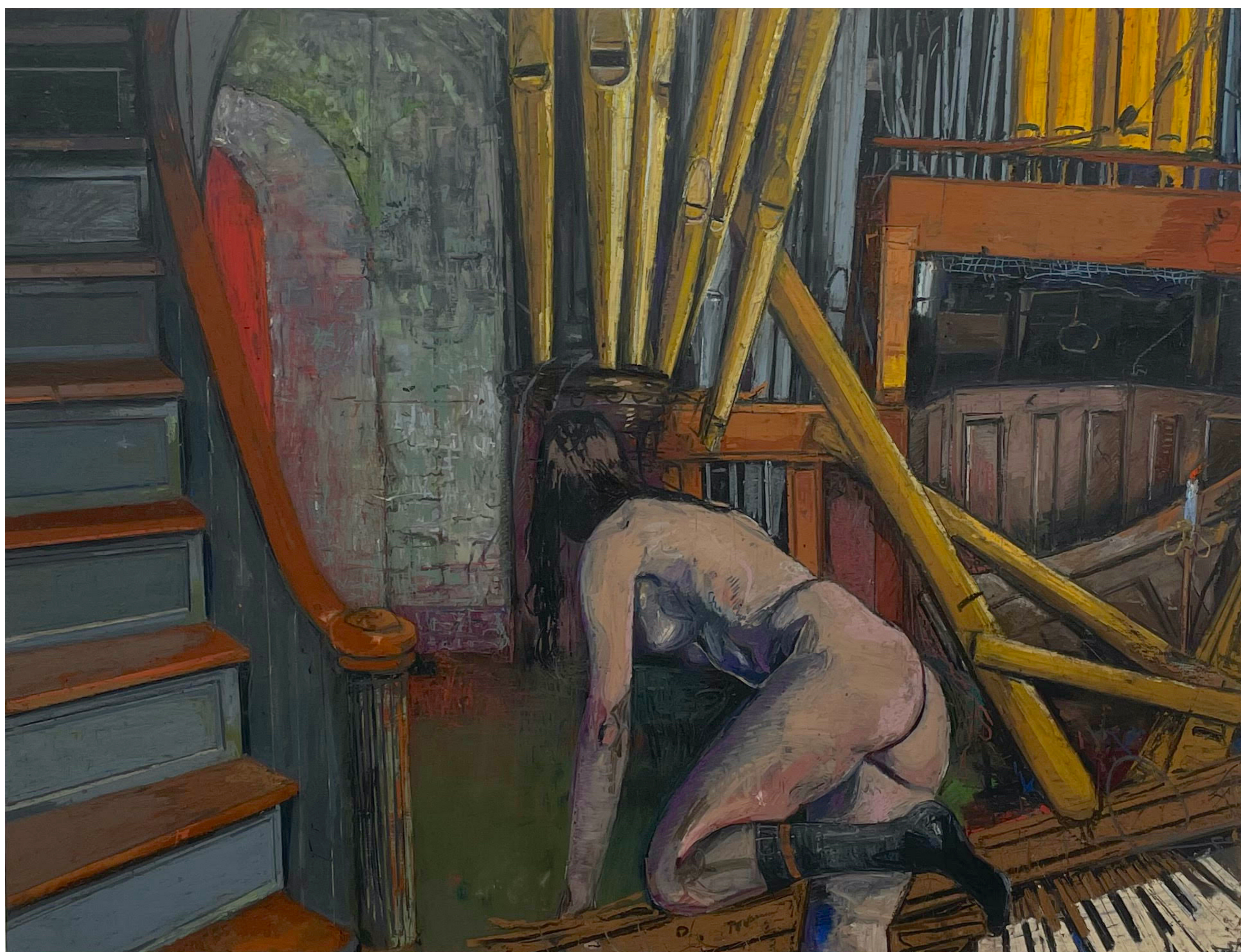
# Michelle Uckotter's Uncanny Vision of Trans Womanhood

In her visceral works, Uckotter examines a version of trans womanhood unseen in most mainstream narratives.



Grace Byron November 27, 2023

Share



Michelle Uckotter, "geiler Arsch" (2023), oil pastel on panel, 38 x 50 inches (all photos Grace Byron/Hyperallergic)

It was the first time my friend could recall four trans women artists having art shows in New York at once — and all within a few blocks of each other on the Lower East Side. Trans women artists are gaining visibility, from the recent survey *Full and Pure*, addressing embodiment and identity, at the Green Family Art Foundation to breakthrough shows for artists like Willa Wasserman and Cielo Félix-Hernández.

Michelle Uckotter's work presents a more grim, surreal look at girlhood than the tender, pastel memes that flood Instagram. Currently on view at King's Leap, the oil pastel self-portraits in *Trap Paintings Vol. 3* consider how we construct both literal and figurative trap doors.

In her visceral works, Uckotter examines a version of trans womanhood unseen in most mainstream narratives. Trap, for the uninitiated, is a colloquial term for trans women indicating that a woman “passes” enough to “trick” cis men into having sex with her. Here, it takes on a new meaning, one that plays on horror imagery and cult films like *Jennifer's Body*.



Michelle Uckotter, "Cage girl" (2023), oil pastel on panel, 40 x 30 inches

Her titles, such as “Satan” or “Is this a woman, a devil, or a mother?,” evoke the diabolical and construct a twisted image of womanhood separate from the simple portraits of empowerment often expected from trans narratives. Some trans women painters are moving toward self-portraiture but doing it slanted, with blurry brush strokes or partially hidden faces, as indeed a few of Uckotter's paintings do. Red and violet hues haunt her intimate renderings of grayish bodies, as tightly controlled line work and shading cohere into sinister shadows, crinkly trash bags, and shiny gobs of spit.

This reverie is fraught with cluttered attics, peepholes, and stairwells — including an actual peephole that allows viewers to peer at a Duchampian sculptural piece displaying an attic scene. In a dark wooden room, a wig, easel, revolver replica, and wooden chair recreate a disturbing version of the artist's studio depicted in many of the paintings on view.

The uncanny quality of the scenes is underscored by her figures' poses, some almost dismembered by their odd positions, mounting toy horses, crawling on stairwells, or drooling, their eyes obscured by hands and shadows.

“Girl in studio,” for instance, features a woman playing hide and seek in a pale pink ballerina tutu and hot pink sneakers. Her one visible blue eye pierces us, seemingly setting a trap for the viewer. Similarly, “Cage Girl” could be read as an image of degradation or a woman drooling over a fresh kill. These paintings draw on an archive of demented imagery recalling the work of Lucian Freud, Dora Maar, and Dorothea Tanning, wedded to a lurid Americana. Crawling out of the cluttered attic, Uckotter's figures mesmerize and beckon us with a monstrous siren song.



Michelle Uckotter, "Girl in studio" (2023), oil pastel on panel, 30 x 40 inches

*Michelle Uckotter: Trap Paintings Vol. 3 continues at King's Leap (105 Henry Street, Store 5, Two Bridges, Manhattan) through December 16. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.*