

ELIZABETH MALASKA



Previous page
Morning Ritual, 2019
Oil, Flashe, glitter, rhinestone on canvas
72 x 60 in



Dry, 2019
Oil, Flashe on canvas
78 x 60 in



Maidens, 2019
Oil, Flashe on canvas
60 x 84 in



It is Our Pleasure to Serve You, 2019
Oil, Flashe, rhinestones on canvas
60 x 78 in

AN ENLIVENING

by Sarah Sentilles

What you notice first are the bodies. Women, cats, shells, couches, carpets, statues, screens, big-leafed plants—all pressed against the picture plane. Elizabeth Malaska's paintings recall medieval altarpieces, the paintings of Giotto, the work of Baroque artists like El Greco and Carravaggio and Jusepe de Ribera, with humans and animals jammed together, with saintly epiphanies that happen in hovels or caves, on couches or at dining tables, in living rooms or bedrooms, in the dark.

I heard an art historian on the radio argue that failed perspective in medi-eval paintings—the fact that the world in those paintings looks flat—was a form of prayer.¹ Hierarchical proportion: size was based on importance, holiness. Sacred figures are large; human beings are small. Realism was not the goal. To remind viewers that the paintings were other-worldly, the settings were deliberately made shallow. Human experience didn't matter. Only religious experience did.

But in Malaska's paintings, nothing is divine, or everything is. Here, paint democratizes. "That's one of the things I love about painting," Malaska told me. "There is an equality of the image. We focus on the human body, but [in a painting] all the things around the body are made of the same material, paint." In *It's Our Pleasure to Serve You*, a naked woman on her hands and knees wears a headset, breasts low, nipples long. Behind her, on top of her, a panther, deep blue-black fur, eyes aglow. In front of her, a wooden tray of sushi, chopsticks, an orchid. Pattern is everywhere—a checked and chevroned rug, striped wallpaper, laminate wood floor, the dark door. Screen, vase, red Solo cup, leg, face—"In my paintings, things like furniture, rugs, or trash get to have a stronger vibration, a stronger presence or power, than we might give them in our day-to-day life," Malaska said. "The whole painting is a force or presence."

The word *vulnerable*—from the Latin noun *vulnus* (wound) and verb *vulnerare* (to wound)—originally meant both "capable of being physically wounded" and "having the power to wound." That second meaning—the ability to wound others—has fallen out of popular usage, but its ghost is at work in Malaska's paintings. Who is in a position of power? Who is exposed? Who is precarious? "I want to make the viewer feel a sense of vulnerability and a sense of power emanating from the bodies in the paintings," Malaska said. "I don't want to recapitulate the power-over relationship; I want to destabilize the viewers' sense of position." We tend to think of our bodies as what separates us from one another; my skin

marks the boundary of my body, the boundary of my self. But, as Judith Butler explores in *Precarious Life*, our bodies reveal our connectedness and our vulnerability. Skin and flesh "expose us to the gaze of others," expose us to loving touch, expose us to violence. Our bodies also "put us at risk of becoming the...instrument of [violence] as well."² Butler continues, "Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own."³

When I look at Malaska's paintings, I have a sense that I am viewing an aftermath, yet I also carry a sense of anticipation, the feeling that something—destructive? reparative? creative?—is about to happen, what Malaska calls an "enlivening, a thickening of the air." One of the ways Malaska enlivens the surface of her paintings is through touch. "I think about touch when I am composing an image," she said. "Objects overlap, things touch in weird places, or bisect one another. It's a way of creating an erotic sense with an image, making it refer again to the human body and our shared intimacy, dependence, and desire." In *Maidens* (2019), a woman's elbow connects with a bag of potting soil for an amaryllis, sage smoke curls around a knee, hands hold a mug, feet wear furry bear slippers, a body fills a couch, her arm elongated, her finger hooked and reaching. Even the single iris bloom appears to have arms, one touching the couch, the other touching the round pink lamp and its pleated shade.

In *Listening to Images*, Tina Campt writes about the role of the haptic in looking, how "it is the link between touching and feeling, as well as the multiple mediations we construct to allow or prevent our access to those affective relations."⁴ Campt is writing about convict photos, images used to arrest their subjects and to subjugate Black bodies, and she uses touch to reclaim such photographs, to render them part of her family album. Malaska's goal is similarly resistant and imaginative: she paints women to disrupt the patriarchal history of painting women, and touch plays a role in her feminist work. I see on her canvases what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten in *The Undercommons* call "insurgent feel," "a feeling through others," "a feel for feeling others feeling you."⁵

Malaska's work invokes for me the word *fugivity*, as defined by theorists like Campt, Harney, and Moten. These writers claim fugivity not only as an act of escape or a strategy of resistance, but "as a practice of refusing the terms of negation and dispossession."⁶ The bodies Malaska paints—be they Coke cans or urns or cats or conch shells or prescription



You Will Become Me, 2014
Oil, Flashe, spray paint, charcoal, pencil on canvas
48 x 58½ in

bottles or women—do not conform to expectations. Some are stretched, taffy-like, as if the bones have been removed, as if they could fit through any opening, as if they are pushing against whatever holds them back or down or up. "It...has to do with a collapse," Malaska said in a conversation about painting and psychoanalysis with art historian Sue Taylor. "An anxiety about the world we live in—what feels like a loss of a future, things are crumbling before our eyes: What will transpire? What's left standing?" Malaska gives us a glimpse of what remains, the unruly beings she helps sustain. In the introduction to Harney and Moten's *The Undercommons*, Jack Halberstam writes, "The path to the wild beyond is paved with refusal."⁷ Malaska's paintings help map that path and show us the way.

¹ When I heard this radio story, I wrote down the historian's name—Eliza Griswold—and the date—July 23, 2018—but now I can't find the story or any writing about failed perspective as a form of prayer. I did find this: <http://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/curriculum/units/1986/3/86.03.08.x.html>. I also wrote about this idea in *Stranger Care*, which will be published by Random House in 2021.

² Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. New York: Verso, 2004: pg. 26.

³ Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. New York: Verso, 2004: pg. 26.

⁴ Tina Campt, *Listening to Images*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017: 100.

⁵ Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*. Brooklyn: Minor Compositions, 2013: p. 98.

⁶ Tina Campt, *Listening to Images*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017: 96.

⁷ Jack Halberstam, "The Wild Beyond: With and For the Undercommons" in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*. Brooklyn: Minor Compositions, 2013: p. 8.



Thank You For Restoring Me to My Whole Body, 2011
Oil, charcoal, pencil on canvas
40 x 40½ in

ELIZABETH MALASKA

b. 1978. Lives and works in Portland, Oregon

2018 Hallie Ford Fellow

Elizabeth Malaska is known for paintings that explore the place of a present-day femme subject in relation to art history, raising issues about femininity, power, domination, and vulnerability, with social and political implications for our current times. She earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts from California College of the Arts and a Master of Fine Arts in Visual Studies from Pacific Northwest College of Art. She is the recipient of a Painters and Sculptors Grant from the Joan Mitchell Foundation and a grant from the Elizabeth Greenshield's Foundation. Malaska's work is included in the permanent collection at the Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon, and the Schneider Museum of Art, Ashland, Oregon, and has been featured in *Ms. Magazine*, *Art in America*, and *ArtForum*, among others.

Hallie Brown was born in 1905, outside of Tulsa, in Indian Territory that would become the state of Oklahoma. She supported herself as she earned a bachelor's degree at East Central University and taught in Oklahoma before her parents moved their family to rural Oregon. In 1935 Hallie married Kenneth W. Ford and together they established Roseburg Lumber Company in the midst of the Great Depression.

Hallie Ford was drawn to art all her life, specifically the accessibility of artmaking. She took classes with the painter Carl Hall at Willamette University in Salem, and painting became a central part of her life. Her philanthropy established and supported key Oregon visual art museums and universities.

After Hallie's death in 2007, The Ford Family Foundation's Board of Directors honored our co-founder by establishing a Visual Arts Program. The first element of this program was the Hallie Ford Fellowships in the Visual Arts, awarded since 2010. Through these unrestricted fellowships, we seek to make significant awards to visual artists who have worked to establish their voice and craft.

Another of our goals is to help support the ecology that builds connections and capacity in the visual arts community of our state. As the Fellows become the focus of exhibitions throughout the world, they bring more attention and support to their Oregon peers. We are certain that Hallie Ford would be pleased to see how both individual artists and the visual arts community in Oregon have flourished since the establishment of this program in her honor.

We could not be more excited each year to bring new Hallie Ford Fellows into this family, and to share their work with you.

Anne C. Kubisch
President, The Ford Family Foundation

The Hallie Ford Fellowships are the flagship element of The Ford Family Foundation Visual Arts Program. The Foundation commits to an ongoing relationship with our Fellows through exhibition support, convenings, and professional development opportunities. In addition, the Visual Arts Program offers grants to visual artists for unanticipated career opportunities; supports artists-in-residence programs in Oregon and nationally; brings curators and arts writers from outside the region to Oregon for studio visits and community dialogue; commissions arts writing and publication; supports exhibitions, catalogues and other forms of documentation for Oregon artists; and awards grants to enhance exhibition spaces.

The Foundation is pleased to partner with the Oregon Arts Commission, University of Oregon, Pacific Northwest College of Art (PNCA), Portland State University, Reed College, Portland Institute for Contemporary Art (PICA), Creative Capital, Native Arts and Cultures Foundation, United States Artists, and the artists and visual arts organizations of our state.

The Ford Family Foundation was established in 1957 by Kenneth W. and Hallie E. Ford. Its mission is "successful citizens and vital rural communities" in Oregon and Siskiyou County, California. The Foundation is located in Roseburg, Oregon, with a Scholarship office in Eugene. For more information about the Foundation and its Visual Arts Program, visit www.tfff.org.



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