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A Painting by Flora Yukhnovich Just Sold for \$1.2 Million, More Than 12X Its Estimate. Now the Art World Wants to Know: Who Is She?

The estimate-busting work at Phillips New York is only the third work by the young U.K. artist ever to come to auction.

Katya Kazakina, June 28, 2021



Flora Yukhnovich. Photo: © Andree Martis.

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The top 10 lots of Phillips's contemporary-art day sale last week in New York featured a familiar blue-chip lineup: Roy Lichtenstein, David Hockney, Frank Stella, Banksy, KAWS.



Tucked among them, however, was a new name: Flora Yukhnovich.



The young artist's painting, *Pretty Little Thing* (2019), carried an estimate of \$60,000 to \$80,000. It soared to a premium-inclusive price of \$1.2 million, representing one of the most remarkable breakaway successes of a new-to-the-scene artist in recent memory. Around 50 bidders registered to compete for the lot; Phillips had 21 phone lines open and 20 online bidders logged in from all over the world.



The seven-by-six-foot canvas—notably, the only artwork in Phillips's top 10 made by a woman—ended up the second priciest lot of the sale, behind a work by Lichtenstein.



Flora Yukhnovich, *Pretty Little Thing* (2019). Photo: Phillips.

"It was a complete surprise," said Rebekah Bowling, head of the day sales at Phillips. "Cecily Brown on that scale certainly sells for more, but this is someone fresh out of the gate. It's a perfect storm of pent-up demand."

Demand for young figurative artists is particularly strong coming out of the pandemic. Matthew Wong's dreamy landscapes have consistently sold for millions of dollars over the past year. Paintings by Salman Toor, Tschabalala Self, and Titus Kaphar routinely ignite bidding wars in the evening sales.

But even in light of this wave of demand, Yukhnovich's momentum past the \$1 million barrier has been dramatic. *Pretty Little Thing* is only her third work ever to sell at auction. Two small oils on paper, which had been estimated at £2,000 to £3,000 each, fetched £16,500 and £21,500, at Bonahms in April.

Yukhnovich, who was born in 1990 in Norwich and lives in London, works in a Rococo-inspired, semi-abstract style, characterized by a flurry of brushstrokes in pretty pastels and hot pinks. It looks a bit like if Fragonard and Soutine had a child (and then sent that child to the Museum of Ice Cream or Disney World). Not coincidentally, her work reproduces well on Instagram, where the artist has 35,800 followers.

The social media platform had a lot to do with Yukhnovich's success. That's where Parafin gallery director Matt Watkins first spotted her oil paintings in 2017. The works were part of Yukhnovich's grad school exhibition at City & Guilds of London Art School. Parafin typically doesn't represent artists straight out of school, but it made an exception for Yukhnovich.

"I liked her a lot. I liked the work a lot," Watkins said. "I felt that she would go far."

Her first show at Parafin, titled "Sweet Spot," was a runaway success in 2019. It included eight paintings, priced at £30,000 each, and several works on paper priced at £2,000. "We had hundreds of people" vying for the works, Watkins said. Everything sold.



Installation view of Flora Yukhnovich's solo show "Sweet Spot" at Parafin Gallery in 2019. Photo: Peter Mallet.

One painting was acquired by the Government Art Collection, administered by the U.K.'s department for digital, culture, media and sport. *Pretty Little Thing* was purchased by an anonymous collector through an advisor with the understanding that it won't be flipped, Watkins said, adding that "it's a shame" that the work went straight to auction just two years later.

London-based art advisor Wendy Goldsmith has been trying in vain to get Yukhnovich's work for 18 months.

"They are just so beautiful," she said. "She appeals across the board. You can put her in almost any collection."

The artist didn't stick with Parafin, despite its early support. In January, she officially joined the roster of London's blue-chip Victoria Miro gallery, which had previously given her a residency in Venice and a solo show at its gallery there last year.

"I like the idea of combining these two art historical moments which have become highly gendered: the pretty Rococo imagery and the machismo of abstraction," Yukhnovich [has said](#). (Neither the artist nor Victoria Miro gallery responded to a request for comment.)

According to Phillips's Bowling, the artist makes very few paintings and the waiting list for them on the primary market is enormous. She got a sense of the depth of demand in March, when one painting sold for £120,000 at a charity auction for White Columns.

"I told my clients, 'It's going to be big,'" Bowling said of *Pretty Little Thing*. "I thought it's going to be about \$350,000. That felt like a big number for a young artist."

Instead, the work hammered at \$950,000. Phillips declined to disclose any information about the winning bidder beyond the fact that they were not from Asia (a region that has been driving much of the demand for young art this year).

"There's a lot of money out there," Goldsmith said. "All you have to do is to keep your hand in the air and bid. These people can't get the works anywhere else."

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