



Jeni Spota C., *Coat of Arms with Newlyweds*, 2022, paper collage, 14 × 16".

NEW YORK

Jeni Spota C.

NICELLE BEAUCHENE GALLERY

7 Franklin Place

January 19–March 4, 2023

One might be misled by the title of Jeni Spota C.'s most recent exhibition, "Works on Paper." A more appropriate name might be "Works *in* Paper" or, even more accurately, "Wonderfully Weird Miniature Bas-Reliefs of Paper, Paint, Cotton, and Foam Core." For this latest show, the artist has conjured thirteen Biblical apparitions from the fastidious manipulation of

detritus.

Consider the fourteen-by-sixteen-inch collage *Coat of Arms with Newlyweds* (all works 2022). Four angels hold the titular shield above a married couple who are flanked by onlookers, including a pope in a miter and tonsured monks. At the top center of the composition, the Virgin Mary cradles baby Jesus, hardly bigger than a peanut. While several of Spota's titles reference Giotto and the early Italian Renaissance tradition, the intimate scale and meticulous assemblage of idiosyncratic materials call to mind the folk traditions of domestic shrines in Mexico. Indeed, the artist's peculiar, obsessive imagination demands an almost forensic mode of scrutiny. Is the implied physiognomy of each face merely the effect of creases in a raisin-sized wad of paper? Could the celestial atmosphere be literally made of cotton? And, wait, why is this skinny-tied groom dressed so much like one of the Beatles?

This is hardly the most psychedelic of Spota's collages. Others, such as *Peace Sign with Body Parts*, depict angels bearing the namesake emblem surrounded by disembodied hands and eyes, and the naked figures of Adam and Eve with visible ribs the size of a baby's fingernail. Floating eyes dominate several compositions, such as *Cross Eyed*, where they are assembled in the form of, you guessed it, a cross. Yes, Spota is funny. But there is also something profound in the suturing of symbols from across eras and contexts that strives to approach the divine.

— Sophia Powers

frieze

Jeni Spota

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, CHICAGO, USA

As if reciting the rosary, Jeni Spota paints the same religious scene again and again, canvas after canvas. Each small panel depicts a three-tiered last judgment in which the crucifixion is sandwiched between angels in heaven above and sinners in hell below. Typically, Christ presides over the last judgment (which took place after the second coming), but here an image of the Madonna and Child, encased in a mandorla, is the keystone. This iconographic interruption is not Spota's invention, but a direct quote of a tableau vivant from Pasolini's *Decameron* (1971), an adaptation of Boccaccio's 14th-century allegorical tales, that focuses on Giotto. In the film, the artist is shown consulting a drawing of a commissioned fresco, but a single panel still needs to be planned – how will he fill in the scene? Giotto is shown in a crowded market drawing inspiration from daily life, but he is struck by a moment of clarity while sleeping. In his dream he sees this last judgment with the Virgin above. Accordingly, all of Spota's paintings are titled 'Giotto's Dream'.

From Boccaccio we know that Giotto is painting in the Church of Santa Chiara in Naples. This fresco is now lost, so both Pasolini and Spota's representations are confections of extant Giotto frescoes. Spota also adds further elements to the scene: extra sinners, a banner of Christ's face, even Watts Towers (1921-54), the monumental sculpture in Los Angeles by self-taught Italian immigrant Simon Rodia. Note that all of Spota's references are 'made



Giotto's Dream, Holy Mountain (Nightmare Symmetrical version) 2008

in Italy.' (She became a Giotteschi after living near the church of San Francesco in Assisi, home to a trove of Giotto's frescoes.)

These scenes aren't overly concerned with historical accuracy and it isn't immediately obvious that the Madonna, or any of Spota's other additions, do not 'fit' into the original iconic scene. Instead, the artist seeks to depict a feeling of weighty religious allegory by appropriating the readymade Catholic mysteries, seeming to tap into Italian Catholic imagery, from Boccaccio to Giotto to Pasolini, and ride the wave of artistic heritage. An aura of sanctity is available to those who can arrange specific elements into a magical configuration.

Does divinity reside in Pasolini and Spota's depiction of Giotto's dream of the last judgment? If not, the age-old compositions are still remarkably good looking showpieces of a lost culture; they don't invite prayer, but worship iconography's stately fixity – Christ and Madonna rendered by centuries of rote symmetry. Dreams, like dusty icons, are the residue of yesterday's anxieties. Giotto's lightning-bolt epiphany promotes a funny little myth of creative inspiration and to perpetuate it in paint is to become swept away by the romance of historical fiction.

Jason Foumberg

Jeni Spota C. at Brennan & Griffin Gallery in New York

BY JULIET HELMKE, MODERN PAINTERS | MARCH 05, 2016



Jeni Spota C.'s "Maestà (For NOLA)," 2015.
(Courtesy of artist and Brennan & Griffin)

New York

Jeni Spota C.

Brennan & Griffin // January 10–March 6

The nine paintings that make up Jeni Spota C.'s "Dicey Fabulous Carnival" will probably lose their aroma over time, but two weeks following the opening of her third solo show with Brennan & Griffin, the gallery still bears the pungent smell of her thickly laid oils. The works—all from 2015; landscape oriented; the smallest about a foot wide, the largest three and a half feet—contain the same imagery: a mother holding her child and surrounded by a crowd. It's modeled after the hallowed motif of the Madonna enthroned, exemplified by Simone Martini's *Maestà* from 1315. Classically, the mother of Jesus, holding her son, is attended by a host of angels, saints, and apostles. In Spota's versions, the central female is a "universal mother" and her companions are ghosts, carnies, mimes, and witches, all rendered in dense, blobby daubs of vibrant color—a mint-green complexion, blue hair, peach cheeks, a lemon-and-green harlequin shirt—that pool when they hit the viewer's eye to mute the vibrancy of the piece as a whole.

The physical composition lends more than structure. Spota's works share with their forebears the intimacy created by the Gothic shift toward realism (exemplified by the Madonnas), when the appearance of perspective and more realistically styled, expressive human countenances enthralled Renaissance audiences. Painted with laid-back brushwork, these versions feel at once familiar yet totally fresh, a reminder of the deeply embedded way art history has taught us to view certain compositional forms with reverence. The diminutive faces pull viewers in, almost nose-close. While they might search for the familiar, expecting to recognize Matthews, Marks, and Lukes, Spota instead gives us a ragtag band of casually drawn visages onto which viewers might project the quasi-mystics, authors, film directors, political candidates, and musicians who attract such cultish fervor in this day and age.

Jeni Spota: Fool's Small Victory

by Terry R. Myers

Kathryn Brennan Gallery, Los Angeles
September 9 – October 10, 2009

I didn't ask, but I have no doubt the title of Jeni Spota's recent exhibition, *Fool's Small Victory*, was borrowed from a compilation album by Faith No More that includes various B-sides and live recordings, five of which are different versions of a song called "A Small Victory." Spota's paintings are significant small victories, but even more they are pure Faith No Less, jam-packed containers of devotion that even make room for doubt if not disbelief, objects that despite their smallish-ness are "heavy" in both senses of the word. Even in my most secular moments it's impossible for me not to consider these pictures as tangible miracles, if only because their manifestations of spiritual faith are intensified rather than devoured by their painterly gluttony, raising Jasper Johns's "'Looking' is and is not 'eating' and 'being eaten'" to another level.

Spota emerged two years ago (fully-formed, it seemed) with a series of 12 by 14 inch paintings that made use of the format of the compilation album, or, better yet, the box set: collectively titled "Giotto's Dream," each piece's name was sometimes extended and then extended again with a parenthetical label similar to those given to remixed dance or pop songs (for example, "Giotto's Dream, Holy Mountain (Nightmare version)"; "Giotto's Dream (Hierarchies of Desire version)," both 2007). Spota's categorizing is authentic and accurate in both personal and spiritual terms: every one of these paintings is an unyielding remix of material (impasto paint), method (as much a depositing as a manipulation of the thick paint), and personal memories (some of the works that are called "The Hour of My Birth" include a depiction of said event), all worked and reworked at the service of her overriding source of the Crucifixion, usually Christ's, but sometimes that of several anonymous figures. True to the playful re-sampling character of her practice, however, the fixed nature of this imagery is from a cascading, destabilizing (some might say blasphemous) source: a scene from Pasolini's 1971 film *The Decameron* depicting Boccaccio's allegory of a dream of Giotto's, in which his religious visions are annihilated by a those of a pagan orgy. Eating and being eaten indeed. Unlike, for example, Chris Ofili when he would offer us a glimpse of his ongoing interest in the Catholic tradition in which he was raised—embodied most infamously in his painting "The Holy Virgin Mary" (1996)—Spota doesn't hand us the easy target of pornography in its photographic (or cinematic) form. Her use of paint may be playful or perverse, but more than anything it is protective, and looks as if it is more than able to withstand (absorb?) an assault.



Jeni Spota, *Teeth*, 2009. Oil on canvas. 16 x 18 inches. Courtesy of Kathryn Brennan Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo credit: Robert Wedemeyer

Four of the five paintings (all from 2009) in this current exhibition are at least slightly larger than these earlier canvases, and no two are the same size. This has the effect of opening up the work, even when the largest canvas is more packed than ever: "Framed" is literally a painting-in-a-painting, with the larger one underneath so crowded that it seems to embody a procession carrying the other framed painting (with a prominent depiction of Christ's Crucifixion) through a town square. Two other paintings remain closer to Spota's original format: "San Damiano" includes several heraldic shields that appeared in earlier paintings (derived, as it happens, from an actual home, which she named "The Polish House," in Spota's neighborhood when she was living in Chicago), and, more unusually, "Teeth" arranges a series of Crucifixions as if they were in the bottom row of a gaping mouth, bringing us back to eating.

I also have no doubt that this exhibition is in many ways a tribute to Johns. This is made explicit in the remaining two paintings. Both "Flag" and "Stripes" minimize and almost forego most of the imagery and the impasto, replacing the former with the format of the American flag, and the latter with another method of construction that introduces strips of canvas to make the support (I'm also tempted to see this as a nod to Rauschenberg). Made up mostly of linear arrangements of patterns (including some of her shields), both works fulfill the painting-as-object criteria that both Johns and Rauschenberg reestablished and reworked again and again. However, upon closer examination, Spota returns to the scene of the crime—I mean devotion—in her "Flag": the alternating stripes that do have impasto turn out to be accumulations of tiny "heads," which she makes out of paint on her palette and then carefully transfers to the canvas, attaching them to their waiting bodies. Such a disembodiment in this last painting extends Spota's outrageous and droll commitment to the grotesque in a way that brings to mind no less than the likes of Flannery O'Connor, who, we should remember in the face of Spota's provocations, once said, "Well, if it's a symbol, to hell with it."



THE NEW YORKER

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN: ART

JENI SPOTA

The young artist's mixed-media paintings, though small, contain multitudes, evoking James Ensor's macabre parade or Henry Darger's battalion of Vivian Girls. Saints swarm the Virgin Mary; a phalanx of figures, most wearing Bedouin headgear, stand at attention, wielding totemlike staffs. Spota applies an impasto so thick that her figures can seem as much sculpted as painted; some are tiny enough to have been carved with a toothpick. Spota wedges playing cards and dominoes into her paintings, as if to acknowledge the high stakes of her game—over all, the gamble pays off. Through April 14.

Through April 14

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ART



WAY OF THE CROSS: Spota's "Stripes" includes religious icons.

UP AND COMING

An artist in the thick of it

Jeni Spota has found early success with her mix of modern and religious imagery.

LEAH OLLMAN

Only months out of graduate school, painter Jeni Spota had her first solo gallery show. Not that unusual, perhaps, in an art world that mirrors the broader culture's lust for youth and novelty. The show, at Chinatown's Sister gallery, sold out before it opened.

A few months later, Spota had a solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, part of a series featuring emerging area artists. Such a show, early in a career, is also becoming less out-of-the-ordinary, but hers was the first in the series, recalls curator Julie Rodriguez Widholm, "where I had to borrow every piece from collectors, major collectors," most notably Paris-based François Pinault, and L.A.'s Dean Valentine and Amy Adelson. "Word had gotten out."

A Project Room exhibition featuring four of Spota's paintings on canvas and one cast in bronze with a silver patina just closed at the Santa Monica Museum of Art. Four new paintings will go on view Sept. 12 in the artist's second solo show at Sister, which is changing its name to Kathryn Brennan Gallery. The largest piece was just bought by London-based collector Charles Saatchi.

Rapid success distinguishes Spota, who moved to L.A. last year, from the flood of aspiring artists released annually from MFA programs nationwide, but more than her blossoming career, it's the tone and technique of her work that set her apart. Spota's paintings are small, sincere and strangely anachronistic. They seem to occupy radically different time zones and psychic spaces at once. Lush, gooey, heaving with motion and emotion, the paintings are physically immediate, while summoning imagery from religious iconography of centuries past: Christ's baptism, crucifixion and deposition, Adam and Eve, the Virgin Mary, St. Francis.

"Everyone working here wanted to lick the paintings," says Rodriguez Widholm. The surfaces "look like frosting."



'LIKE FROSTING': Spota with her artwork "San Damiano." Her paintings are lush, thickly textured and physically immediate.

"The work is almost goofy — the gloopiness of it, the heavy texture combined with the tiny figures. There is a kind of tension between the seriousness of her subject and the way she's depicting it. She's pushing it, and evolving and changing, while already having developed a mature vocabulary. For such a young artist, she really has a voice. She found it early on."

Spota, 27, grew up on Long Island and graduated from the State University of New York at Purchase in 2004 as a painter of large, flat, poetic abstractions. After a year off, she enrolled at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and started making big, "washy," black and white figurative paintings of stills from films by Pier Paolo Pasolini.

"I knew there was something in his films that I definitely wanted to hold onto, but I just couldn't put my hands around it. They were bad paintings," says Spota, laughing, curled casually on the couch of the Echo Park apartment she shares with her boyfriend, Ian Hokin, also an artist.

After a "really awful" critique in the fall of her second year, she reversed course, embarking on a series of small,

colorful, thickly painted canvases. And instead of painting multiple film stills, she drew from a single one, a scene from the director's 1971 "Il Decamerone."

"There's one particular moment where Giotto, who's played by Pasolini, wakes up in the middle of the night with a vision of a painting he wants to make. It's of all these people on a hill and the Virgin Mary and choirboys and underneath them, naked mannequin figures hanging and angels holding out a cross and people praying, and a boy holding up a miniature church. In the film it only lasted for a few seconds. I really wanted that image to stay in my head. It felt like a dream, so fleeting, but you really felt the energy of it. It encapsulated everything I was trying to find and say and think about."

Freeing herself from the anxiety of creating something new with every new canvas, Spota began to paint, over and over, variants of "Giotto's Dream" — scenes densely packed with tiny repeated figures, each a single swipe and dash of paint, yet legible as rows of angels, Christ on the cross,

Mary with the infant Jesus in her arms, naked bodies suspended by their feet, all laid down in muted primaries, black, white and brown, in pigment viscous as marshmallow cream.

"I really liked how the thick paint made the dream more dreamlike," she says, "how the paint vibrated and created that feeling of the dream, because you can't really focus on it when it's thick and textured like that. You get the general idea of the image and then as soon as you look away, you can't really construct the entire image in your head the way it is in the painting, but you get the feeling of the painting, the ethereal energy from it."

Her format has stayed relatively consistent since that turning point, but the paintings have continually changed, incorporating personal narratives, flags and border designs derived from Italian church architecture. In recent work, she has cut strips of canvas patterned with coats of arms and wrapped them around another canvas. With a palette knife in each hand, she scooped up chunks of not-quite-dry imagery off one canvas and grafted it onto another.

Throughout, the colors, idioms and themes borrow heavily from the late Gothic and early Renaissance Italian art she studied during a formative semester abroad as an undergraduate. Traveling through Umbria and Tuscany, Spota soaked in the art of Duccio, Cimabue, Piero della Francesca and Giotto, and learned to paint using egg tempera and fresco techniques.

When she saw that scene in Pasolini's film, "something snapped," she recalls, her warm brown eyes widening. Her intrigue with film imagery and her deep impressions from Italy converged, resulting in a stunning and surprising body of work: small canvases with an epic scope and, for a contemporary artist, an unusually earnest take on religious subjects.

"I think it's like the perfect storm," Spota says. "I've been so focused on painting and the history of painting, but I am Italian and I am Catholic — in this mystical sense of being Catholic. And all these elements combined have made the work non-ironic. They're very sincere to me."

calendar@latimes.com



ARTFORUM

Jeni Spota C.

BRENNAN & GRIFFIN | LOWER EAST SIDE

55 Delancey Street

January 10–March 6

James Hampton, a janitor, built a tinfoil throne room for Christ's return in a Washington, DC, rental garage; Leonard Knight's Salvation Mountain is an adobe edifice in California made in honor of God's enduring love; Laure Pigeon's densely worked ink drawings are faithfully recorded transmissions from beyond the veil. Painter Jeni Spota C. unabashedly joins this lineage of ecstatic visionaries for whom art is a gateway into the divine.

One doesn't just look at Spota's paintings; one *feels* them. Their thickly encrusted oil surfaces warp—or rather, masticate—the orderly and elaborate geometry of the compositions. The textures read as hammered tin, disintegrating brocades, or even mortified flesh, and their eerily wan colors—acid yellows, arid blues, and desiccated-looking greens, whites, and reds—are culled from another century. These images pulsate with religious patterns and insignias, along with the reverent faces of communicants, kings, saints, and queens. The most resplendent illustration of this, *Venetian Victory*, 2015, includes a pair of ossified cherubim flanking a sculptural crimson flower wreathed in ribbons, like an offering. And so we are transported: to Babylon and Lascaux; seventeenth-century Protestant graveyards; dusty monastery attics and basements; *heaven*.

Let it be clear: Despite the “outsider” appearance of her work, Spota is anything but. There is nothing willfully naive about her approach. She is a maker of sophisticated objects with a sophisticated art education to match. She knows her history and her aesthetic kin, and how she wants to place herself in the spectrum of contemporary thinking and making. But, like Sabato “Simon” Rodia, the architect of Watts Towers in Los Angeles—and a blood relative of Spota's—she does as obsession, or the heart, commands.

— Alex Jovanovich



Jeni Spota C., *Venetian Victory*, 2015, oil on canvas, 36 x 42".

Art in America

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

LOS ANGELES

JENI SPOTA

KATHRYN BRENNAN

Jeni Spota's stunning 2007 debut show at Sister (recently renamed Kathryn Brennan) featured a series of paintings based on a single brief scene from Pasolini's 1971 film *Il Decameron*. In the scene, Giotto (played by the director) awakens in the night with a vision he aspires to paint of a hillside dense with worshippers, angels, dangling naked figures, choirboys and the Virgin Mary. Spota worked small but with an epic scope, painting swarms of repeated figures framing the Madonna and Child, and Christ on the cross, in thick, gooey daubs. The surfaces heave with emotion. With their dreamlike urgency and devotional earnestness, the paintings leave an indelible impression.

Spota, currently based in L.A., largely continues to mine religious imagery, and the strength of her new work suggests that she has not yet exhausted that theme. In *San Damiano* (20 by 22 inches, all 2009), repeated images of the Virgin and Child are stacked at the top center of the canvas; below them are multiple depictions of the Crucifixion. On either side of this spine is a roughly symmetrical, encyclopedic array of the hellish and the hopeful—monks, angels, Adam and Eve, choruses, naked figures hanging upside down. Spota lays down viscous paint in solid colors, her abbreviations immediately legible as iconographic mainstays, such as the tiny swipe of red at Christ's rib. She handles pigment with aggressive, modern flamboyance, yet her imagery retains much of the unironic austerity of the late Gothic and early Renaissance Italian models she draws from. Her almost musty palette of muted primaries, black, white, gray, brown and flesh tones keeps an otherwise ecstatic materiality in check.

Coats of arms and ornamental pat-



Jeni Spota: *Teeth*, 2009, oil on canvas, 16 by 18 inches; at Kathryn Brennan.

terns derived from Italian ecclesiastical architecture crop up amid the figures in the paintings and take center stage in two of the new works. In *Flag* (an homage, inescapably, to Johns), a 19-by-22-inch oil on canvas, applied strips of canvas marked with repeated quatrefoils demarcate the horizontal stripes, and in *Stripes* (11½ by 14½ inches), numerous such bands, varying in width and patterning, wrap around the entire canvas like a package. Both pieces extend Spota's formal and stylistic vocabulary, but neither is as viscerally compelling as those in which she drives deeply, insistently, into the fertile terrain of Pasolini's vision. *Teeth* (16 by 18 inches), the most gripping painting in the show, introduces a new and promising darkness. A Madonna and Child anchors the top portion of the painting beneath a marbled pale blue sky, while below, black veils shroud the corners and multiple crucifixions fan out in the shape of a gaping, troubling smile. The field is more turbulent than ever, crusty with ridges and clefts, tense and alive.

—Leah Ollman

AROUND THE GALLERIES

Horrors hidden in globs of paint

By DAVID PAGEL
Special to The Times

Jeni Spota paints like a cake decorator, spreading, swirling and daubing globs of viscous oils with spatulas and applicators to create undulating fields of creamy color and supersaturated deliciousness. You find yourself with your nose very close to the luxurious surfaces of her nine small paintings at "sister" before you notice that their writhing piles of paint describe horrors of biblical proportions.

That's when you realize that this Chicago-based painter tells tales like a lunatic visionary, mixing well-known stories with outlandish fantasies to concoct perverse dramas that can be neither believed (because they're flat-out preposterous) nor dismissed (because they contain too many grains of truth).

Spota's paintings cover 12-by-14-inch panels. Nearly all feature crucifixions, often of a Christ figure and sometimes of several rows of anonymous victims, their naked bodies hanging from long crossbeams. Other martyrs are burned alive over fiery woodpiles or cooked in caldrons of boiling oil.

"Giotto's Dream, Holy Mountain (Symmetrical version)" depicts Christ in duplicate, his bent



JENI SPOTA, "sister"

DIZZING IMAGERY: In Jeni Spota's "Giotto's Dream, Dream of Constantine," showing at "sister" gallery, various groups surround an image of the crucified Christ, a motif in her works of oil.

legs, sagging torso and hanging head appearing to the left and right of the cross's upright. In "Giotto's Dream, Holy Mountain (Nightmare version)," the crucifixion takes place on an inverted mountain or in a hellish pit. Christ appears in the center, surrounded by more than 60 doppehgangers crowded around him as if reveling in Walpurgis Night ecstasy.

Choirs of angels and legions of nuns look on. In other images, cottages are festooned with

cryptic banners as villagers prepare for kinky festivities. Think Hieronymus Bosch meets Pieter Bruegel, with a good dose of Jess Collins and Alfred Jensen tossed in to make the mix even more dizzying.

Spota's inspiration goes back to Giotto, by way of Boccaccio, by way of Pasolini. She looks to a movie (Pasolini's "Decameron") based on a collection of stories that features a painter whose subject was the troubled relationship between humanity and

divinity. It's enough to make your head spin. And that's just what her paintings do, making you wonder where the storytelling stops and reality begins.

The results are volatile. And intoxicating. This 25-year-old painter's solo debut transforms what should be a sickly sweet stew — or overdose of distastefulness — into a fascinating phantasmagorical extravaganza.

***sister**, 437 Gin Ling Way, L.A., (213) 638-2000, through Nov. 17. Closed Sundays through Tuesdays. www.sisterfa.com.

Jeni Spota C.

NEW YORK,
at Brennan & Griffin

by Leah Ollman

Jeni Spota C.: *Carnie Stars*, 2015, oil on canvas, 13 by 16 inches; at Brennan & Griffin.



The texture of Jeni Spota C.'s paintings verges on outrageous. Impasto barely begins to describe the gooey slabs and thick crusts, the insistent materiality. For all of their surface intensity, however, the paintings never devolve into artifacts of performative bravado. They convey innocence as well as intelligence, modesty even, and a keen sense of both history and humor.

The nine recent canvases in her show at Brennan & Griffin (all 2015) riff on Simone Martini's *Maestà* (1315), an iconographic staple in which the Madonna, enthroned, holds the Christ child and is flanked by haloed apostles, saints, and angels. In the Sienese fresco, the group constitutes a congregation, sober and worshipful. In Spota's paintings, too, the characters align neatly, front row kneeling, but they form more of a troupe. Gone are the dignified, flowing robes, replaced by the costumes of Carnival: boldly striped pants, bright buttons, ruffled collars, scalloped skirts, polka dots, and the diamond patterns of harlequins.

In *Dacey Fabulous Carnival*, the show's title piece, a regal canopy shades the ensemble and medallion portraits border the whole; both

elements derive from Simone's fresco. In the radiant *Moonlit Maestà*, Spota sets the assembly against a ruggedly brushed, deep-blue sky, its scatter of five-pointed stars like starfish tossed on a turbulent sea. An architectural framework of slender columns and Gothic arches elegantly encloses the scene.

Simone helped usher in a new naturalism to the rendering of figures in space; Spota dials it way back, to a primitivist, nearly cartoonish flatness. She paints eyes as dots and brows as mere dashes above them. Faces might be teal, terra-cotta, or gray, their cheeks and noses daubed in vivid, contrasting colors. Her halos read less as luminous auras than as clunky helmets—top-heavy accoutrements of spiritual ascension.

Through this loopy, anachronistic inversion of style, Spota enacts Carnival's irreverence and upending of convention right on the surface. In her early work, a decade ago, she reached back to Giotto via a dreamlike scene from a Pasolini film. Here, she invokes the function of the Christian festival in the Middle Ages and early Renaissance through the theories of Bakhtin, who wrote of Carnival as a time of fertile rupture, the temporary collapse of rigid hierarchies allowing for a fluidity within and between prescribed roles.

The same dualism that defines Carnival drives Spota's paintings. The works marry the sacred and the profane, the reverential and the satirical, the stable and the improbable. Spota fixes on a traditional iconographic scheme, and imposes upon it a gluey entropy. The paintings conflate the liberating debauchery of capital-"C" Carnival with that of its crude (lowercase) contemporary counterpart. What she does—at once examining and exercising permissiveness—turns out to be marvelously dicey, and surprisingly surprising.