

**Bianca Fields. *Like a Rowdy Raccoon* at Dragon, Crab and Turtle. 11 April—May 2021.
By Elizabeth Bernhardt, PhD**

Meet Bianca Fields. She grew up in an artistic household in Cleveland, Ohio, as her father was an artist and an inspiration, and she followed his lead by earning her BFA in Painting from the Cleveland Institute of Art (2019). She is currently based in Kansas City, Missouri.

Bianca chooses to work with an unusual and original mix of figures from American pop culture alongside primates and savage beasts found in jungles, forests and zoos. She forces us to question our role and responsibilities in the world as humans.

Looking at her body of work in this show takes us on the equivalent of a roller coaster ride, a somewhat frenzied experience where we might laugh and feel nostalgia for certain cartoon characters—or perhaps we might turn to feel fear and scream or cry as if caught in a childlike nightmare.



Bianca's response to her experiences in 21st century living is highly original. She enters the psyche of make-believe characters as well as that of wild primates. Humans created the cartoon characters and yet they are themselves part of the primate family—so there is ample food for thought about our place in the larger scheme of things. Are we more like contrived puppet actors following scripts on TV invented by fellow humans, or are we more like wild animals improvising our lives? Should we live our lives in a somewhat naive, blissful fashion based on idealised scripts from *Sesame Street* or in a more defensive and aggressive mode as if we were fighting for survival in nature alongside other hungry creatures? Bianca reminds us that humans can act in many ways and exist in many forms, from happy and naive to hateful and aggressive, from ignorant and absurd to sophisticated, scientific animals of reason...and in her painting world, these characters can coexist adjacent to and in dialogue with one another on the same canvas.

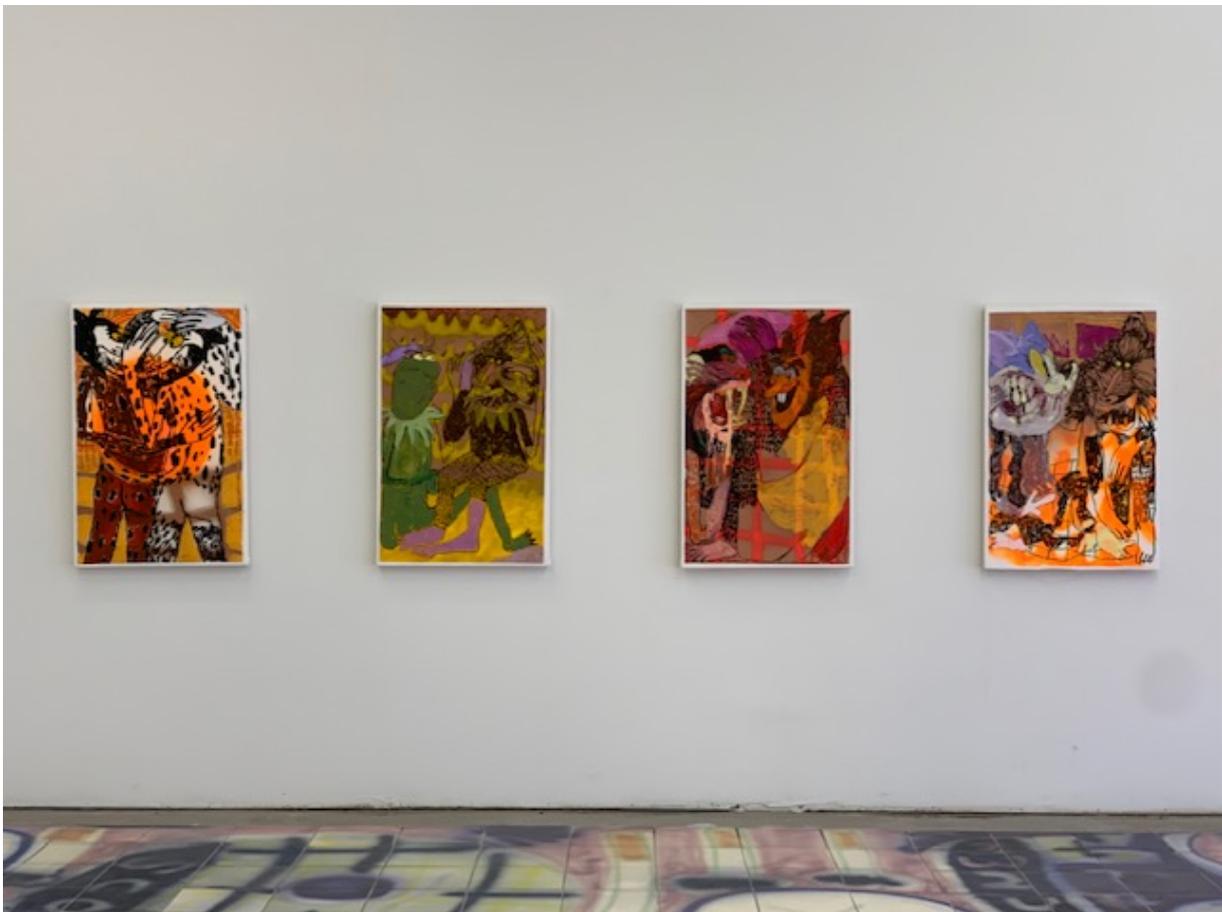


Many of Bianca's works focus on Count von Count, the iconic counting character (loosely based on Count Dracula) who has appeared on *Sesame Street* since 1972—yet who is already allegedly 1,832,652 years old. Bianca loved math in school, especially geometry and pre-calculus so it's no surprise she was attracted to a figure who loves numbers and wholeheartedly promotes them. Bianca finds it amusing that he counts so much and that so much can allegedly be quantifiable in life; she revisited his persona when he appeared as a popular meme in 2020.

For this show Bianca created a giant version of the Count, one with elongated arms and gigantic hands. Her soft sculpture currently dangles over the loft ledge, watching over the gallery while we can imagine him counting drawings, window frames, floor tiles, lightbulbs, and possibly humans.

Below one of his arms hangs one of Bianca's many drawings of the Count. In this particular rendition he can be seen in an intense emotional state, crying over bananas. Near that drawing hangs another portrait of the Count who shares the canvas with a portrait of a Mandrill monkey from equatorial Africa. Bianca seems to feel nostalgia not only for childhood cartoons but also for our deep human past fixed in the primate world.

Besides the Count, Bianca turns to other "vintage" characters from *Tom and Jerry* (created 1940), *Kermit The Frog* (created 1955) and the cereal box legend *Count Chocula* who has appeared on grocery store shelves since 1971. Bianca is young but already has an incredible understanding of materials, especially colourful paints and their textures, and how they can help her amplify her intentions.



Four paintings featuring: two cheetahs embracing; Kermit the Frog and a Mandrill monkey; a vicious monkey and Count Chocula; Tom and another Mandrill monkey.

The artist certainly questions traditional concepts of beauty—and apparently for Bianca beauty means originality, truth, open-mindedness, open-endedness, inner psychological investigation, vulnerability, and perhaps an unresolved understanding of how we should act as humans. If we zoom in to look more closely at her work we might describe her painting as luscious, messy, grotesque, goopy, juicy, layered, bloody or simply bizarre. We could also say that her work is full of cartoon energy, savage beast energy, fantasy, fear, and humor—all in one. The works are so

intense at times that they appear to create visual noise—screaming out to be seen.

Take, for example, the Count (here on the right), who is painted rich and thick. In this particular work, the Count might be compared to some of the earlier work by Katherine Bernhardt (b. 1975) who has also focused on thick painterly renditions of E.T. and other pop cultural figures.



Bianca's subject matter recalls that of another female artist, Joyce Pensato (1941-2019), who focused a lot of her energy on renditions of Mickey Mouse, Batman, and other American cultural icons. Bianca's work also recalls some of the artistic techniques used by Philip Guston (1913-1980). The unusual content matter in the portraits also loosely references the Italian Mannerist movement during which time painters chose to juxtapose the odd and unexpected, particularly present in the work of Agnolo di Cosimo Bronzino (1503-1572); his painting here (on the left) features Venus, Cupid, honeycomb, a snake, a scorpion, Father Time, masks, and a personification of syphilis. Bianca herself loves the whim, color and style in the work of the contemporary American painter Laura Owens (b. 1970).

More juicy, goopy and/or grotesque methods can be seen in these final three images (below) that highlight some of the details of certain paintings and a drawing. The images focus also on fangs, mouths, and dripping saliva paint. Just as the Count depends on quantification through numbers to create his sense of reality, Bianca creates her sense of reality from unquantifiable brushstrokes and qualitatively rendered wild animals. Her work helps us all search for our soul, our identity—and perhaps these works are all self-portraits of who we are as we create and continually reshape for ourselves our own personal sense of humanity.

