

Gianna Dispenza: *Overcome by Joy*

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Charles Moffett

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UK-based artist Gianna Dispenza to debut first New York solo show, featuring seven clay-on-canvas works and a new sculpture

Four bodies of work are represented in the show. One of the bodies is three of Dispenza’s ‘Bather’ paintings, which update the art historical archetype of ‘bathers at a water’s edge’ by imbuing it with the artist’s personal connection to a women’s-only swimming pond (for both cis and trans women) that she frequents near her London home. Another body of work—the titular painting included, along with a ten-foot triptych—remove the figurative subjects of newspaper photos from their provided contexts (Overcome by Joy, for instance, offers open-ended emotive readings into what was originally a photo of tennis player Andy Murray collapsed in ecstasy after a major victory)

Thematically, the show explores the role of narrative context in human interpretations of emotion. Formally, the works interrogate what materially constitutes a ‘painting;’ Dispenza’s works on canvas straddle the mediums of painting and sculpture in their heavy reliance on clay rather than paint



From left: **Summer** (2021); clay, industrial caulk, graphite, charcoal, and PVA over oil stick on canvas; 30 x 40” • **The Bathers** (2021); clay, dried oranges, lily pollen, industrial caulk, graphite, charcoal, industrial contact adhesive, and PVA over oil stick on canvas; 55 x 65” • *ibid.* (detail) • **Overcome by Joy** (2021); clay, industrial caulk, graphite, charcoal, oil stick, and PVA on canvas; 76 x 50” • *ibid.* (detail)

New York, NY – May 2021 — Charles Moffett is pleased to present *Overcome by Joy*, a solo presentation of eight never-exhibited works by London-based visual artist Gianna Dispenza (b. 1990, Washington State) that principally explore, through four bodies of work, how emotive readings of figurative subject matter can be altered when context is added or removed. Three of the eight works on view fit into Dispenza’s ‘Bather’ series, which presents the art historical trope of ‘bathers at a water’s edge’ by depicting the nudes through a resolutely feminist gaze, whereas in the art historical canon, this archetype is overwhelmingly employed by male artists projecting idealized body standards. Two of the eight works on view, including a ten-foot-long triptych, are titled after newspaper clippings and allow the viewer to reimagine the context of the original newspaper photos’ figurative subject matter. The

common thread of the 'Bather' paintings; the newspaper-derived paintings; and the two other bodies of work on view, in addition to the unusual material quality of clay on canvas, is their interrogation of the value or necessity of "context" to a viewer making an assessment of a figurative artwork's emotive intent.

The body of work on view with the largest scale—including the exhibition's titular painting, *Overcome by Joy*—distills Dispenza's exploration of "an image or event understood in different ways, sometimes conflicting ways, depending on the context or lack thereof." Explains the artist:

"'Overcome by Joy' was the headline for a newspaper clipping showing the tennis player Andy Murray collapsed in ecstasy. He'd won. But without the header, he could just as easily be buckling dejected and defeated. I like this complication. That's part of the reason I love the sports section, because the rapture of winning or losing is so pronounced, but visually it is often the headline that distinguishes between the two (it is also a rare space of intense intimacy, touch, and emotion among men). *The World Raises its Arms*, a ten-foot triptych, is the other painting in the show that's based on a newspaper clipping. The original photograph is a group shot of all the world leaders, taken at the G7 summit in 2015. And here we have this kind of class photo of the great powers gathered together, doing nothing. Apart from the fact that there's only one woman, it could almost be a school photo of kindergarteners. Their distraction and absolute lack of composure is a little bit endearing, and a little bit terrifying."

The focus of another body of work on view, Dispenza's 'Bather' paintings, is a major influence in her life overall: a women's-only swimming pond in London that she discovered several years ago. (Before the pandemic, she was visiting every other day, and even chose her current home due to its close proximity). On her first visit, Dispenza was profoundly moved by the pervasive feelings of safety and confidence among the pond's collective of women, cis and trans alike. She was likewise unsettled by how drastically the visit had magnified the absence of these feelings in her day-to-day. (It is important to note that Dispenza's depiction of the Ladies Pond serves as a larger narrative device to explore safe spaces in general, not just for women.) The three 'Bather' paintings on view in the exhibition (*Summer*; *Swimmer*; and *The Bathers*, all 2021) address the emotional complexity of being inside or outside of the Ladies Pond (or similar environment) by reimagining the compositional trope of 'bathers at a water's edge'. Whereas this archetype has been ubiquitously rendered through the voyeuristic male gaze of thousands of historically important artists, like Cézanne and Gauguin, Dispenza's 'Bather' works derive from her personal experiences as a part of the community depicted.

Formally, in the 'Bather' paintings, Dispenza prioritizes tone, texture, and the non-hierarchical treatment of the picture plane. She explains that working exclusively in grayscale contributes to a mood of the work which "may not intuitively align with the freedom and joyousness from which they arose." Dispenza states that the point of the works is not necessarily to reflect on the moment that inspired them, but rather the reason the moment was special: the unsettling rarity.

Thematically, the artist explains, "many of the works in the show, in the 'Bather' paintings but in the three other series as well, offer a variety of readings. For instance, the figurative subject in *Swimmer* perhaps appears to be treading water—but could also be drowning. The works are about the interplay of context and a viewer's circumstantial perception."

A third body of work on view in the show consists of a portrait of the artist's grandfather that formally presents as a black textured abstract work; once Dispenza finished the portrait, she covered it in ash from Mount Etna, a notable volcano near her grandfather's ancestral Sicilian hometown. The piece embodies the artist's conceptual exploration of adding or removing context to the art-viewing experience, and her use of Italian volcanic ash as a thematically responsive medium is a great example of the unique material processes she employs throughout her practice.

Comprising the fourth and final body of work in the show is a painting and sculpture duo, each titled *The Embrace*, which depict a singular figurative arrangement rendered in the disparate mediums. The pairing exemplifies Dispenza's fascination with translating the same figurative subject matter between her three practiced mediums (sculpture, painting, and drawing). The canvas version of

The Embrace was based on the sculpture version; she likens this practice to “a game of telephone” and an exercise in further interrogating the role of “context” in art-viewing and emotive perception.

The principal formal exploration in Dispenza’s work is her heavy reliance on the textural qualities of clay applied to canvas, rather than the broad representational capabilities of paint. Working with the sensibilities of a sculptor but also adhering to the tradition of painting in many ways, including the foundational incorporation of an underpainting, Dispenza describes her process as follows:

“My process begins physically, by pushing clay with my palms, building or reducing shapes and arrangements. I often combine unconventional materials, like volcanic ash or industrial caulk. Or, during the three years I was in Beirut, I developed homemade resins and binding agents when I couldn’t source certain art supplies. Form, texture and tone are all part of this inventive process. But what I’m really referring to is non-physical. Feeling and intuition pilot all of the movement and mark-making in my practice. What I love about working in this way is the vastness and flexibility of expression it affords.”

Due to the pandemic, Overcome by Joy is on view by appointment only. Press may make an appointment by emailing molly@molly.nyc, and others are encouraged to book via the [SeeSaw app](#).