



Installation view of
"Paint, Porcelain and Pulp: Amy
Bessone, Francesca DiMattio,
and Natalie Frank" at Salon 94 Bowery.
Photo: Courtesy of the artist
and Salon 94

Artist Natalie Frank Shows Off a Stunning New Series of Pulp Paper Paintings at Salon 94

Frank created her new series at a residency at nonprofit papermaking studio Dieu Donn 

by ROZALIA JOVANOVIC

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Earlier this year, as news was emerging of the run of anti-abortion legislation being passed in the South, artist Natalie Frank was making new paintings. "I painted women chewing on their hair," she tells *Galerie* during a recent visit to her gallery. It was a couple of months prior to the opening of the three-woman show "Paint, Porcelain and Pulp: Amy Bessone, Francesca DiMattio, and Natalie Frank" at Salon 94, and Frank was feeling anxious. "I really started thinking of their hair as instruments. Things they didn't have control over but could hang them, or have halos."

The paintings that Frank was creating were not ordinary paintings. They were pulp paper paintings, which don't actually involve paint at all. It's a process that entails applying a mixture of pigment with "bits of linen pulp paper suspended in water" to a base sheet made from cotton pulp or abaca. The messy, old-fashioned process involves vats of paper pulp, "deckle boxes," and screens with wooden frames.

"You're working on these wooden carts with blankets over them," says Frank. "The paper painting is on top, and the water is just flowing. Most people wear rubber boots and a rubber suit. At the end of the day, everything gets wet, right down to your underwear."



Natalie Frank working at Dieu Donn .Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

Painting strong, dark, and suggestive portraits of women is Frank's calling card. She is best known for her theatrical, darkly comic drawings featuring strong feminist protagonists, such as those she did of the stories from *Grimms' Fairy Tales*, the recently retranslated and un-whitewashed version that contained episodes of rape and incest. That series led to a [collaboration this year with Ballet Austin](#) for which Frank designed stage sets and costumes.

Recommended: Natalie Frank Lends Her Dark Feminist Vision to a New Production of Ballet Austin
Her work has at times proven to be too edgy for some. A series of paintings she had done illustrating the *Story of O*, the classic French novel of female submission, which had been slated to open in the spring last year at a space in New York, had been canceled in the wake of the #MeToo movement, because the gallerist felt it was inappropriate under the circumstances. Frank, [who has written about her own experience with predatory men in the art world for ARTnews](#), ended up showing the work at Half Gallery on the Upper East Side that May.



Woman Hair Eater V, 2019. Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94

That central story is still ongoing—the issue of “female sexuality and what’s acceptable and not acceptable to show in art or in literature.” “For me,” she says, “all of the stories revolve around women.”

The work she's done for the show at Salon 94 are decidedly tame for Frank. There are nine works in the show, most of which are of women chewing on their hair—with literal titles like *Woman, Hair Eater II*.

Recommended: Doug Aitken's Hot Air Balloon Sculpture Takes Its Final Flight in New England

The works were created in a residency in a sponsorship program at Dieu Donn , a nonprofit cultural institution founded in 1976 that fosters artistic collaborations employing the medium of hand papermaking. For the residency, Frank spent five days in the studio working with master papermaker Amy Jacobs.

"She prepares all the pulps for me, pigments them, prepares the base sheets, sets everything up. Then I work in the studio by myself."



Natalie Frank working at Dieu Donn . Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

As a result of the collaboration, Dieu Donn  gets to keep a portion of the work, which gets split with a collector who partly funds the residency. Although a slew of noteworthy artists have come

through Dieu Donn  for its other programs—Nicole Eisenman, for example, as well as Glenn Ligon, Firelei Baez, and Do Ho Suh, who have all done its Lab Grant—Frank is the first artist in the sponsorship residency, which kicked off this year.

“We’re all about advancing the medium of hand papermaking as an art form,” says Dieu Donn ’s executive director, John Shorb, who says the program was developed partly out of a desire to bring back artists they’ve worked with in the past, though it’s open to artists who have never worked with them. For Frank’s residency, Shorb says, the organization linked Frank up with the collector, who was already interested in her work.

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Paper pulp is a seemingly perfect medium for Frank, both because she’s literary-minded (with her series often looking to literature as a starting point) and because the luscious medium, for which pigment and paper can clump and pool, suits her style, whether it’s a woman’s pale fleshy skin, a mess of bright red extravagant curls, or a phantasmagoric backdrop to a portrait for which the uneven edges of the paper take on an unusual physical form. Frank’s works often have a rawness and natural movement that the medium accentuates.



One striking pair of works are a portrait of a young woman with her eyes closed and her head turned upward resembling both Bernini’s famed sculpture *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* and a portrait of the American child beauty queen JonBenet Ramsey, who was killed in her home in Boulder, Colorado, in 1996. While the two portraits are similar, they’re slightly different. In one, the woman’s face is surrounded by a cascade of wavy blonde hair set against a bubble-gum pink background. In the



other, the woman seems enshrouded in a gossamer-thin veil that cascades to the edge of the painting.

"I like them together," says Frank of the two portraits. "Something subtle happened. That felt like an image of youth," she says, pointing to the image of the woman with the cascade of hair before gesturing to the other, "and that felt like an image of death." Like most of Frank's work, they're simultaneously dark and uplifting.

The show at Salon 94 is something of an ode to a shared sensibility among the three artists of strong, female-driven imagery and color. "This kind of celebratory hallucinogenic expressionism," says Frank, laughing.

"Paint, Porcelain and Pulp: Amy Bessone, Francesca DiMattio, and Natalie Frank," is on view through August 9 at Salon 94 Bowery.