

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Roberta Smith, "Sarah Lucas, Unmasked: From Perverse to Profound," *The New York Times*, September 5, 2018

The New York Times

Sarah Lucas, Unmasked: From Perverse to Profound

Not widely known on this side of the Atlantic, the British sculptor has a show at the New Museum this fall that may cause jaws to drop.



The artist Sarah Lucas at her London home. On her head, she is wearing one of the signature components of many of her sculptures: a piece of pantyhose filled with a wad of fluffy material.

“A rude woman is really what we need right now,” a veteran of the New York art scene said to me last May, just weeks before several assertive female political candidates started to emerge and even win some primaries.

In this case, however, the rude woman under discussion was the pre-eminent British sculptor [Sarah Lucas](#), whose first American museum retrospective — and largest exhibition of her work yet — will open at the New Museum on Sept. 26. It may cause some art world jaws to drop.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Prolific and provocative, yet not widely known this side of the Atlantic, Ms. Lucas is an original member of the [Young British Artists](#) (Y.B.A.s), the group Damien Hirst — while still in art school — introduced in 1988 with the [“Freeze” exhibition](#), helping to rocket the London art scene to international status. She established herself abruptly in London four years later with “Penis Nailed to a Board,” her first solo gallery show. The title came from [a work](#) that incorporates a sensational article — and its headline — from The Sunday Sport, a British tabloid that’s now defunct.

Over the years, I don’t think any artist’s work has shocked me — mostly in good ways — as often as Ms. Lucas’s. Some of her pieces have initially made me wonder if they are art or some kind of dirty joke. Their unrelentingly challenging attitude is among their strengths.

Ms. Lucas’s works tend to be raw, sexually hilarious and heartily skeptical of propriety and societal repressiveness, especially concerning the body and its basic impulses. Her blunt yet ambiguous meditations on gender, class and language make her one of the few great artists to emerge from the Y.B.A.

ranks, as the New Museum’s show, [“Sarah Lucas: Au Naturel,”](#) should demonstrate. It will fill most of the building with over 160 works made since 1989: photographs, photo-based wallpaper, videos and sculptures, many using her signature combination of



Ms. Lucas’s “Nature Abhors a Vacuum” (1998), which consists of a toilet whose surface is plastered with cigarettes. Credit Sarah Lucas, via Sadie Coles HQ, London

GLADSTONE GALLERY

pantyhose stuffed with cotton or wool fluff. Those efforts include floppy female half-figures from the [“Bunny Gets Snookered”](#) series and the abstract, coiled knots of the strikingly expressive [“NUD” pieces](#), which can suggest entwined couples, malformed fists or Matisse sculptures.

A photograph Ms. Lucas staged for this article alludes to these materials: A ball of white fluff is held atop her head by a bank robber’s mask of pantyhose, turning her into a kind of Lucas sculpture. Whether intentionally or not, the image seems to parody the flawless Hollywood studio portraits of yore and also evokes the “fascinator” hats favored by British upper-class women at royal weddings.



“Nahuiolin” (2013), a bronze work cast from one of Ms. Lucas’s “NUD” pieces, suggests entwined couples or Matisse sculpture. Credit Sarah Lucas, via Sadie Coles HQ, London

After “Freeze,” Ms. Lucas said she wavered in her commitment to making art. “I had no idea whether I was any good,” she said in June, when she was in New York, preparing her show. We were chatting in my apartment, over white wine from a bottle she had brought with her.



Ms. Lucas at her London residence, with a vintage rug and a shot of mezcal. Credit Ana Cuba for The New York Times

GLADSTONE GALLERY

She wasn't even sure what art was for. She said the issue bothered her quite a bit. Also, the male Y.B.A.s were getting most of the attention. "I was quite reconciled to people not being so interested in me, but that freed me up," she said. "I could experiment with materials, only pleasing myself." She came to realize, she added, that "I could really have a lot of fun, humor, between me and me."

By 1991, Ms. Lucas was making big collages from the most offensive Sport spreads. (An example, "[Fat, Forty and Flabulous](#)," is in the retrospective.) Reading the feminist Andrea Dworkin helped her "see the extent to which everything is stacked against women," she said. Dworkin also wrote about exploitive tabloid images, which encouraged Ms. Lucas to think she "could mobilize this hateful stuff to my own purpose," she added. Part of that purpose was to explore an unsettling ambiguity: Are such images titillating, offensive, tragic or some combination thereof? Ms. Lucas feels that the tabloid spreads symbolize the position of all women, not just those in the images. And more: "You can identify with men as much as women," she said. "They coexist."

Since then, Ms. Lucas's art has specialized in rudeness — although unvarnished honesty with a moral undertone may be more accurate. The phallus — whose depiction in Western art has been one of the most persistent taboos since the end of the Classical era — is a ubiquitous form in her work. (You might think that she wants to equal the attention male artists have lavished upon female breasts throughout history.) Intercourse is frequently intimated, and a tender sarcasm is the prevailing tone. Titles can include profanities and other slang learned on the streets of Islington, the London borough where she grew up. Her materials are cheap and familiar: old furniture, toilets, cinder blocks, underwear, cans of Spam and the stuffed pantyhose. Cars, traditionally a male obsession, also figure in: variously crushed, bisected, burned or carefully collaged with a layer of cigarettes, as are other objects. Fruits and vegetables, kebabs and whole raw chickens do double service, portraying erotic body parts.

GLADSTONE GALLERY



All of which may startle Americans, who tend to be more prudish than the British. Also, while Ms. Lucas's work has been seen in museums and galleries all over Europe — and represented Britain at the Venice Art Biennale in 2015 — she has had only four solo shows in this country, at the Gladstone Gallery in New York, starting in 1995.

“Sex Baby Bed Base” (2000) illustrates the artist’s fondness for using fruits, vegetables and raw chicken carcasses as stand-ins for human body parts. Credit Sarah Lucas, via Sadie Coles HQ, London

Even if you know how good Ms. Lucas is as an artist, there’s a chance you don’t know all the different ways she’s good, how consistently tough her fusion of politics, aesthetics and the grit of life has been, and how it has deepened over the years, especially formally. Ms. Lucas speaks of “the necessity of actual boldness” in art.



Sarah Lucas in conversation with Don Brown, film by Julian Simmons: UK at the Venice Biennale, 2015. Credit CreditVideo by British Council Arts

“It’s hard to keep that sense of necessity,” she said. She has succeeded to an unusual extent, perhaps partly because she has never had a permanent studio, which may enforce an implicitly improvisatory mode that keeps her work fresh and on edge.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

There's also the increasing richness with which her art connects to the history of modern sculpture, beginning with Dada and Surrealism. For starters, her toilets could be seen as female rejoinders to Duchamp's urinal, and, of course, her work is riddled with variations on the ready-made. Magritte, Louise Bourgeois, Gilbert & George, Martin Kippenberger and especially the sculptor Franz West are among her influences, as well as the humble materials of Italian Arte Povera and Post-Minimalism. Her work is dotted with amused asides, including fluorescent light fixtures — a signature of the Minimalist Dan Flavin — used as penises.



“Me (Bar Stool),” shown in the British Pavilion at the 2015 Venice Art Biennale, features a plaster cast of the artist’s own body and a provocatively placed cigarette. Credit: Sarah Lucas, via Sadie Coles HQ, London

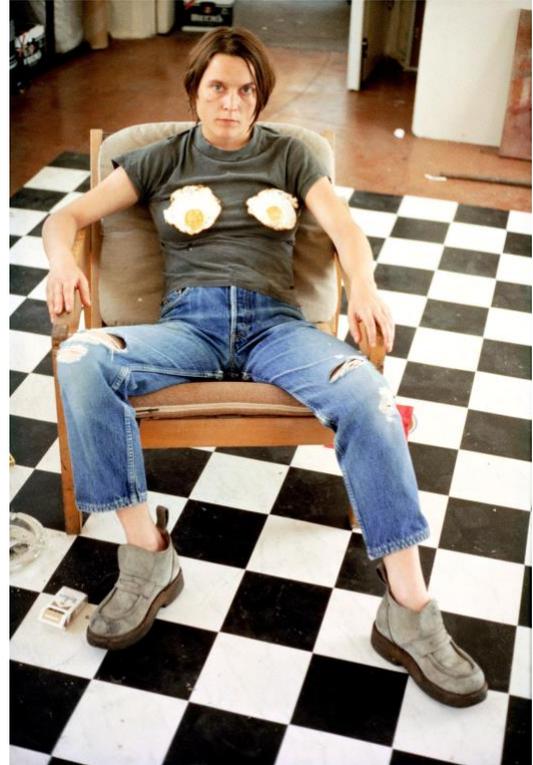
In contrast, there are the eggs, those perfect little female miracles, full of hope — and in Ms. Lucas’s favorite shade of yellow — with which she covered the interior of the British Pavilion during the 2015 Venice Art Biennale. In her work, fried eggs function as [breasts](#) or eyes; throwing eggs can half-seriously approach pagan ritual or figure in participatory performances, in which they’re smashed against gallery walls in Twomblyesque splatters. Ms. Lucas seems to see the yellow splats as female ejaculations, noting that in life, “men do that all the time with sperm.”

The New Museum show includes a short video, [“Egg Massage,”](#) made with her partner, the artist [Julian Simmons](#), with whom she lives in Suffolk, northeast of London, and frequently collaborates. (They also have a London residence.) In it Mr. Simmons lies naked on a kitchen table, while Ms. Lucas breaks eggs and smears them over his body. A spontaneous event, it happened after dinner at the house of Ms. Lucas’s close friend and longtime art dealer, [Sadie Coles](#). (Her two dinner guests had a

GLADSTONE GALLERY

lot of eggs in their car: Christmas was coming.) The New Museum show may have its own egg-splattered wall. “I’m quite a domestic person,” Ms. Lucas told me.

She described working for the New Museum show at her friend [Matthew Barney’s studio in Long Island City, Queens](#), where she was readying one of the exhibition’s two largest pieces: a 2003 Jaguar that had been cut lengthwise, with one-half burned and the other collaged with cigarettes. (Its title, “This Jaguar’s Going to Heaven,” rephrases the Pixies song title “This Monkey’s Gone to Heaven” and also weaponizes it, since jaguars, one of the world’s great predators, have probably dispatched plenty of monkeys.) The other work will be an 11-foot-tall pair of over-the-knee platform boots in cast concrete, redolent of sidewalks, streetwalkers, drag and great-man public sculpture.



Ms. Lucas’s “Self-Portrait With Fried Eggs” (1996), a photographic work that uses this breakfast staple to represent breasts. Credit Sarah Lucas, via Sadie Coles HQ, London

I’d met Ms. Lucas in the early 1990s in New York, but hadn’t seen her, except in passing, in 20 years. She seemed nearly unchanged: tall and thin, with slack brown hair just above her shoulders, and a lean, no-frills yet delicate British face, devoid of makeup, that she has called “plain.” As usual, she wore a shirt, jeans and substantial, thick-soled shoes, an ensemble that might have been determined by the age of 11 or 12 and barely altered since. This is the uniform seen in her frequent self-portraits, and is by now as familiar as Joseph Beuys’s vest and hat or Andy Warhol’s navy blazer and school tie.

Ms. Lucas’s indifference to conventional comportment is, like her art, liberating. It’s a tribute to her working-class roots while also signaling her interest in androgyny and other kinds of ambiguity.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

She looks like what she is: an artist always ready to work and completely at ease complicating gender and age stereotypes, fusing man, woman, adolescent and child.



“Bunny Gets Snookered #8” (1997), a piece incorporating stuffed tights, from another series of anthropomorphic sculptures. Credit: Sarah Lucas, via Sadie Coles HQ, London

Born in London, Ms. Lucas, 55, grew up on a council estate, one of four children. She held part-time jobs from the age of 13 until she graduated from [Goldsmiths College](#) — where many of the initial Y.B.A.s met — in 1987.

A D.I.Y. atmosphere prevailed at home: Her family “was always making things,” she said. Ms. Lucas’s father, a milkman, could build cabinets. Her mother, who would later oversee art programs in primary schools, had a plot in a community garden, where she grew vegetables. She made clothes as well as toys, including stuffed animals (Ms. Lucas’s introduction

to fluff) and taught her daughter the basics of gardening, sewing and cooking. Ms. Lucas was, in her own words, “a shy, reserved kid” who read voraciously and seems to have gradually discovered her own gregariousness.

“In my early teens, I found my feet with it and learned to banter,” she said. “It was a great joy.” The love of banter is reflected in her fondness for collaborating with other artists and her preference for enlisting friends to help make work. Yet one of the most resonant things she said during our talks was: “Making things is company. Like reading or cooking.”

GLADSTONE GALLERY



Ms. Lucas at her London residence. Credit: Ana Cuba for The New York Times

Massimiliano Gioni, the New Museum's artistic director, who organized the Lucas show with Margot Norton, a curator at the museum, described Ms. Lucas as "very carefree but, on the other hand, extremely precise." He characterized her as a "long engagement"

GLADSTONE GALLERY

the dozen or so years when she continually rejected his invitation for a retrospective. She had been included in "[Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century](#)," the first exhibition in the museum's new home on the Bowery, in 2007. And in 2013, Mr. Gioni put her in "[The Encyclopedic Palace](#)," the show he organized as commissioner of the Venice Art Biennale, where she exhibited the first bronze casts of the "NUD" pieces.

"In terms of freedom of materials, techniques and attitude," Mr. Gioni wrote in an email, he considers Ms. Lucas "quite unparalleled and perhaps only on the same level as Isa Genzken for pervasiveness of influence among younger artists."

Among Ms. Lucas's consistently demanding efforts is one piece that had me, totally, at hello. This was her 1994 masterpiece, "Au



"Au Naturel" (1994), which uses a mattress and a wry still life of fruit and a bucket to imply lovers in bed. Credit: Sarah Lucas, via Sadie Coles HQ, London

Naturel," the source of the New Museum show's title. The work floored and exhilarated me in the 1999 "[Sensation](#)" exhibition at the [Brooklyn Museum](#), one of the more controversial art shows in history.

"[Au Naturel](#)" depicts, with brazen economy — or carefree precision — a man and a re woman in bed. For her: two grapefruits lodged within the mattress (which is bent against the wall, forming its own

headboard) and, lower, a beat-up red fire bucket. For him: just two oranges flanking an upright cucumber in line with the bucket.

It doesn't take long to get the joke: We're seeing their primary sexual characteristics, and they're ready for action. You can apprehend the couple as clearly as you might two figures in an early work by Edward Kienholz; they seem similarly seedy, given the stained yellowish mattress. Nonetheless, the still life of fruit and bucket remains equally present. As usual, Ms. Lucas makes every texture, color and shape count; the ensemble put me in mind of the

GLADSTONE GALLERY

lightness and delicacy of a painting by Watteau. The piece is caustic, yet joyful about the persistence of desire and connection. The main arc of the New Museum show, on view through Jan. 20, is from early assemblages like “Au Naturel” to the distinctive 2010 “[Penetralia](#)” series, made with Mr. Simmons, which involves pieces of wood and rock found around their Suffolk house. My favorite is “[Tree Nob 2](#),” in which an expressively sculpted white plaster phallus rises like a mushroom from a small chunk of wood. From the Biennale, there are several plaster casts of the lower bodies of the artist and nine girlfriends, which they made together. Lolling about on tables and chairs, with cigarettes protruding from unlikely places, they resemble impertinent secretaries or artists’ models relaxing for a moment, casting shade on the male artists for whom they are posing. At least those are two possibilities. In total, this trajectory shows an artist becoming much more of a sculptor or



“Tree Nob 2” (2010), from Ms. Lucas’s “Penetralia” series, which uses pieces of wood found around her house in Suffolk.

Credit: Sarah Lucas, via Sadie Coles HQ, London

form maker, veering between the found and invented in new ways that imply that the avant-garde might still exist.

How will Americans respond to all this? Ms. Lucas said she sees sex as a way to make her art as accessible as possible while also getting to viewers’ most interior feelings.

“I have a lot of empathy for a lot of people,” she said, adding that she wanted her audience — at the New Museum or anywhere — to “include people who might not go into an art gallery.”

“I like things to make sense to plebes like myself,” she observed.” I can’t take that out of me.”