

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PRINT APRIL 2022

# CLOSE-UP: FAMILY RESEMBLANCE

Michael Ned Holte on Kaari Upson's "Portrait (Vain German)," 2020–21



Kaari Upson, *Portrait (Vain German)*, 2020–21, urethane, resin, Aqua-Resin, pigment, fiberglass, aluminum, 29 1/4 × 23 1/4 × 2 7/8". From the series "Portrait (Vain German)," 2020–21. © The Kaari Upson Trust.



**“OH, I AM SUCH A PAINTER!”** Kaari Upson once exclaimed, though she often went to great lengths to disguise this vocation by sublimating her painterly impulses into hallucinatory sculptures, screwball installations, and audacious performance videos. “Portrait (Vain German)” is the provocative title she gave to a series of modestly scaled paintings begun in 2020 and completed shortly before her death this past August. Thirty-two of these hung in a double band around her Los Angeles studio when I visited it in January; ten will make their debut in “The Milk of Dreams,” the fifty-ninth edition of the Venice Biennale, curated by Cecilia Alemani. Here, *paintings* is a helpful shorthand for complex cast objects made with tinted Aqua-Resin. They began as tiny, tile-like accretions of thickly impastoed pigment on canvasboard that were then scanned and enlarged. The complicated process that produced them is less important than their highly charged presence, which teeters between ravishing and lurid.



**Kaari Upson, *Portrait (Vain German)*, 2020–21**, urethane, resin, Aqua-Resin, pigment, fiberglass, aluminum, 29 1/4 × 23 × 5". From the series "Portrait (Vain German)," 2020–21. © The Kaari Upson Trust.

The parenthetical title of the works alludes to their art-historical lineage. The root of *vanity* is the Latin *vanus*, meaning “emptiness” or “futility.” In the *vanitas* genre, all of the iconography—skulls, melting candles, timepieces, flowers—symbolizes the passage of time and the inevitable victory of death. Still lifes serve as means of self-reflection—sometimes explicitly, as in Pieter Claesz’s *Vanitas Still Life with Self Portrait*, 1628. In Upson’s versions, a face usually emerges from the fray. Sometimes it takes the form of a skull; in several works in the series, the face is a lumpy, Guston-y clock, ticking away.

**The complicated process that produced the works is less important than their highly charged presence, which teeters between ravishing and lurid.**

Upson spent years riding a roller coaster of cancer treatment and remission, working in extraordinary bursts of productivity until her death last summer at the age of fifty-one. Protruding into the third dimension, these paintings are death masks. Throbbing purples and dusty pinks (more shades of Guston) appear frequently, recalling Upson's abject cast mattresses and sectional sofas, which were already stand-ins for bodies, crumpled, sagging, bruised, rotting. The equation is driven home with particular force in Upson's installation *Mother's Legs*, 2018–19 (first exhibited at Kunsthalle Basel, and later at Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebæk, Denmark), in which enormous knobby-kneed limbs in corporeal shades dangle from the ceiling, variously resembling legs, logs, or carcasses.



**Kaari Upson, *Mother's Legs*, 2018–19**, pigment, urethane, twenty-six parts. Installation view, Kunsthalle Basel, 2019. Photo: Philipp Hänger. © The Kaari Upson Trust.

The “German” of the parenthetical title undoubtedly refers to Upson’s mother, who emigrated from East Germany to San Bernardino, in California’s Inland Empire, and was often a subject of the artist’s work, though viewers may have to do some decoding to perceive this. Upson’s first solo exhibition in Germany, at Berlin’s Sprüth Magers in 2016, was titled “MMDP”—“My Mom Drinks Pepsi”—and included a “logbook” containing excerpts of her mother’s chilling unpublished autobiography, detailing her upbringing under a brutal, repressive regime. In the four-channel video *Recluse Brown*, 2015–16, the artist sports short-cropped blonde hair (a wig?), a red-white-and-blue checkered shirt, and jeans—a mom persona that in later exhibitions would appear en masse as life-size sculptures but here inhabits a Costco store as if it were paradise, sitting on a provisional throne constructed of Pepsi cases. In the artist’s own words, “She interrupts space like a giant lump.”





**Kaari Upson, *Recluse Brown*, 2015–16**, four-channel HD video, color, sound, 32 minutes 19 seconds. Installation view, Sprüth Magers, Berlin, 2016. Photo: Timo Ohler. © The Kaari Upson Trust.

My initial reaction to “Vain German” transported me back to my first meeting with Upson in 2007, in the “honeymoon period” of “The Larry Project” (2005–12), a sprawling investigation of a creepy San Bernardino playboy neighbor and his charred McMansion. In “Kiss,” a series of paintings from 2007, she smushed a portrait of Larry against her matching self-portrait, wet-on-wet, yielding a diptych that consecrated the psychic entanglement of artist and subject. The *Vain Germans* seem to do something similar, although in ways that are more elusive than allusive, and accumulative—the red-and-blue grid of the Costco costume makes a suggestive return in one of these paintings, for example. But mostly I sense an artist confronting a traumatic inheritance that no amount of painting could ever exorcise. That her mother’s death preceded her own by little more than a year makes it that much more wrenching to contemplate these painterly (self) portraits, which at once confirm Upson’s place in the *vanitas* tradition and urgently bring that tradition and its ever timely obsession with finality into the present.

*Michael Ned Holte is an independent curator who teaches in the art program at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia.*

All rights reserved. Artforum is a registered trademark of Artforum Media, LLC, New York, NY. .