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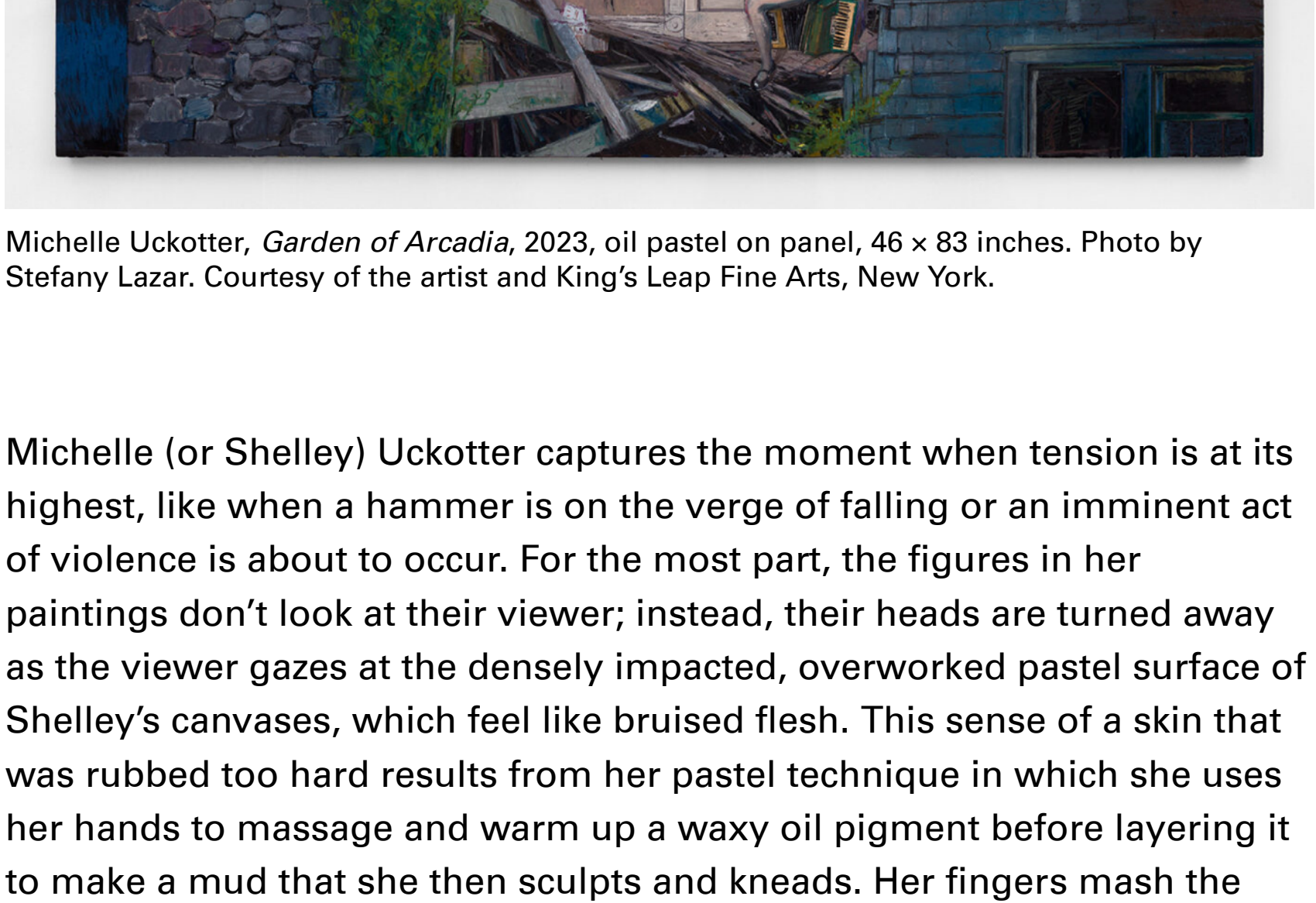
Michelle Uckotter Interviewed by Almog Cohen-Kashi

Ominously smudged femme forms.

Nov 22, 2023

Interview

Art



Michelle Uckotter, *Garden of Arcadia*, 2023, oil pastel on panel, 46 x 83 inches. Photo by Stefany Lazar. Courtesy of the artist and King's Leap Fine Arts, New York.

Michelle (or Shelley) Uckotter captures the moment when tension is at its highest, like when a hammer is on the verge of falling or an imminent act of violence is about to occur. For the most part, the figures in her paintings don't look at their viewer; instead, their heads are turned away as the viewer gazes at the densely impacted, overworked pastel surface of Shelley's canvases, which feel like bruised flesh. This sense of a skin that was rubbed too hard results from her pastel technique in which she uses her hands to massage and warm up a waxy oil pigment before layering it to make a mud that she then sculpts and kneads. Her fingers mash the mud as if she's rubbing away layers of filth from the skin of the girls in her paintings to cleanse them of their impurities. Shelley's hands traveling over her figures establish a parallel between viewing and touching that stimulates a longing for something tactile encoded as atavistic absorption in the physical self.

—Almog Cohen-Kashi

Almog Cohen-Kashi
Your current show at King's Leap is divided into two parts across the gallery's two floors. Can you tell me more about this decision?

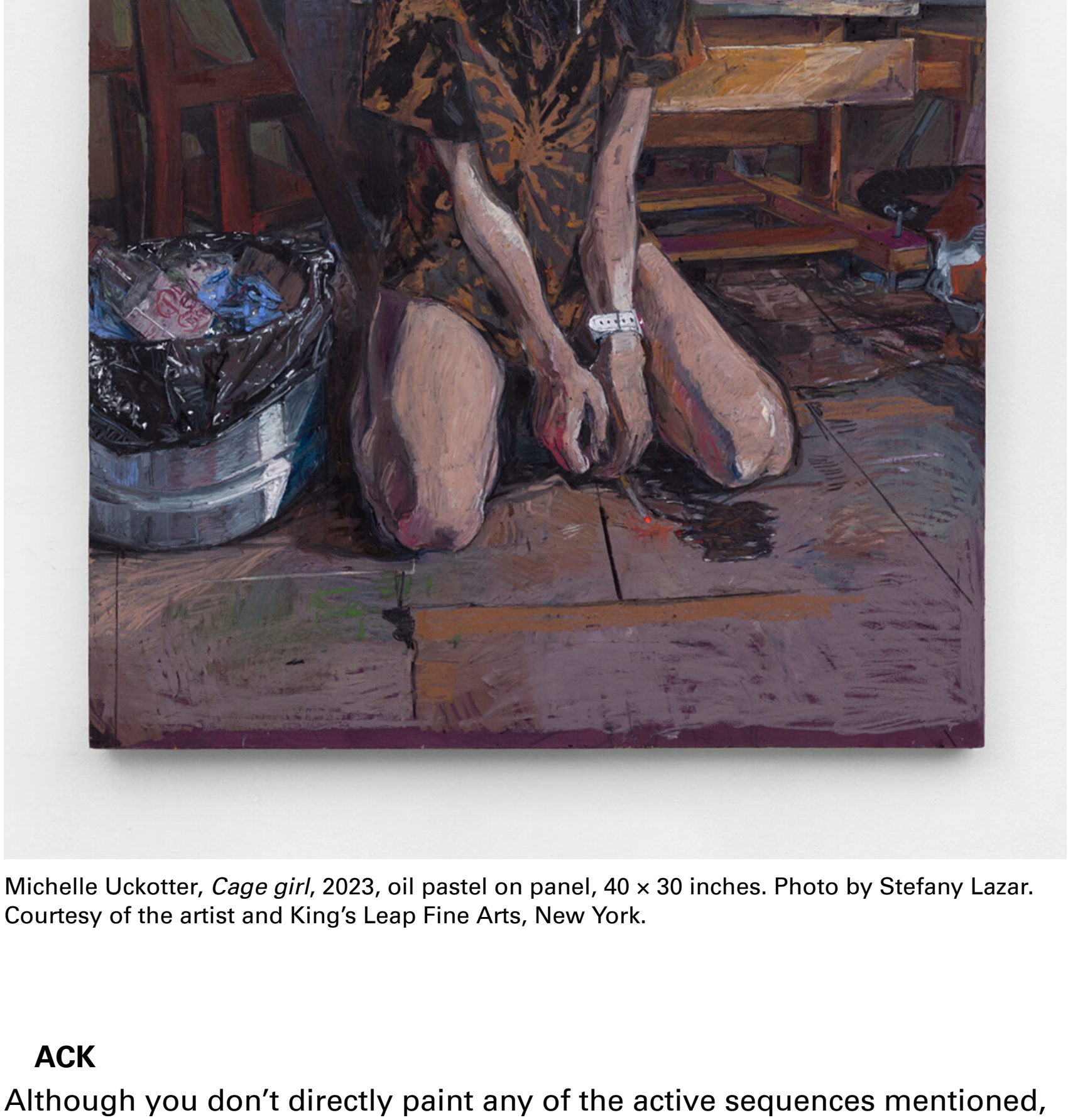
Michelle Uckotter
Yes, the basement is my "studio," and upstairs is the "attic." The attic is the construct, the magical realism, the unreality space where all my work lives; the basement is a representation of where I create that image, my studio. Most of the paintings are in the basement, including one self-portrait and two other portraits of models I know. I put myself in the painting to play with the expectations of "the artist." Of course, I'm drooling and pissing myself; I make myself look demented. I'm turning myself into a character as one of the women by inserting my image into the narrative with them.

ACK
So they're women now, not girls? In all your work you use titles to refer to your figures as "girls." What is the identity of these figures. Who are they?

MU
No, they're girls. I've been doing this for a while, telling myself that I'm grown up now and that I need to stop calling them girls; but they're girls. I call them girls in the same way Kim Gordon does when she talks about girlhood to discuss femininity that's about more than one corner of the reality of being a woman. I think my women are lost; I think there's a sort of mystique to them. For me, it's like mourning a girlhood that I never experienced. There's a sadness to it, and I think my girls are characters plucked out of specific films, like Gena Rowlands from a Cassavetes movie, Laura Dern in *Blue Velvet*, Shelley Duvall in *The Shining*. I don't know if they are frightened, per se.

ACK
Why would they be frightened?

MU
Because they're in attic spaces where it's unclear what's going on in their surroundings. This ambiguity is built into the work. Part of the reason why I don't depict them in explicit scenes of sex or violence is because I don't think it's the job of a painting to show those direct images. Maybe movies or pornography have that role, but painting is more about creating a scenario within an image that offers the idea of something and creates questions that pull from reality while not necessarily giving you what you want. In Lisa Yuskavage's work, you don't see penetration; but you do in John Currin's paintings. If I'm depicting something sexual, there's some shyness to it, like Yuskavage, because it denies the viewer the satisfaction of seeing a woman. It feels ambiguous because girlhood is about being a tease. This puts the viewer in a state of anticipation. You get the feeling that someone is about to be fucked or their guts are going to be cut open. I don't need to depict that, just imply it.



Michelle Uckotter, *Cage girl*, 2023, oil pastel on panel, 40 x 30 inches. Photo by Stefany Lazar. Courtesy of the artist and King's Leap Fine Arts, New York.

ACK
Although you don't directly paint any of the active sequences mentioned, you have your girls looking away from your viewers. Can you talk about this approach?

MU
It's easier to paint, and it doesn't have the baggage of an expression. I have a few pieces where full faces are visible. I started those by having one eye on the figure so I could identify where they were looking or if they were aware of being looked at. That's the femme experience: Is someone looking at me? Am I being perceived, or is this all in my head? After I started to think about how horrifying and grotesque it is to not have a face on them, I thought, Why not have their heads turned or cover their faces with hair? It feels more organic so that the viewer doesn't have to make such large, logical jumps.

ACK
I'm interested in the title of the show because you had *Trap Paintings* at A.D. Gallery in 2020, *Trap Paintings Vol. 2* at King's Leap in 2021, and now this is the third iteration of an ongoing series. Is there a progression?

MU
The *Trap Paintings* are all the solo shows I had in New York City. When I came up with the name, I didn't know what to do, so I thought about the transphobic slur "trap" and its many meanings. I feel sensitive about putting forth my identity as a trans woman because I'm also aware that I'm putting myself into a market that lacks empathy from any real experience. Serializing the titles of my shows helps provide distance from the work and serves as a wink to anyone who knows what's up.



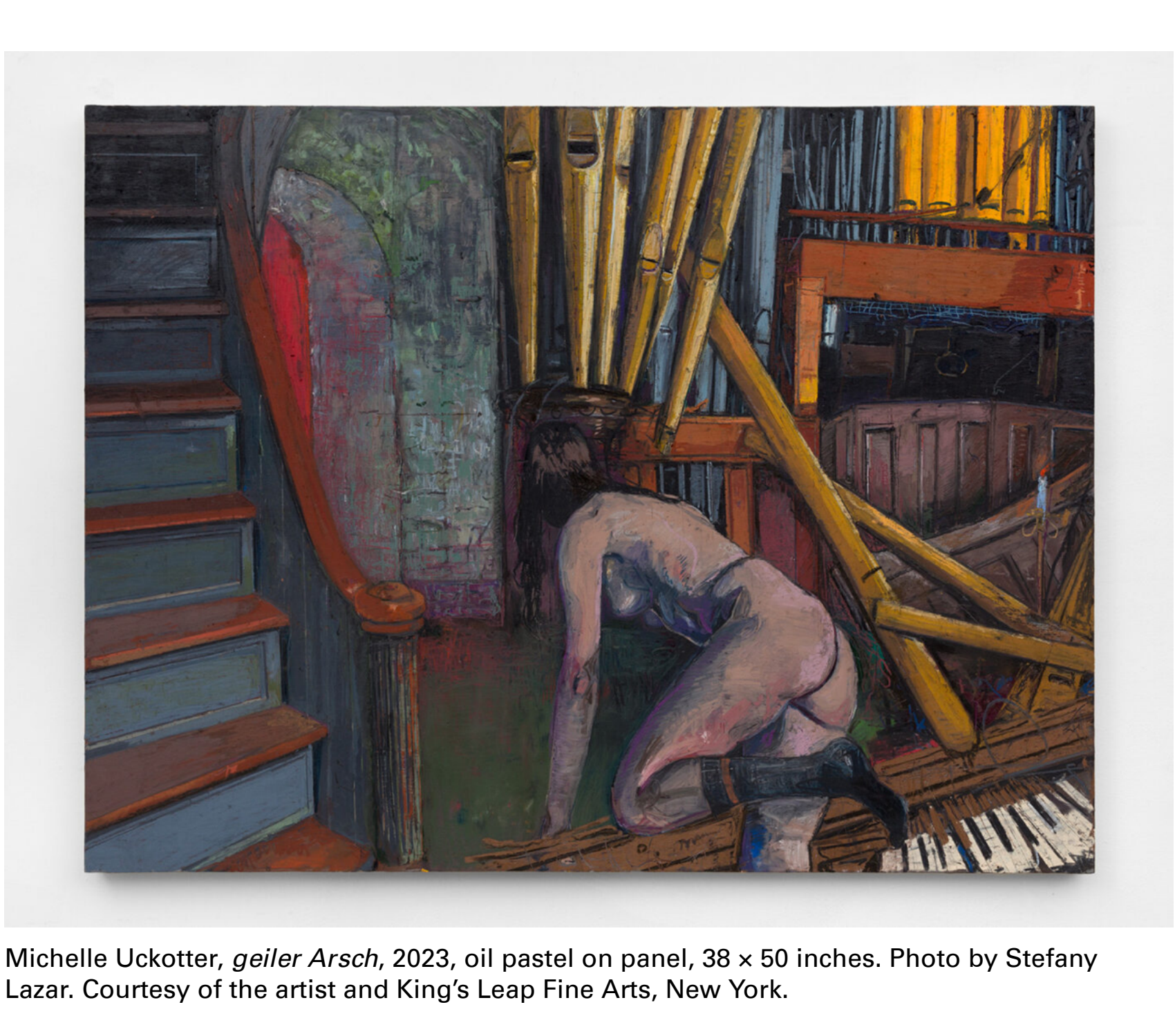
Michelle Uckotter, *Satan*, 2023, oil pastel on panel, 46 x 83 inches. Photo by Stefany Lazar. Courtesy of the artist and King's Leap Fine Arts, New York.

ACK
It's like the next movie. We had *Trap Paintings*, then we had the sequel, and now the threequel. Each series is aware of itself and remains consistent in crucial elements that become characters, including your material, which is oil pastel. It's funny that you call yourself a painter because you don't use any paint.

MU
I'm approaching painting from an angle that is materially untraditional. I'm using pastels, which gives me the ability to draw and sculpt, but I'm thinking like a painter. I'm concerned with edges and the moments when colors meet. While I don't use brushes, my fingers mimic everything that a brush would do, helping me blend on the surface of my canvases. It's all just hanging out there.

ACK
You're showing where you labor and how you labor, both on the canvas and in your depiction of your studio. What's the significance of revealing to people how and where you enact the work of being an artist?

MU
Building a mystery is fun, but I like inserting myself into my work. That's what Francis Bacon did with his studio, and it turned him into complete artifice. I think it's an interesting idea to create a narrative about yourself where what you say becomes truth and what you actually are is forgotten. An enticing thing about taking ownership of one's self is that you can become whatever you want, which is why I place myself in my work. Also, my studio is a character. In the installation piece upstairs, I put the layers of cardboard I lay down in my studio that are smushed with oil pastel I ground in with my shoes. It's filthy and covered in a gray-tone soot.



Michelle Uckotter, *gailer Arsch*, 2023, oil pastel on panel, 38 x 50 inches. Photo by Stefany Lazar. Courtesy of the artist and King's Leap Fine Arts, New York.

ACK
That gray that you mash into your floor is the same gray you typically blend into your figure's skin, but in your new self-portrait the skin has more life in it.

MU
Yes, I'm starting to make them a bit fleshier. When I initially started, my girls were gray, and that was a way for me to simplify the problem of depicting a body in a space. Now I'm putting warmer hues in to make people think that maybe there was blood running through their veins at some point. It adds to a sense of horror or uneasiness. It's the same with the faces; somehow it makes them slightly more plausible.

ACK
It's like Alan Longino wrote in his press release for your Independent booth: "Their bodies do not look physically plausible, because their trajectories to dominance isn't one recognized as plausible unto the normative viewer." But you aren't thinking about the normative viewer?

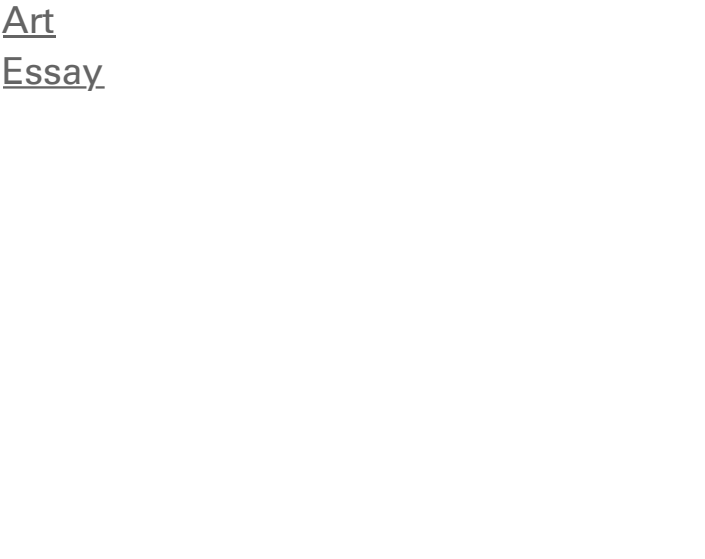
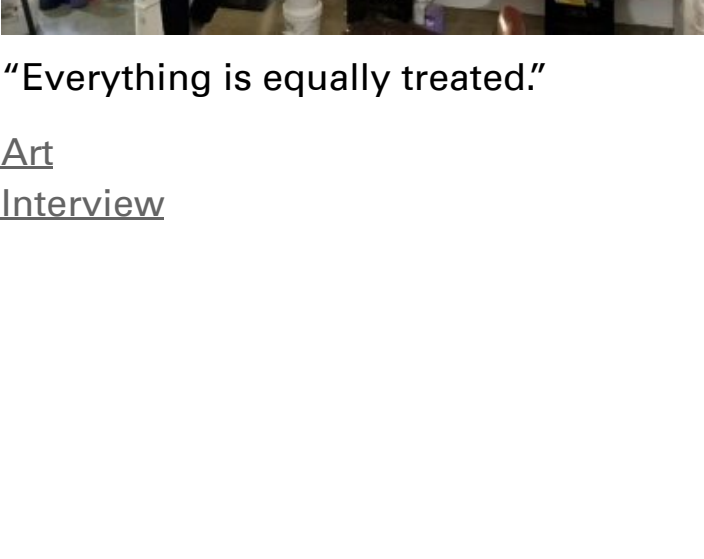
MU
No. I'm not normal. I'm also not trying to depict reality either. Getting closer to it doesn't mean that I am going to make a traditional representation of a figure. It can enhance what Alan is talking about if they have more believable attributes that somehow make them weirder, more uncanny, or disturbing. It's like making something artificial that looks real; it exists, but it also can never actually exist. My girls are ultimately artificial stand-ins that function as figures in space for me to drape my tropes over.

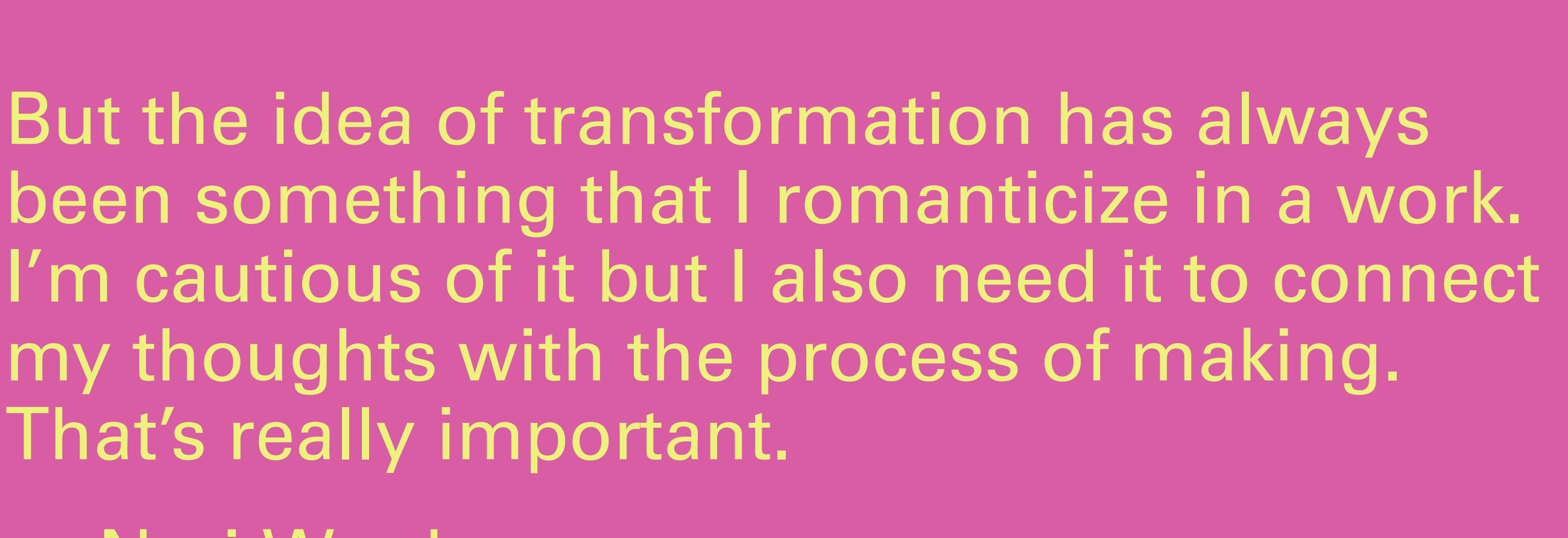
Michelle Uckotter: *Trap Paintings Vol. 3* is on view at King's Leap in New York City until December 16.

Almog Cohen-Kashi is a writer and PhD student in art history at Stony Brook University. Her studies focus on computational media and questions of materiality pertaining to modern and contemporary sculpture.

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But the idea of transformation has always been something that I romanticize in a work. I'm cautious of it but I also need it to connect my thoughts with the process of making. That's really important.

— Nari Ward

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