

A WOMEN'S THING

Inside Laura Krifka's "Carousel": Exploring Desire, Femininity, and Power

by The AWT Editors September 23, 2024

Laura Krifka's art has long been a reflection of the complex interplay between power, desire, and identity. Her latest exhibition, "Carousel," now open at Luis De Jesus Los Angeles, continues this exploration, offering viewers a chance to confront the ever-changing nature of the feminine experience. Through a series of evocative figurative paintings, Krifka questions societal constructs of desire while examining how the gaze—both external and internal—shapes our sense of self.

For Krifka, the concept of the carousel is a metaphor for the cycles we experience as we navigate our lives in the context of femininity. "It's a ride we're on, around and around, for better or for worse," she clarifies. In her work, the feminine is both powerful and elusive, a source of personal agency as well as societal control. This tension is at the heart of "Carousel," where her subjects are caught in moments that reflect beauty and the anxieties of immobility as aging starts to play a role in these dynamics.

Beyond themes of identity, Krifka's work is greatly personal. As both an artist and a mother, she reflects on how motherhood has redefined her life. What once felt like a full-time commitment to her art and teaching has now expanded into a constant negotiation between her creative process and the demands of parenting.

As "Carousel" runs from September 14 through October 26, 2024, Krifka hopes that her new show will encourage viewers to question their own identities and engage with parts of themselves they may not be fully familiar with. Ultimately, she says, "I hope when people leave my show, they feel like they know themselves less than when they walked in."

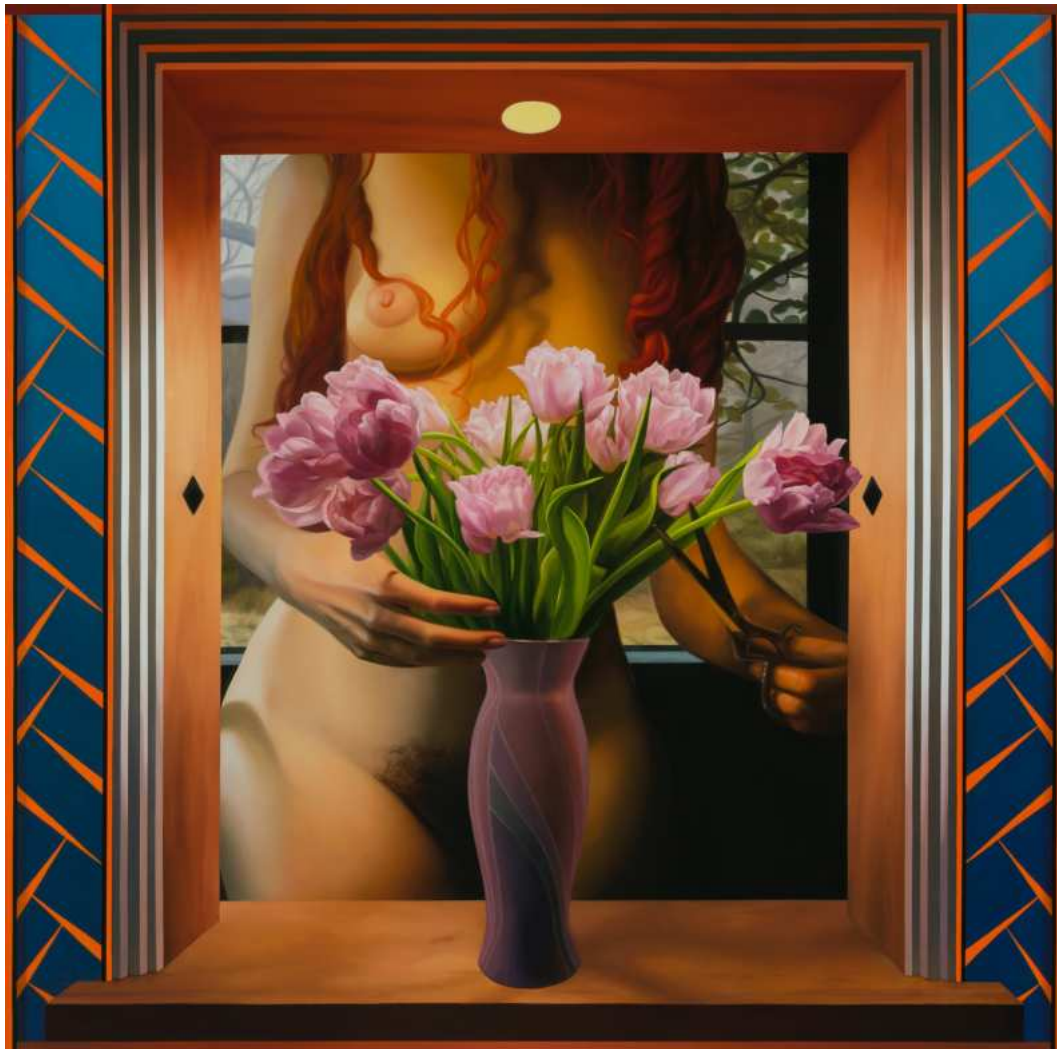


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Laura Krifka
Metronome, 2024
Oil on canvas
48 x 72 in (121.9 x 182.9 cm)
Courtesy of Laura Krifka and Luis De Jesus Los Angeles



Laura Krifka
In Bloom, 2024
Oil on panel
36 x 36 in (91.4 x 91.4 cm)
Courtesy of Laura Krifka and Luis De Jesus Los Angeles

Laura, thank you so much for taking the time to sit down with us!—“Carousel” is an exploration of feminine identity and societal constructs of desire. What inspired you to tackle these themes, and how did the idea of the carousel come into play?

Laura Krifka: I am interested in power dynamics, and how they are asserted, subverted, and used by people and social structures throughout history. The idea of the “feminine” has always been provocative to me—it is coveted, feared, revered, and disdained. Everyone relates to the feminine in a different way—claiming it, desiring it, rejecting it, etc. It plays a tricky role in our culture because

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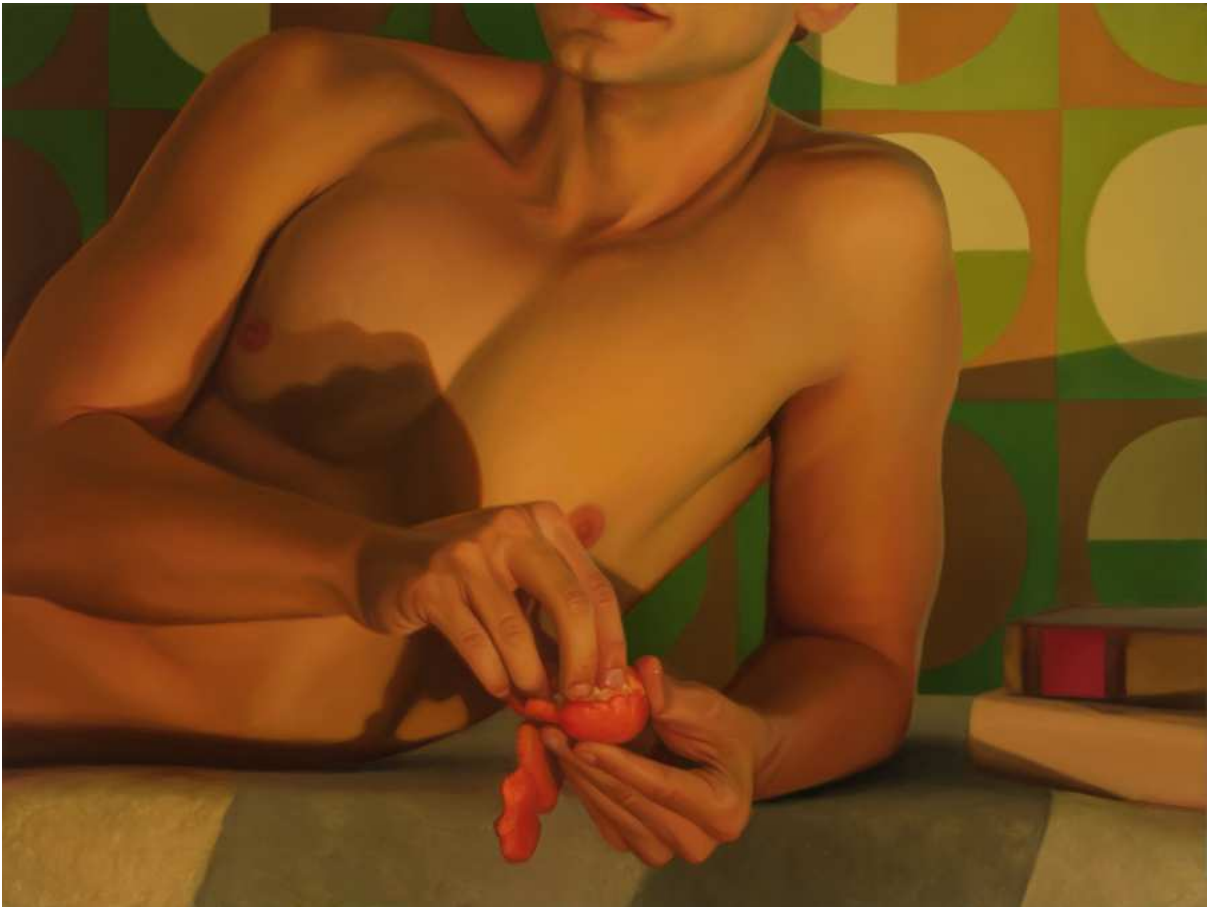
it's a fluid concept—evolving and ever-changing. I think this fluidity is one of the reasons it's so interesting to me, as it relates specifically to power. How the construct of the feminine has been used as a means of personal agency, a way of playing into and against social constructs to shape our lives in a way of our choosing. And, on the flip side, how it has been used as a means of social control. In this show, I am grappling with this balance, with an added layer of exploring how aging starts to play a role in the efficacy of this kind of power altogether. All of these ideas are continually present and linked as we move through the world, a lot like a carousel, a ride we are on, around and around, for better or for worse.



Laura Krifka
Turn On, 2024
Oil on linen
48 x 48 in (121.9 x 121.9 cm)
Courtesy of Laura Krifka and Luis De Jesus Los Angeles

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Laura Krifka
Slice, 2024
Oil on linen
18 x 24 in (45.7 x 61 cm)
Courtesy of Laura Krifka and Luis De Jesus Los Angeles



Laura Krifka
Smile, 2024
Oil on canvas
36 x 36 in (91.4 x 91.4 cm)
Courtesy of Laura Krifka and Luis De Jesus Los Angeles

Your work often plays with the concept of the [gaze](#)—how we look at others and how we’re looked at. Has your perspective on this evolved over the years, specifically in the context of your new series?

Laura Krifka: I think of our gaze as an amalgamation of all the things we have seen, taken in, and internalized, which we then project out onto the world around us. My gaze was shaped as a young woman by what was around me—primarily middle-class, conservative, religious views. I saw the

world through a lens of predestination, an inherent belief that “everything happens for a reason,” peppered with a substantial dose of my own moral and spiritual certainty.

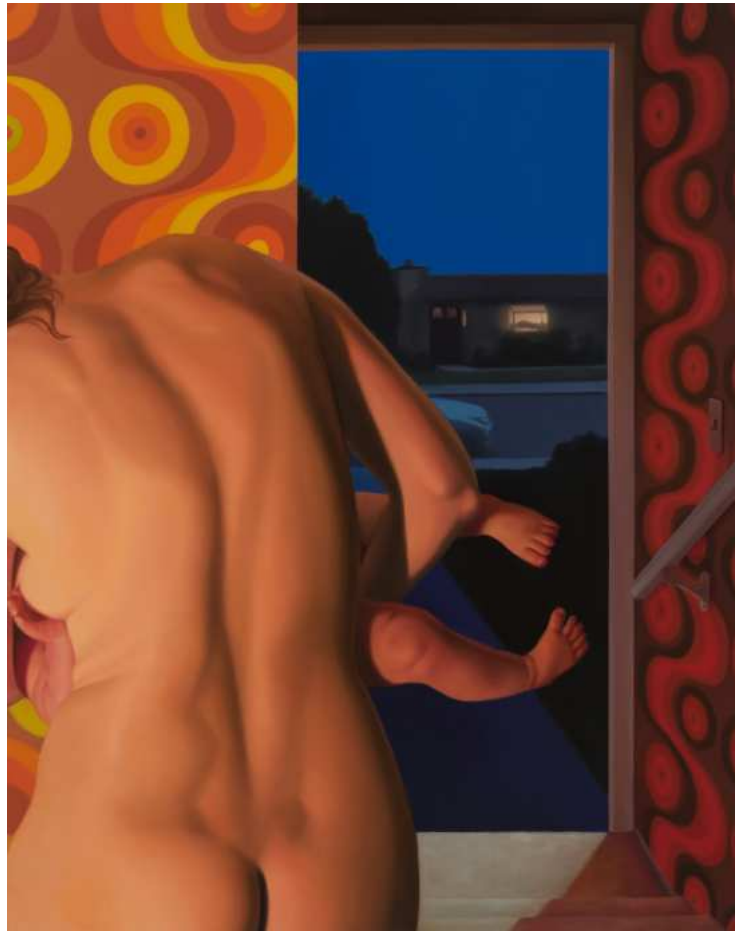
The idea of the “feminine” has always been provocative to me—it is coveted, feared, revered, and disdained. Everyone relates to the feminine in a different way—claiming it, desiring it, rejecting it, etc. It plays a tricky role in our culture because it’s a fluid concept—evolving and ever-changing.

As I grew up and made my own choices, life unfolded, and these views changed dramatically. A lot of the paintings of my twenties were spent untangling purity, [shame](#), and desire. As I got older, I became increasingly invested in questioning any kind of “certainty” about how the world should be. After all, a lot of dangerous stuff happens when we claim moral superiority.

In my current work, the same frictions are there from my youth but layered into them are the realized or sobering experiences of growing up. When you are 19 and making work about the transient nature of beauty, that work contains a level of both truth and fantasy—doing it at 39 hits differently. I hold the gaze of my 19-year-old self concurrently with my own. I can see how she sees things, but I am different now, in that I see so much more. The show reflects this kind of fracturing, repetition, and evolution. Figures and images echo throughout the series, calling back to each other as they mutate into something new.

You’ve talked about the technical challenges you love, like dealing with hard edges and value shifts. What is it about these challenges that keeps you hooked, and how does it all fit into your bigger creative process?

Laura Krifka: I like solving complicated problems and working with my hands. I’m always trying to do something new in a painting to see what kind of nonsense I can pull off. Painting can be a kind of magic. You can make the impossible real. Who doesn’t want to make magic?



Laura Krifka
Hunger, 2024
Oil on panel
30 x 24 in (76.2 x 61 cm)
Courtesy of Laura Krifka and Luis De Jesus Los Angeles

You once mentioned that motherhood has redefined everything for you—making some things easier and others harder. How do you feel this shift has impacted the themes or the way you create?

Laura Krifka: Before becoming a parent I was an artist and a professor. That took up all of my time, and they both felt like full-time jobs because *they are* full-time jobs. When I became a parent I suddenly had three full-time jobs! Hence, the proverbial wheel of reinvention. It was the greatest and most painful metamorphosis of my life. Miranda July wrote a great book recently, called, “All Fours.” On page 6, she spoke to this division more than anything I have ever read:

“I’m perpetually at a crucial turning point: everything is forever about to be revealed. At five o’clock I have to consciously dial myself down before reentering the house, like Astronaut Buzz Aldrin preparing to unload the dishwasher immediately after returning from the moon.”

Being a parent makes every single thing in my life harder, but it is by far the most interesting and rewarding thing I have ever experienced.

I have always made work about motherhood, but before I became a parent a lot of that work was about grappling with my fears of becoming a mother, and what it meant to be a mother in our culture. Now, being on the other side of it, I am speaking to the physicality of it, the aftermath—whole new levels of love, dread, and obsession—in that order!

Looking back at pieces like “Boys in Bloom,” you’ve talked about the mix of emotions that comes with seeing your old work. How do you feel about your journey from those early days to now, and is there anything you’d tell your younger self?

Laura Krifka: I would tell myself the same things I tell my students every year, “Try to enjoy it. Invest in your friends and colleagues and maintain relationships you can trust. Advocate for yourself. You can’t wait for someone else to make your dreams happen.”

You balance self-awareness with humor in your reflections. How do you keep self-doubt from creeping in too much while still being honest about your growth?

Laura Krifka: It’s hard to tell the difference between being honest with yourself and tearing yourself down. It can be paralyzing.

I believe the creative process is a sacred, wild, and precious thing. You have to really stew in it. Revel in uncertainty and trust you will eventually find your way to some sort of answer. Make something with your whole heart, whatever it is, no matter how stupid. You have to fight for it and believe in it when you make it. Then when you finish, you judge it mercilessly. There’s a time and a place for being critical, the infancy of an idea is not that place.

I believe the creative process is a sacred, wild, and precious thing.

Also, not everyone is going to like your work. Sometimes I feel badly because I read a snide comment someone made, or feel snubbed by someone cool or whatever. It’s just part of it. Being an artist means you make things and put it out there. People will look at it and like it, hate it, or be indifferent. No matter how many people like your work, it feels as if it is never enough. You find yourself asking, “Is this why I made this? Was that what I was waiting for?” Even when great things happen. You have to just roll with it and let it all go.

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Laura Krifka
Golden, 2024
Oil on panel
20 × 16 in (50.8 × 40.6 cm)
Courtesy of Laura Krifka and Luis De Jesus Los Angeles



Laura Krifka
Curve, 2024
Oil on panel
20 × 16 in (50.8 × 40.6 cm)
Courtesy of Laura Krifka and Luis De Jesus Los Angeles

Teaching and being a professor must bring a lot of new perspectives into your life. How does your work with students influence your own creative process?

Laura Krifka: Working with students has a way of keeping you honest. I admire the level of integrity I encounter every day, the earnestness. The importance of making a difference. We talk a lot about the role art plays in our culture, what it can do, cannot do, and what it could do. It makes you believe in people. It's hard to be jaded when you have that level of hope and excitement around you. I can say with 100% certainty that the best conversations I have ever had about art and life happen with my Junior and Senior undergrad students every year. It keeps me excited to work and make things and keep going.

With everything you juggle—being an artist, a mom, an arts educator—how do you stay motivated? What keeps you going?

Laura Krifka: I don't have any other choice? (that's sort of a joke but not really)

With “Carousel” diving into gender and desire, what are you hoping people take away from the exhibition?

Laura Krifka: The greatest homerun-out-of-the-park outcome would be that my show seduces people into parts of themselves that are unfamiliar, that they spend time with thoughts and feelings that don't run their usual script. I hope when people leave my show they feel like they know themselves less than when they walked in.

What's next for you? Are there any new projects you're excited to explore?

Laura Krifka: I'm looking forward to not knowing what I am about to make honestly. I love the time before I start something new, it could be anything! Maybe I am going to make the greatest painting I have ever made and it's going to blow the socks off all my heroes and everyone will love it and I will make a million bucks. Maybe it will be dumb and boring and I will throw it in the trash. Not knowing is the most exciting thing of all.

See “Carousel” at [Luis De Jesus](#) Los Angeles, on view until October 26, 2024.

Featured image: Laura Krifka. Lookout, 2024. Oil on panel, 20 × 16 in (50.8 × 40.6 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Luis De Jesus Los Angeles.