

ANNA BENAROYA

The artist's London debut explores
the racy allure of cars and women.

Text by Veena McCool

Ahead of her first solo exhibition outside of the US this Spring at Carl Kostyál's gallery in Mayfair, artist Ana Benaroya sits down with us to tell us what inspired her latest paintings, how her background in illustration and distinctive approach to painting has garnered her a global following, and what's next in her flourishing career.

New Jersey-based artist Ana Benaroya is a force. A 2019 MFA graduate of the Yale School of Art, she captures the vibrancy, power and desire of women in her paintings through the use of voluminous shapes, exaggerated corporeal forms, arresting colour and tongue-in-cheek vocabulary. Inspired by the classic male hero archetype in comics and cartoons, Benaroya's work is underpinned by her mastery of illustration, having spent a decade working in graphic design prior to enrolling at Yale.

Following successful solo exhibitions in New York and Los Angeles despite the pandemic, Benaroya's first show in Europe, *The Passenger*, opened in Carl Kostyál's gallery in Mayfair on April 8th. Drawing inspiration from the visual culture of cars in 1950s Hollywood, Benaroya reimagines the racy allure of automobiles through the perspective of women as both drivers and passengers for the show.



Artist Ana Benaroya, photographed by Laura June Kirsch.

"Cars are shiny, metallic and sexy, which relate to how I paint female figures," she says of the relationship between car bodies and female bodies, which forms the focal point of the show. Benaroya studied classic American cars as symbols of masculinity, referencing old photos of Hollywood celebrities and stills from James Bond movies to inspire the eleven works on canvas she created for *The Passenger*.

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Ana Benaroya, pictured with "The Chauffeur", one of three larger paintings in the London show and a personal favourite of the artist.

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Ana Benaroya, pictured with artworks. Photograph credited to Art of Choice

As a child, the artist describes a fascination with superheroes, athletes and muscular male figures, which informed her early drawing before her transition to painting saw a greater focus on female figures. “I play with a lot of subject matter that is in the arena of male interest while trying to reappropriate parts of it into the female world,” she says. “I didn’t realise I was gay until my undergraduate years and didn’t accept it until later, so a large part for me was identifying with that figure and being drawn to it.”

Morgan Aguiar-Lucander, exhibition curator and longtime collaborator of Benaroya, describes the show’s depictions of women enjoying cars both to a real and implied audience of women. “There’s this idea of women’s bodies being used to market cars to men, and [Benaroya] loves to invert these gender tropes by playing them back against each other,” he says. The artist’s paintings have been exhibited across the US, and she has a following in Asia despite never having shown there. Aguiar-Lucander hopes the exhibition will introduce Benaroya’s work to more European collectors and broaden her global audience.

Much like *The Passenger*, the artist’s previous exhibitions in New York and Los Angeles have been shaped by strong narratives and locations. Her LA show, which opened in February 2020, drew inspiration from Rick’s

Cafe in the movie Casablanca. “The idea was you’d walk through the show and see something happening in one corner of the room or cafe, and look over your shoulder and see something else in that space,” she says. Similarly, her New York show at Ross + Kramer Gallery in late 2020, entitled *The Softest Place on Earth*, was reminiscent of a party hosted at a woman’s apartment - a nod to Gertrude Stein’s salon.

“I made all the work for the New York show during the pandemic, and because of that there was some magic to it,” she says. “I was proud that the drawings I exhibited were well received, because illustration was where I started and bringing that back to show alongside my paintings makes me happy to have both of them.”

The artist describes her sources as largely low-brow, rooted in a belief that her art should appeal to a broad audience and following a sense of disconnectedness to the fine art world during her time at graduate school. Benaroya uses approachable visual language in her pieces, and has broadened her mediums to include zines, bronze sculpture and soon glass works to ensure her art reaches audiences beyond established collectors.

For Aguiar-Lucander, the joy found in the bodies of the artist’s characters is echoed by the market’s enthusiasm for her pieces. “There’s a lot of genuine passion for her work and she often brings an audience with her,” he says, recalling a time when one of Benaroya’s paintings was on view in a group show during Art Basel and a young buyer flew in from Texas to



It Was Summer, I was There, So Was She, acrylic, spray paint, and oil paint on canvas, 2020.

purchase her piece in person. “Galleries can provide structure and exhibition space and help build your career, but when it comes to injecting excitement into the practice, that comes from the artist.” Having worked with Benaroya since her MFA days at the Yale School of Art, he attests to her unwavering dedication. “She’s been painting the same way since I’ve known her and she’s never chased anything, she’s always done her own thing and her paintings drive demand.”

My Reflection of You, acrylic, spray paint, and oil paint on canvas, 2020.



Queen of the House, oil and acrylic on canvas



Following a hectic schedule of exhibitions over the past few years, Benaroya is in early discussions with collaborators about her next move. Until then, she plans on returning to illustration and making a new body of drawings for herself, using markers and brush pens from her studio near Grove Street in New Jersey.

“I hope to travel at some point during the London show and hopefully meet new people, but other than that I don’t really know what’s next,” she says. “I’m just hoping for excitement.”