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Audrey Flack's Goddesses at Gary Snyder Gallery

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If you are going to chat with New York based artist Audrey Flack, she might ask you about the color of your lipstick, particularly if it is a shade of classic red as worn by iconic women, say Marilyn Monroe.

In her early photorealist phase, this very girly prop shows up in likely and unlikely places, atop a dresser, near a mirror, revealing something of an obsession with the ill-fated movie star; but in the 1978 oil, “World War II (Vanitas),” going up at auction at Christie’s next week, that very red is the color of a candle as well as a rose. Speaking about this work and its impending resale over lunch at the midtown restaurant Rare, Flack said, because of its historic reference, the painting is a work for a museum. Indeed, with its Holocaust reference, Flack juxtaposes a bright cherry on a petit four on an ornate silver dish, lustrous pearls, a butterfly, a teacup, a sumptuous gathering of life affirming objects with the grays and blacks of a row of Buchenwald inmates from a photograph by Margaret Bourke-White taken upon the concentration camp’s liberation. At an art history class at Baruch College that morning, Flack told students, back in the day, she was criticized for this odd, possibly insensitive assembling of images. But to her surprise, Holocaust survivors got it, asking her, how did you know the dream of pastries kept us alive during those dire times when all we ate were crumbs.

Now in a new phase of her career, Audrey Flack has an exceptional show at the Gary Snyder Gallery, sculpture and drawings from 1989–2012: A self-portrait as St. Theresa, an anatomically correct statue called “Sofia,” featuring muscles and skull adorned with flowers, a “Medusa” from 1989, mouth agape in horror, her head in menacing tendrils. These coils echo a bronze, “Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra” (ca. 1496) by Pier Jacopo Alari Bonacolsi, known as Antico, now exhibiting at the Frick, just as Flack’s goddesses evoke the nymphs and Venuses of classic statuary. Says Flack, Antico who? But the Renaissance artist was inspired by similar lore, condensing, recreating the famous Greek statues of his time.

Look again. Flack makes the old new updating with a gaze, bullets or tubes of paint in the hair, a revolver, toy soldiers, gemstones, turning her girly eye to create knowing feminist figures in flux; see how she wink winks at tradition.