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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

upstairs: Bernadette Despujols

*The Vast Ocean in Which the Woman Swims*

curated by Ché Morales

September 7 - October 2, 2021

Rachel Uffner Gallery is pleased to present *The Vast Ocean in Which the Woman Swims*, the gallery's first solo exhibition with Bernadette Despujols, curated by Ché Morales. This body of work features Despujols's recent series of paintings and sculptures that confront the objectified view of the female body as informed by her own perspective and experiences. Despujols explores themes that go beyond the expected identity of a woman drawing inspiration from the many dynamic women that have played important and personal roles in her life including her Mother, Grandmothers, sisters, nieces, cousins, friends, and even colleagues that have shaped who she has become.

Despujols takes a seemingly sculptural approach to painting as she vigorously fills her canvases with thick and energetic brushstrokes, that at times are also retracted and scraped away to resurface the underpainting. These textural portraits invoke emotional and profound imagery reminiscent of artists such as Alice Neel or Jenny Saville.

With these paintings, she portrays various women in all possible scenarios and stages of their lives such as: A collection of portraits of women as young girls, mothers, children, elderly, healthy and sick. Despujols states, "I want to explore the vast ocean in which the woman swims, (one that I am yet to fully understand) one that goes way beyond those absurd expectations of what women should be."

At first glance, some might find it strange to place a "sexualized" sculpture next to the painting of a child or a mother with her children, or an older woman. However, Despujols wants to remind the viewer that the "sexualized" woman was once a little girl that would eventually become an older woman. That a woman is not just one of a certain age, women are of many ages and many faces. She wants to remind everyone that the patriarchy wants to separate women into specific, uniquely stereotyped stages.

For example, Despujols represents how the perception of ideal femininity is ingrained from an early age with the painting of *Cassandra and Gala*. Here, one figure wears a Smurfette t-shirt referencing the artist's own childhood memory of watching the cartoon aptly titled, "Los Pitufos" or "The Smurfs". She would always wonder how despite the many male characters with their countless personalities be it sleepy, grumpy, surprising, old, or funny, there was only one "girl," and she was simply characterized as "pretty". Despujols transforms this formative memory into one of many visual examples to emphasize the dismissal of the female identity.

Many of her paintings in this show are based off of photographs — some she has taken herself, she has found second hand or were sent to her by friends and family. Despujols finds the process of painting these images as a sort of translation, from one language to another. In

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this translation, many details may go missing, change or mutate. The image that she produces does not attempt to look photorealistic, or realistic in any way. It is its own version of reality, existing in a realm in which fact and fiction do not exist. A story with a reality that now solely exists on the canvas.

A selection of sculptures in the center of the room completes the exhibition. These sculptures are from Despujols' *Inflatable Love Dolls* series and are comprised of five female busts fabricated from soft latex sex dolls filled with concrete. The inflatable love doll she uses is a representation of the female body; it is both figurative and abstract, as it tries to reproduce the female figure, yet remaining true to its origins as an inflatable structure. Through her practice, Despujols reclaims these agent-less inflatable objects into something completely new. As the concrete begins to set, the weight responds to gravity and transforms the shape of the once static doll into a more substantial human form. Though it is evident that their extremities and heads are missing, the sexual orifices still remain, highlighted, in their original yet impenetrable pink plastic.

Through their transformation, these torsos have now become symbols of an impossible objectification or abuse. They are no longer possible to penetrate, and their pleasure-inducing cavities have been filled. Instead of soft objects with the sole purpose of fulfilling the desire of men in their solitude, they now stand firm like a truncated contemporary version of Hellenistic torsos. Despujols references the Greek goddess Aphrodite as an example of this mythological presence. Aphrodite also embodied themes of love, beauty, pleasure, passion, and procreation. Despujols hopes that the viewer will find these same themes and complexity of character within the portraits surrounding gallery walls.

**Bernadette Despujols** (b. 1986, Barquisimeto, Venezuela) studied Architecture at the Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV), where she graduated with honors in 2007. Soon after, she continued her education at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris, where took classes in architecture, cultural exchange, morphology and anatomy before beginning her endeavors in art making. Despujols taught Architectonic Design at the School of Architecture at the Universidad Central de Venezuela before moving to the US to pursue her MFA in Visual Arts at the California Institute of the Arts (Cal Arts) in 2010. Despujols' artistic practice is highly expansive, as she incorporates a wide range of different media, including painting, sculpture, video and installation. Her current work revolves and questions historical allusions, myths and references regarding the perception of women, sex and contemporary life. She shares her time between her architectonic firm and her art practice. Despujols lives and works in Miami since 2013.

Image: Bernadette Despujols, *Mi hermana y sus hijas* (My sister and her daughters), 2021, oil on canvas, 60 x 48 in (152.4 x 121.9 cm)

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