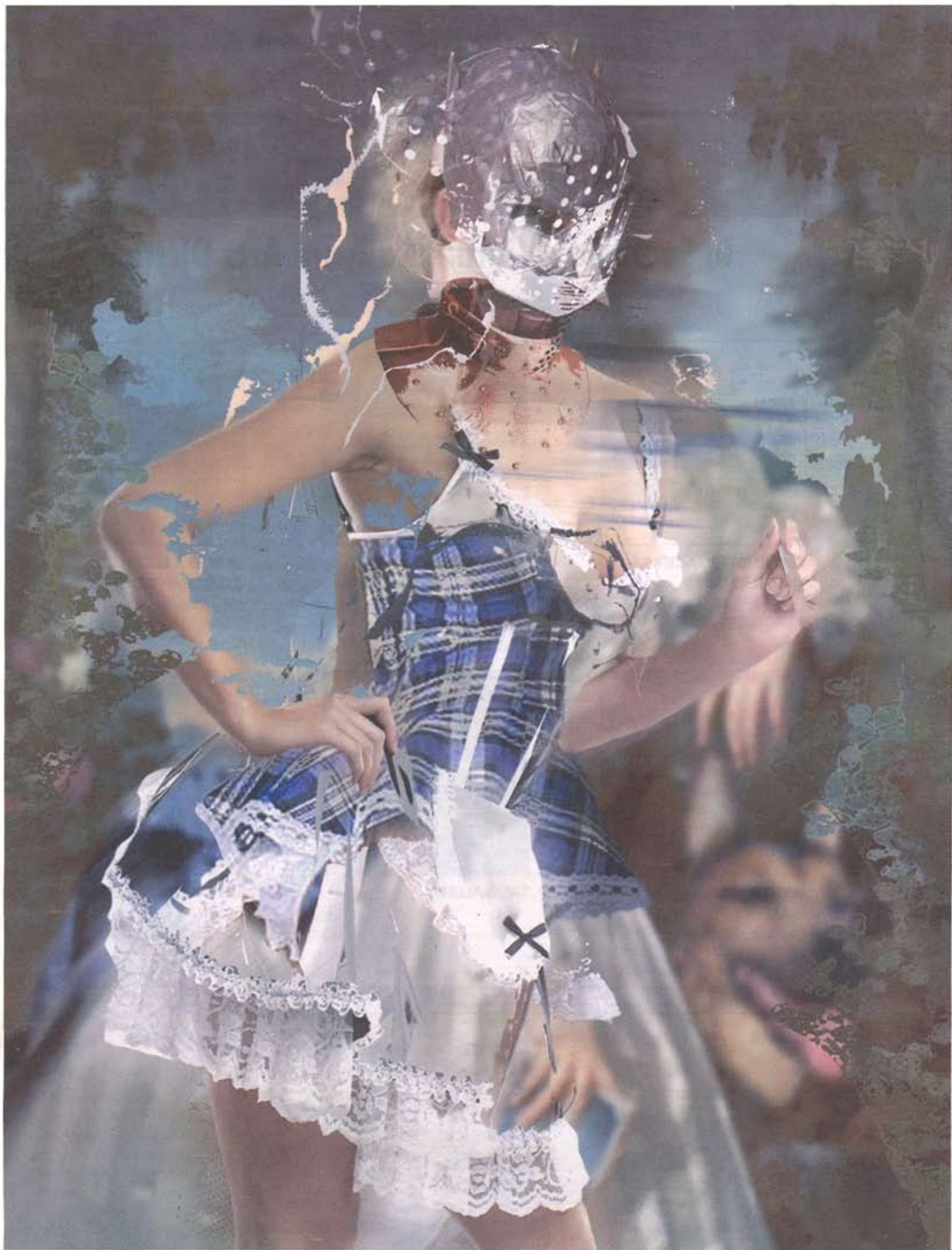


Jennifer Levin | For The New Mexican

# POCKET FULL OF POSES



DEBORAH OROPALLO'S RECONFIGURED HEROINES



layering images of lingerie models atop those of 17th-century kings and military leaders happened almost by accident for Deborah Oropallo. Eight years ago, in a paper she was writing, the artist referred to a woman standing in a Napoleonic pose. "You'd think everybody knows what that pose is, but I thought I should Google Napoleon to make sure he stood that way. Then I made the image transparent and laid it on top of the sexy pirate I was working with, to explain what I was talking about, and I ended up loving that image," she said in a telephone conversation with *Pasatiempo*. The discovery led to the exhibit *Guise* at the de Young Museum in San Francisco in 2007. Oropallo, who majored in art history at Alfred University, had access to the de Young's collection of 17th- and 18th-century portrait paintings while creating *Guise*. Such portraits feature a finite number of poses that are repeated painting to painting — the same poses used in

21st-century lingerie and Halloween-costume photos widely available online.

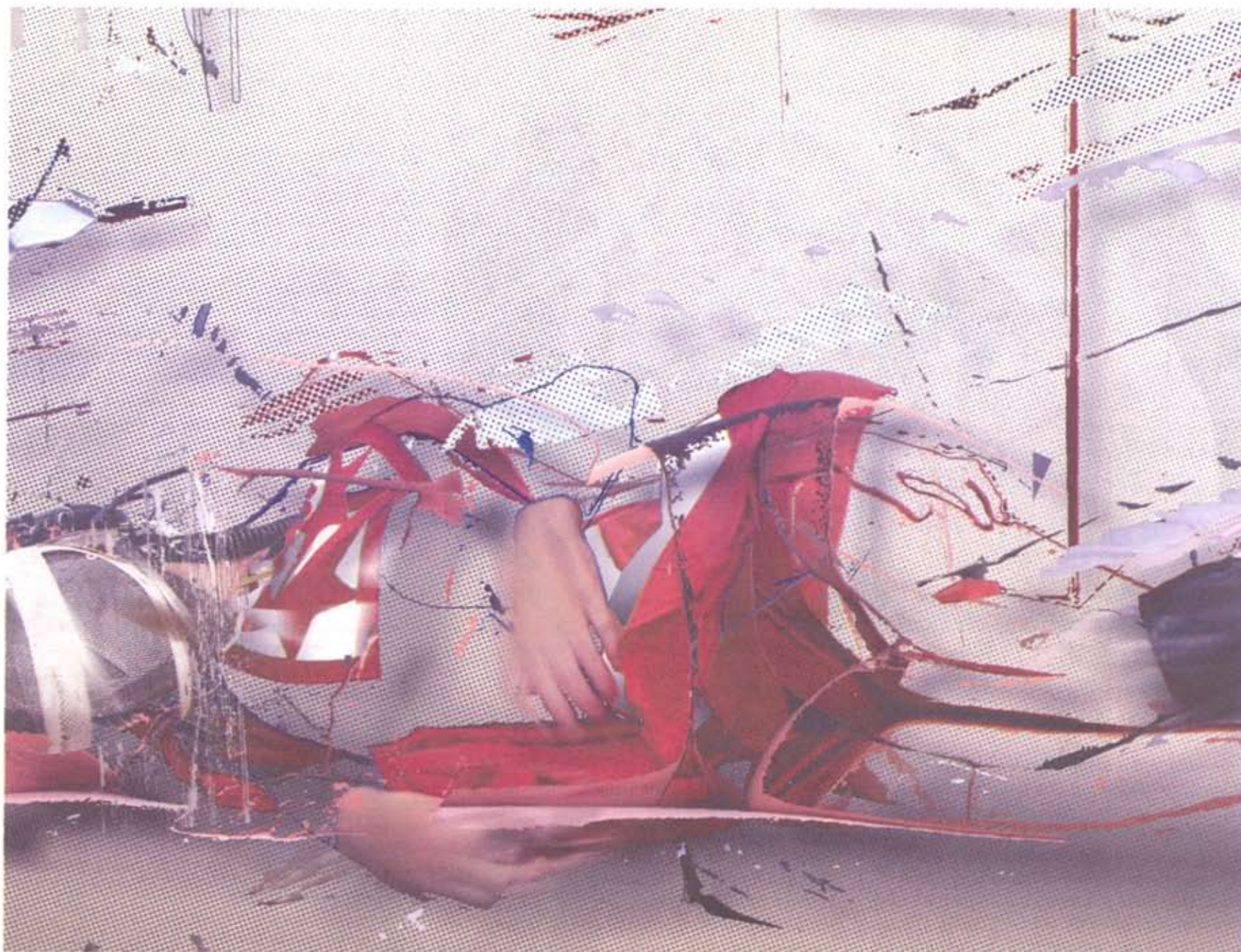
"Whether it's Louis XIV or George Washington, there were only a certain number of power poses men were depicted in," Oropallo said. "Photographers put the women in their costumes — the pirate, the sailor, the lion tamer — in the same three poses. But the men, in their portraits, always had all the signifiers of wealth and power: the cannons, the army behind them, all the medals. Seventeenth-century women's portraits were still reflective of men's power, because the women's eyes had to be downcast, their hair had to be up, they had to be holding a book or a violin to show they were of noble birth. Pearls symbolized virginity. It was very rigid. I wanted to make famous women in history that never existed."

*Guise* led to several more series using images of women found on the internet. Oropallo's new work, in which women of presumably noble birth are given superhuman powers, is included in

*Heroes: Deborah Oropallo, Hung Liu and Squeak Carnwath*, opening Friday, April 27, at Turner Carroll Gallery. All three artists reside in the Bay Area and have been painting and showing their work for more than 30 years. Oropallo is represented by San Francisco's Stephen Wirtz Gallery. Her work has been shown in New York, Chicago, Boston, and Berlin, among many other cities, and she is the recipient of awards from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Oropallo does much of her painting on the computer, which she took to in 2000 when her children were young and she was having difficulty finding adequate stretches of time in which to paint. The computer allowed her to work in fits and starts; she could make progress even if she had just 10 or 20 minutes. Originally from Hackensack, New Jersey, she moved to Berkeley

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Deborah Oropallo: "You'll pay for that.", *Heroes* series, 2012, acrylic pigment print on Lenox rag paper; opposite page, *Chambermaid*, 2012, permanent pigment print on canvas with handwork; both 50 x 38 inches





"That's impossible!", *Heroes* series, 2012, acrylic pigment print on Lenox rag paper, 50 x 38 inches

## Deborah Oropallo, continued from Page 53

in the early 1980s to go to graduate school at the University of California. She remained in Berkeley after earning her master's degree in fine arts and saw "the whole dot-com thing happening. It was the beginning of the internet, the beginning of Google, the beginning of Photoshop. The computer became a more quotidian tool; we were using it in our homes for ordinary things. It was no surprise to me that eventually my work would come off of there."

Oropallo's painting has always been photo-based. For years, she photographed her own objects and then created silk screens to transfer the images to canvas. "Those were mainly black-and-white or one color, and then I started using two- and four-color silk screens, and at that point I started to ask why I was doing this," she said. "I was already working with the computer, breaking up images into four colors and then rebuilding them on a canvas, so I was two minutes away

from the process I use now; I just jumped over." She uses the pressure-sensitive Wacom Tablet with Photoshop to create layers and remove body parts, limbs, and faces. The program leaves behind bits of pixels that function for Oropallo as memory or previous gesture. Oropallo watches as the digital image is printed on a large commercial press; because it is printed in layers, she can go in and paint over things she wants to change. In her studio, she puts the image to canvas and paints over some sections of the printed image. In her artist statement, she writes that she uses the computer as a tool, "but painting is the language of deliberation that is running through my head."

"I feel like the computer does have accidents and subtleties and different transparencies and opacities; you can affect everything," she said. "I've liked a systematic approach since I was a kid, you know, paint by number, Etch A Sketch. I had no art training at the Catholic school my parents sent me to, so that's basically how I started."

It is easy to read feminist statements into Oropallo's mostly faceless, sometimes headless women, with their ghostly, disjointed body parts and varying states of dress, though Oropallo insists she didn't have a political mission when she began the work. "I just wanted to scramble the radar, this symbolic power of men; I wanted to poke fun at it in a sartorial way." But after the de Young exhibit, she began to be approached by women's-studies students asking her to speak in their classes, as well as by transgendered people, who were very enthusiastic about the work. She began visiting costume websites after going online to find white stockings for a wedding and encountering images of "sexy Snow White." "I didn't know what it was: some kind of fairy-tale fetish? And like anything, your curiosity. ... If you start looking for something on the web, once you go down that path, you find more than you can ever imagine. The typical costumes are the schoolgirl, the nurse, and the maid."

For *Heroes*, she was interested in how women have been portrayed in comic books. She found websites that featured young costumed women acting out stories, which gave her access to images that moved, rather than the same three poses she'd been using. The layers that make up the women of *Heroes* are, effectively, putting on and taking off their costumes, which Oropallo said represented the constraints put upon female superheroes, such as Wonder Woman, who, over the years, went from muscle-bound crime fighter to a secretary worried about her weight. "It's a metaphor for wanting to become something else, the becoming and unbecoming. The transformation. Not so much escape as transformation." ◀

## details

- ▼ *Heroes*: Deborah Oropallo, Hung Liu and Squeak Carnwath
- ▼ Opening reception 5 p.m. Friday, April 27; exhibit through June 9
- ▼ Turner Carroll Gallery, 725 Canyon Road, 986-9800