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What to See in N.Y.C. Galleries Right Now

Elizabeth Englander



Elizabeth Englander's "Yogini No. 7" (2022) at Theta

Elizabeth Englander's strange and strangely affecting sculptures of dismembered nutcrackers should be too weird to function. Modeled after yoginis - Buddhist, Jain and Hindu female ascetics deified into religious icons - and perched in yogic poses on salvaged children's furniture, their source material never fully dissolves: Tiny wooden soldier arms become a hand formed into an open-palmed mudra; faux-fur beards poke from newly formed clavicles; bared teeth and rictus grins pop up where they shouldn't. The ghoulishness with which some yoginis are depicted (fanged and wearing garlands of severed skulls) becomes a droll frisson of feminism (a garland of severed dopey nutcracker heads).

Englander is a deft touch at locating the profane in the sacred. (She has previously rendered crucifixions in neon bikinis.) Splicing German folk art objects into pastiches of Eastern divinities would seem a vulgar proposition, until you remember that the process of commercializing both Christmas and yoga is already complete.

In any case, the sculptures' power derives less from their spiritual forebears than their materiality. Englander's spare and rangy yoginis reanimate her family's collection of nutcrackers and others found online, which, along with the Lilliputian chairs bearing decades-old pony stickers and dusty letter block stools, are charged with the recollection of their past lives. Like Kurt Schwitters, Englander finds a more potent religiosity in memory's ghosts. Yoginis embodied asceticism as the path to liberation from karmic suffering. As a means of exorcising your own ancestral baggage, filleting your family heirlooms would seem as good a place to start as any. *MAX LAKIN*