

ROSY KEYSER

"Unpredictable Force: Rosy Keyser's *The Hell Bitch* at Maccarone"

By Anneliese Cooper

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Rosy Keyser's "Music for a Drowned World," 2015, currently on view at Maccarone Gallery.
(Courtesy the artist and Maccarone, New York)

A title like "The Hell Bitch" is difficult to ignore. Or, at the very least, it has a kick to it — one befitting Rosy Keyser's formidable [new show](#) at Maccarone's 630 Greenwich Street outpost, on view through June 6. But while it's easy to imagine the phrase in studs on the back of a leather jacket, Keyser's inspiration is somewhat more offbeat. In fact, the name comes from a horse — specifically, a horse in Larry McMurtry's Pulitzer Prize-winning western novel "[Lonesome Dove](#)."

“The Hell Bitch is this sort of unpredictable force,” Keyser explained, for those of us unfamiliar. “It actually is a loyal character, but it’s totally obstreperous” (a word she threw down, for the record, without pause — it’s one of the joys of listening to her describe her work, effortless poetics sown into steady speech).

Still, more than just an underlying concept, “The Hell Bitch” refers to an actual piece that remains in Keyser’s studio, a “big object in the form of a painting” that acted as a breeding ground for the works on view — sometimes a scratchpad for testing out different materials, other times a place to press the canvases against for paint transfer. “It just became this wellspring for different ideas and different gestures,” she said. “The thought was that ‘The Hell Bitch’ was like a source, almost like a mother yeast or a repository.”

“Repository” also feels like a fitting term to describe the resulting series. Of course, there’s the wide range of incorporated materials — furs, brushes, beaded chair covers, construction wick, etc. — hanging at all angles from sturdy wall-sized grids of bare plywood. (The grid is key, Keyser noted, for its ability to give the viewer a form to work off — a boundary by which to mark the extent of transgression: “If it was just these elements hung up on the wall, you wouldn’t have a place to begin.”)

Then, however, there’s the tangle of reactions and new significances the objects invite when incorporated into a single composition. “The only way to understand this relationship between nature and spirit is in this crazy material storm,” Keyser said. “I see the parallel being in poetry, when you put two words next to each other and they become a matrix for some expanded form.”

“So in a sense, the Hell Bitch is that matrix,” she added. “It’s something that can’t be broken down, because the sum of the parts is so different than, just on paper, what the parts are.”

Perhaps it’s the interplay between these various parts that makes the works so hard to pin down — obstreperous, even — as they seem to fluctuate, moment to moment, between creation and destruction, suffused with a primal zeal. “I think they ride that line between on their way up and on their way down,” she said, “which I think is highly relatable for all of us.”

There’s a wonderful vulnerability in that limbo — raw and uneasy, lines like veins pulsing under punctured skin — best captured by another one of Keyser’s seamless turns of phrase: “None of these are meant to be bulletproof. They’re all trying to dignify their faults.”