

Two Coats of Paint

Award-winning NYC blogazine with a focus on painting

SOLO SHOWS

Melora Kuhn: Refreshing myth

July 24, 2026 11:28 am



Melora Kuhn

Contributed by [Bill Arning](#) / Museums and theaters are hard-pressed to introduce younger audiences to canonical works whose titles contain the word “rape.” Art history, drawn largely from the Bible and Greco-Roman mythology, is filled with images far more disturbing than most contemporary films. Renaissance works, for example, depict the Massacre of the Innocents: screaming infants being slaughtered in sprawling spectacles. Such works were intended to bring scripture vividly to life for largely illiterate audiences while satisfying the appetite for grand drama before cinema. Today, however, the digital world censors language in ways that often flatten historical nuance. Social-media algorithms routinely block “rape,” making it increasingly difficult to illuminate works such as Benjamin Britten’s opera *The Rape of Lucretia*, which accords the heroine profound dignity and moral courage. Contemporary audiences are shielded not only from discomfiting language but also from the complicated history it describes.

Germantown-based painter [Melora Kuhn](#) confronts this dilemma directly in “[The Legacy of Disembodiment](#)” at Private Public Gallery. Drawing on art historical appropriation, she revisits canonical depictions of rape alongside images of volcanic eruptions. Rather than simply reproducing these works, Kuhn surgically removes their violent male protagonists, allowing other emotional and formal ideas to emerge from what remains. Her project is considerably richer than a mere protest against female victimhood. Kuhn’s paintings reflect a deep admiration for the European tradition, transforming their myths from literal narratives to psychological landscapes whose meanings continue to evolve. We remain simultaneously attracted to and unsettled by these celebrated masterpieces even though our moral sensibilities differ dramatically from those of the societies that produced them.



Melora Kuhn

Kuhn’s monumental canvases recall the overwhelming scale of paintings encountered in royal palaces and great museums. In the diptych *Eruption*, a volcanic explosion is paired with her version of [Sebastiano Ricci’s](#) somewhat obscure *The Rape of the Sabine Women*. Less restrained than the more famous versions by [Poussin](#) or [Rubens](#), Ricci’s composition revels in exposed flesh and airborne bodies. For generations, painters were attracted to the subject not simply for its narrative of sex and power but also for the exhilarating complexity of intertwined figures in motion. Kuhn approaches Ricci analytically. She removes the bodies themselves, leaving swirling draperies to carry the painting’s emotional force. Violence survives excision as energy, the adjoining volcanic eruption functioning as echo and metaphor. Catastrophe is elemental, even if our understanding of it continually shifts.



Melora Kuhn



Melora Kuhn

The exhibition's centerpiece is a large-scale sculptural reinterpretation of Bernini's celebrated sculpture *The Rape of Persephone*, recreated at full scale in temporary materials. Bernini's original, completed in 1622 when he was in his early twenties, established his reputation through astonishing technical virtuosity: Pluto's fingers sink into Persephone's marble flesh, a single tear traces her cheek, and the entire composition seems to twist in perpetual motion. The sculpture is frequently titled *The Abduction of Persephone*, raising the question of how language shapes interpretation. The myth itself is hardly simple. Although Hades seizes Persephone, Zeus has already sanctioned the union. Demeter's grief causes the earth's crops to fail until a compromise allows her daughter to return each spring, giving rise to the cycle of the seasons. Does "abduction" soften the violence or merely describe it differently?

Kuhn preserves the emotional intensity of Bernini's composition while redirecting focus to Persephone's interior life. She is no longer just the object of action but instead a subject whose psychological experience is crucial to the narrative. Theatricality is also important to Kuhn, who delights in modeling the expressive faces of Cerberus, Pluto's three-headed guardian. The quietest and perhaps the most moving work is a small cement bust of Demeter. Crowned with dried goldenrod, the harvest goddess embodies not abundance but maternal grief. Her anguish, rather than Persephone's immediate fate, drives the myth.



Melora Kuhn in her studio

When art history's constituent myths are read literally, it is more unsettling than it has to be. From the ancient Eleusinian Mysteries to pre-Raphaelite art, twentieth-century literature, and contemporary feminist poetry, Persephone has been reimagined as victim, queen, survivor, and agent of transformation. The troubling word "rape" in the title of Bernini's sculpture is increasingly difficult to print, but the myth itself will not disappear. Within it each generation discovers new ways to think about power, loss, patriarchy, desire, and renewal. As Kuhn demonstrates, ancient stories remain fertile because their meaning can change with the times.

"Melora Kuhn: The Legacy of Disembodiment," Private Public Gallery, 530 Columbia Street, Hudson, NY. Through August 9, 2026.

About the author: Bill Arning is a curator, critic, advisor, writer, and itinerant maker of pop-up shows based in Old Chatham, New York.