

Victoria Gitman Turns Vintage Fashion Into Contemporary Art

BY CIARA LAVELLE FEBRUARY 25, 2015



A Girl in the Arbor #8, 2013, mixed media on paper, 29 3/4 x 41 1/2 inches

“Is there a way it can go faster?”

Victoria Gitman peers at the monitor and impatiently taps the laptop’s down arrow. On the screen, photos of purses scroll past in a rapid, jerky rhythm. She’s using a borrowed computer; at home, she says, she flies through these listings twice as fast, watching the colors and shapes in the pictures blend together as they fly by.

Gitman knows exactly what she’s looking for. The Buenos Aires-born artist, now based in Hallandale Beach, has spent 15 years scouring antique markets, thrift stores, and websites like eBay and Etsy that sell secondhand items, searching for just the right purse or piece of jewelry.

But this isn’t your average shopping addiction. In Gitman’s eyes, these aren’t just accessories. They’re muses, subjects she’ll study for months at a time as she painstakingly paints them in ultra-realistic detail. “I’m, like, hungry,” she says. “You can tell from my work that I’m a very obsessive person.”

Gitman’s paintings of accessories such as necklaces, bracelets, and purses made of beads or fur, along with a series of oil reproductions of portraits originally sketched by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, compose the exhibition “Victoria Gitman: Desiring Eye,” which opens this Thursday, February 26, at Pérez Art Museum Miami.

The idea for the paintings was born when she decided to depict a necklace she’d used as a prop in a series of self-portraits. Soon, she was searching the Lincoln Road Antique Market in South Beach and the Swap Shop in Fort Lauderdale for her next subject. “Anytime I would travel—I went to London, and in Covent Garden there is a really nice antiques market, so I got a couple purses there. But my main source was actually on Lincoln Road.”

Paintings of necklaces gave way to paintings of bracelets and then to her current subject, purses. She began painting white beaded pouches, then branched out into colored beads, and most recently has turned her attention to purses made of fur. Her shopping techniques also evolved. “Every time I went to Lincoln Road, I would find maybe 50 things, and [often] nothing would be a good subject for me, whereas I go on eBay and there are like 3,000 each time I go, and they change all the time,” she says.

Gitman’s artistic process, on the other hand, has remained old-fashioned. She paints from life, never from a photograph. And she’s so committed to creating eerily lifelike renderings of her subjects that she spends up to four months working on a single canvas. With the beaded purses, for example, she estimates she completed about 30 beads per day.

“When I started [painting] the fur purses, it was such a challenge . . . The beads are very orderly; there’s a grid, and I can follow each bead line by line,” she says. “Switching to fur, there’s no shape. So that was a huge challenge just in technical terms.”

It takes a special kind of temperament to concentrate so intensely for so long on the minute details of an everyday object. “My painting days [involve] looking at the actual fur up close. That’s seven hours of work looking at the purse and reproducing what I see. It’s superfocused, and that’s a plus, but it’s a minus in some other areas,” she says, laughing.

But it pays off in the work. Gitman’s purses look ready to fall off the wall and into the arms of a vintage-obsessed fashionista. But for the artist, this isn’t about fashion.

“I dress very simply,” she explains, wearing a black shirt and pants that look more comfortable than cutting-edge and her dark hair pulled into a simple bun at the nape of her neck. “I don’t buy expensive designer clothes or anything like that.” Regarding the purses, she says she’s not looking for pieces she’d want to wear. Instead, Gitman is more interested in the accessories’ standalone aesthetic appeal. “They’re flat designs in a sense.”

Sometimes she finds purses that remind her of the work of artists she admires. A white-and-red fur purse she discovered on Etsy, for example, reminded her of a Mark Rothko painting in the same color scheme. “So that’s why I pick it,” she explains. “It somehow reminds me of somebody else’s work, or it feels somehow related to the history of modernism.”

Gitman has very specific criteria for her subjects. She prefers real fur to fake; the beads of her purses can’t be too small, the way they were in the Victorian era, because they’re impossible to paint in her style; textures like cowhide aren’t visually interesting enough. Then there’s that ethereal, eye-catching quality that Gitman says she can’t accurately describe—she just knows it when she sees it.

Though she has never spent more than \$90 on any one item, the purses look luxurious in her work. “The objects get transformed in the painting,” she says. “By making a painting that takes three to four months to paint, I’m dedicating all this time and mental energy and love to the subject, and somehow that makes it special.

“So I guess somehow I’m rescuing these things from being lost in this sea of objects,” she adds. Then she clicks to the next page of purses and continues trolling for treasure.