

An abstract painting by Anita DeSoto. The central focus is a figure, possibly a woman, wearing a vibrant red garment. She is surrounded by lush, colorful flowers, including large red and pink blossoms. The background is a mix of earthy tones and bright colors, suggesting a landscape with trees and a sky. The style is expressive and textured, with visible brushstrokes and a rich palette of colors including reds, pinks, greens, yellows, and blues.

Anita DeSoto

I Don't Want  
Your Golden Apple

## I Don't Want Your Golden Apple - Anita DeSoto

Essay by Hilary Radner

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*The Sisterhood Advocating Vegetarianism, after Rubens, 2022* (detail)

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# I Don't Want Your Golden Apple

Anita DeSoto

2022

In conversation, using a well-modulated almost girlish voice, Anita DeSoto is quick to underline what she considers to be her feminist stance, her deeply held convictions about the vicissitudes of patriarchy and the traumas of her personal journey – one that led her to become an artist against all odds. She explains, that, harking back to her “earliest memories,” she “absolutely loved paint... always loved figurative painting.”<sup>1</sup> She continues,

It was the only thing I could do well at school...[I] just completely bombed out...and all I could do is paint... I really wanted to go to art school, but I didn't have enough education to get in back then in the seventies, and I became a signwriter.

In her thirties, despite environmental pressures, Anita DeSoto did finally enroll in the Dunedin School of Art, escaping the Christian fundamentalist culture in which she had sought refuge and that, paradoxically, she explains, probably had “saved” her “life” during a troubled adolescence. At several points, she confesses that she still can't really believe that she is an artist. One senses both how unexpected and how hard won it has been for her to arrive at this point, given the multiple difficulties she has had to confront along the way.

Her earlier work was largely autobiographical, more recently, she has turned increasingly to history for her inspiration, including the history of art. In her current series, she tackles a period and tradition known for its excesses – its affirmation of the ascendancy of the Western European conception of masculinity in the age of empire. She takes as her principal source material works by Tiziano Vecelli or Vecellio, known as Titian (1488–1576), Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) and Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1696–1770), as well as Jean-Marc Nattier (1685–1766). Among this group, who arguably define what it meant to be an artist of note in this period, is a single woman painter, Rosalba Carriera (1673–1757) with

her *Portrait of a Young Lady with Parrot* (ca.1730). By including her, DeSoto signals her debt to women who have preceded her – women who defied the cultural conventions into which they were born to take up the paint brush, thus paving the way for future generations and women like herself.

The centerpiece of the series, occupying two large canvases, is a re-invention or re-interpretation of *The Judgment of Paris* (ca.1638) painted by Peter Paul Rubens, the final depiction of this mythological event among the several attributed to this painter, produced shortly before he died. In contrast with Rubens' single canvas, which measures 1.99 meters by 3.79 meters, DeSoto depicts the scene in two panels (a diptych measuring 1.6 meters in height by 2 meters in width), suggesting, rather than replicating, the majestic dimensions of the original and shifting its proportions, producing, literally, an example of "disrupted realism," a term DeSoto borrows from art writer John Seed.<sup>2</sup> The notion of disruption has a deep and almost personal significance for DeSoto. An alternate title for the exhibition was "The Golden Apple Disrupted." Here, then, DeSoto asks us to revisit our memories of these iconic works of art, but also disrupts them, asking us to reconsider our relations to the paintings and the society they represent – without rejecting them as part of an aesthetic tradition that held possibilities for women, while also putting them in their place.

This slipping and sliding along the paths of association (an idea from here, a painting from there) are characteristic of DeSoto's practice. We might describe this practice as a series of appropriations that have a personal significance to her and that she transforms in order to create images that are uniquely her own, employing an ever-changing set of painterly techniques controlled with palpable virtuosity. The two smaller canvases reproduce only a part of the originary larger canvas – side by side they create an area of overlap, with the goddess Juno situated partially "off screen" at the edge of the frame in the left-hand canvas, re-appearing almost at the center of the frame in the right-hand canvas, next to Venus, now squarely in the center, with Paris and Mercury "off-screen" to the left, that is to say eradicated from the viewer's field of vision. The duplication of the images gives a cinematic feel to the installation, as though

a camera had made a slow pan to the right, resulting in a re-framing of the trio of goddesses, now, in the second panel, almost jubilantly admiring themselves for themselves in the absence of a male gaze – or, at least, having quite a good time in the company of other women and their little putti.

In classical Greek mythology, “the Judgment of Paris” is a critical component in the myths surrounding the Trojan war, explaining its origins. Paris a young shepherd (the son of Priam, king of Troy, a fact poor Paris does not know) is given the task of awarding a golden apple to the fairest of three goddesses, Venus (beauty), Minerva (wisdom), and Juno (the hearth). To briefly summarize a rich and complex episode that is integral to the story of Troy, in this scene, Mercury (as messenger of the gods) displays the apple, while Paris listens, each goddess attempting to influence Paris’s decision by offering him gifts. Minerva offers Paris glory on the battlefield, Juno wealth, and Venus the most beautiful woman in the world. This woman would become known to the world as Helen of Troy, “the face that launched a thousand ships,” as she was famously described by sixteenth century poet Christopher Marlowe.

As we all know, Paris accepts Venus’s offer. Unfortunately, Helen was already married. One look at Paris – and, with Venus’s help, the two are besotted with one another. Helen runs off with Paris leaving a powerful, older, and more than slightly disgruntled husband behind – and, thus, legend has it, begins one of the most famous wars in history. The import of this story has been variously interpreted over the centuries. In DeSoto’s version, as her title explains, the goddesses reject the apple, recalling the views of feminists of the first half of the twentieth century, such as Virginia Woolf, who hypothesized that if women were in charge, the world would have no wars. More forcefully, as the title “I Don’t Want Your Apple” suggests, the “disruption” to which DeSoto alludes has a personal context. The fact that DeSoto chose the title of this painting as the title of the exhibition underlines its importance – the emphatic nature of her refusal to accept the place that society, the education system, and her former church had allocated to her.

Significantly, it is not only the disposition of the figures within the pictorial frame that

DeSoto changes, but also her handling of paint, through which she makes the painting clearly her own. Carefully controlling her palette, which is deliberately constrained and planned (recorded, and allocated painting by painting, in a notebook), DeSoto abandons any pretense at naturalism – the colors are brash and vigorous, the brush strokes adamant and assertive. In certain areas, the painting shifts into almost total abstraction, challenging viewers to question what it is that they see. In contrast with the polished and liquid compositions of Rubens' painting, DeSoto's brushwork recalls the masculinist energy of mid-twentieth century abstract expressionism, another stylistic appropriation.

Indeed, DeSoto talks about painting as a performance:

It is a total dance – it's a total push and pull dance between the big brush strokes, between what's needed and what to take back. I will always start with painting out the painting in a crude kind of way. When the painting is dry, I repaint the entire painting all in one hit, mostly... I'm standing back, taking layers off, putting them back on – choosing what to leave from the former layer and what to add, what to cover...and building up those layers. It is a real dance between those layers, and the brush strokes and the looseness. [I] certainly [have]to be in the right uncluttered zone to do it and have a good space of time, uninterrupted... I actually have to psychologically build up to it... I find it's like when you go on stage, and you have this moment to do the thing. It always sort of feels like a private stage-performance. I just get performance anxiety. Once I'm into it, I'm fine. It's getting myself over here [to the studio] to do it. [I tell myself] THIS IS THE DAY.... At the same time as feeling performance anxiety, I also feel a sense of anticipation.

Yet, like all virtuosos, her anxiety is a private matter, her works exuding a sense of continuity and confidence. If her brush strokes evoke an almost dangerous muscularity that often seems on the verge of creating a chaotic “mess,” the mess she fears, the work she exhibits never crosses that boundary. The artist confesses that not all paintings, not all performances, make the grade – suggesting the discipline and the almost harsh self-assessment that lie behind the displays of spontaneity incarnated, in particular, in the works on view in “I Don’t Want Your Golden Apple.” Like a general marshalling her forces, or perhaps a seasoned politician mounting a campaign, DeSoto plans, curates and delivers her exhibitions through a careful balance of, on the one hand, self-control in which she takes an almost managerial role, and, on the other, magnificent operatic displays of emotion (her private performances in her studio), resulting in the paintings as we see them exhibited.

Through the process of re-appropriation and transformation, DeSoto produces a “creative imitation,”<sup>3</sup> asserting her power over the images that she re-interprets and the stories she re-tells. She does not deny the past – neither history with a capital “H,” nor her own personal story – but, rather, through her painting makes these her own, a source of creative inspiration and, hence, in her terms “empowerment.” The nature of what constitutes a political act has become a matter of public debate in the twenty-first century – as it should be in an era in which self-gratification and self-fulfillment seem to have become cultural mantras in a world defined by consumerism. Yet in so doing, we often forget that the way that we live our lives is also a political choice. Anita DeSoto’s art asks us to remember. She asks to look at our past and our present in order to imagine future images that challenge us to develop into the selves that we were meant to be – the goal at the heart of feminism in its many guises.

**Hilary Radner**

June 2022, Dunedin

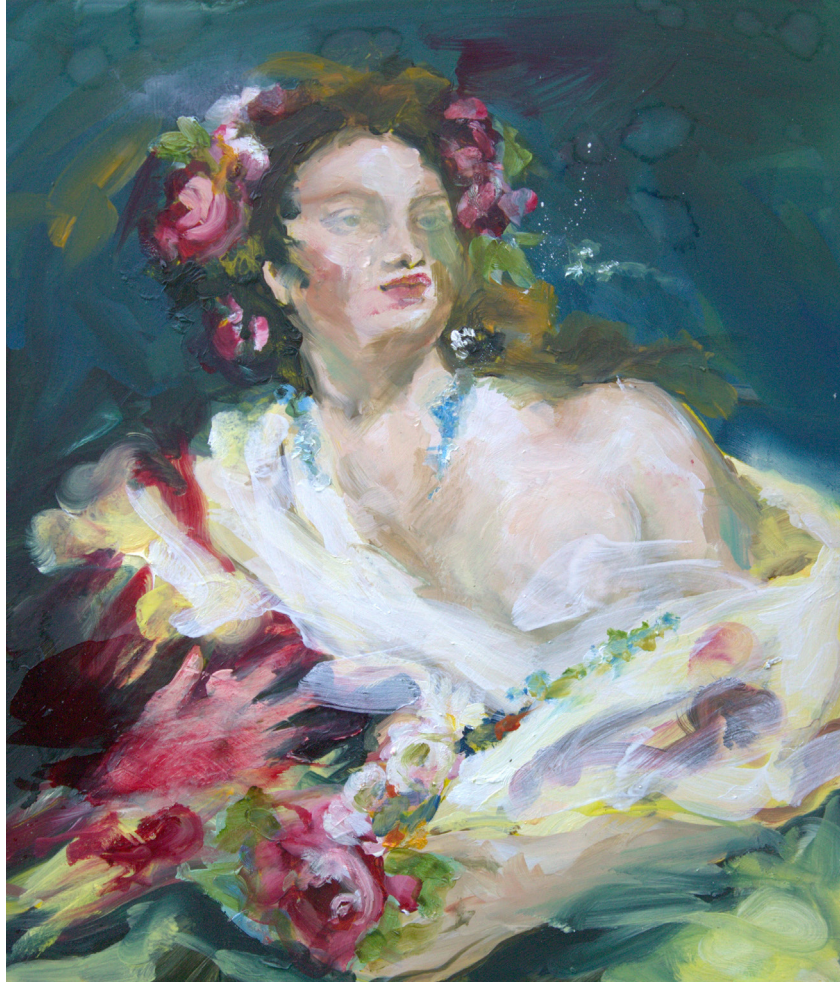


Endnotes:

1. Anita DeSoto, conversation with the artist, 24 May 2022, Waitati, New Zealand. All quotations attributed to the artist, unless otherwise stated, are from this same conversation. Quotations were reviewed by the artist, and further edited for coherence, accuracy, and succinctness.
2. The book to which she refers is by John Seed, *Disrupted Realism: Paintings for a Distracted World* (Alghen, PA: Schiffer Publishing, 2019).
3. “Creative imitation” is a term widely used to describe a common practice during the Tudor period in which writers, including William Shakespeare, borrowed and revised material taken from Classical literature to make it their own. See Harold Ogden White, *Plagiarism and Imitation during the English Renaissance: A Study in Critical Distinctions* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1935).

**Hilary Radner** began her career as a video artist in the late 1970s and early 1980s, with work shown at MOMA (1981), Video Free America (San Francisco, 1982), the Biennale of Sydney (1982), among other venues. In 1988, she completed a PhD at the University of Texas, Austin, and was awarded the position of Assistant Professor, and later Associate Professor (1995), at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana.

In 2002, she was appointed Foundation Professor of Film and Media Studies at the University of Otago. She currently holds the title of Professor Emeritus, University of Otago, and has published widely in the areas of visual culture and cinema studies, most recently *Raymond Bellour: Cinema and the Moving Image*, with Alistair Fox (Edinburgh UP, 2018). She is currently the Director of the RDS Gallery, Dunedin.



**Anonymous #1, after Tiepolo 2022**  
Oil on signboard / 32 x 37cm /



**Flora the Explorer, after Tiepolo 2022**  
Oil on signboard / 120 x 108cm /



**I Don't Want Your Golden Apple, after Rubens 2022**  
Oil on signboard / diptych / 200 x 80cm





The Womens World, after Rubens 2022  
Oil on signboard / 100 x 122cm /



A Sisterhood Connection on the Island of Fortuna, after Tiepolo 2022  
Oil on signboard / 100 x 122cm /

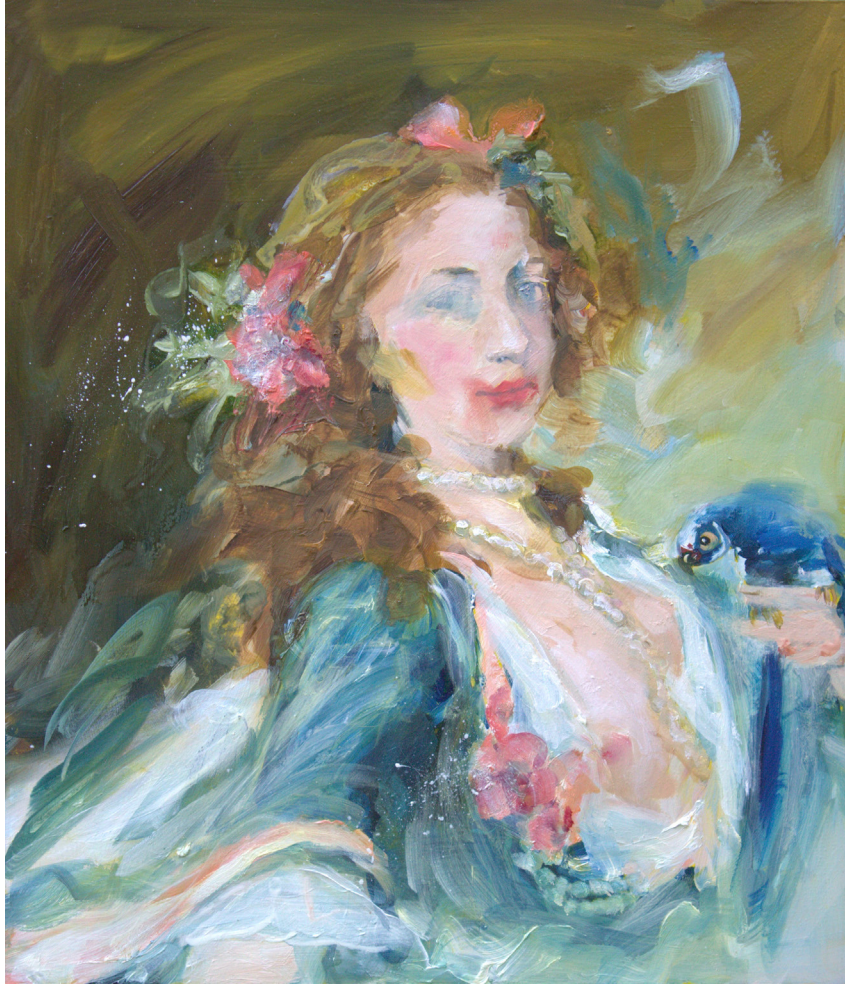


The Sisterhood Advocating Vegetarianism, after Rubens 2022 (detail)  
Oil on signboard / 108 x 120cm /





The Sisterhood Advocating Vegetarianism, after Rubens 2022  
Oil on signboard / 108 x 120cm /



**Anonymous #2, after Carrier** 2022  
Oil on signboard / 32 x 37cm /



**Anonymous #3, after Nattier 2022**  
Oil on signboard / 32 x 37cm /



**Earth Mothers, after Rubens 2022**  
Oil on signboard / 100 x 80cm /



**Earth Mothers, after Rubens 2022 (detail)**  
Oil on signboard / 100 x 80cm /



**Leucippus Daughter's had Names, after Rubens 2022 (detail)**  
Oil on signboard / 120x120cm /



**Leucippus Daughter's had Names, after Rubens 2022**  
Oil on signboard / 120x120cm /

