

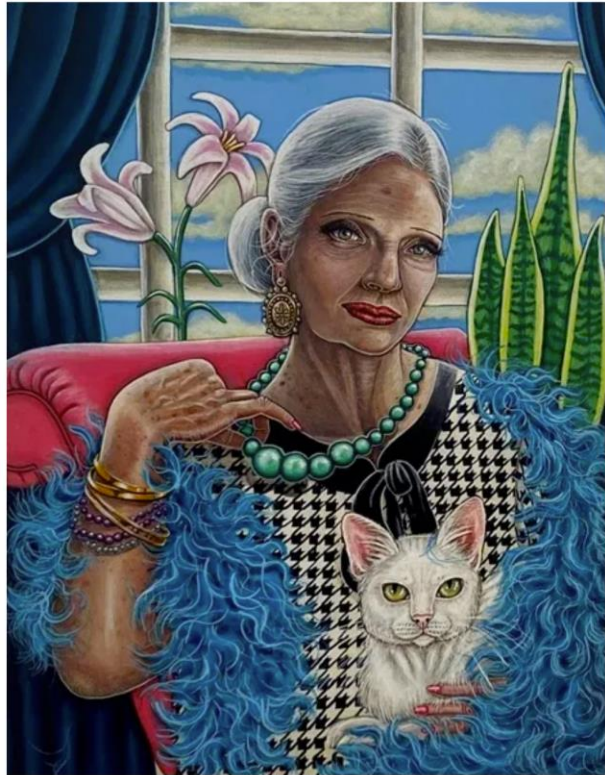
VISUAL ARTS

# Gail M. Boykewich's works have a visual language of their own

Written By TRIS McCALL • November 18, 2025

We have all seen what overexposure can do to a film negative. Modern artists can be awfully suspicious of illumination. An abundance of light can distort what we see just as effectively as shadows can. So emphatically have we discarded the notion of sunlight as a clarifier that it has become customary for painters and illustrators to represent light as a kind of translucent shroud: a blurring force at the fringes of our perception of reality.

But Gail M. Boykewich is, in many ways, an old-fashioned artist. In a Boykewich painting or sculpture, light is natural, copious and revelatory. There are shadows, but they don't obscure the image; there are gradients, but they always seem to come within discrete fields of color. The mystique of a Boykewich piece is in what we see, not in what is hidden. In her quietly dramatic and invariably appealing images of human beings and animals in curious situations, everything is visible. Most of her subjects face forward. Some even look directly at you.



*Gail M. Boykewich's "Mrs. Peacock."*

An exhibition titled “Illuminations” squeezes more than 20 of her pieces into a narrow viewing area: the ground floor hallway in Vault491, an old bank building in downtown Montclair that has been converted into office space. As was true at the Monique Sarfity mosaic show that hung in the same corridor earlier this year, it is tough to stand back far enough from the pictures to take in more than one at a time. This obscures how articulately Boykewich’s paintings and small sculptures speak to each other. She has come up with a visual vocabulary based on revelation — one that can’t be mistaken for anybody else’s in New Jersey.

It does have its antecedents elsewhere. With her love of nature and narrative detail, her affection for pastels and bright colors, her awareness of the ticking clock of mortality, and her fondness for unsettled facial expressions, she calls back in time and space across the Garden State swamps to the English Pre-Raphaelite painters like Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Edward Burne-Jones. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood disguised nothing. Their 19th century canvases are soft, lush and voluptuous, but they are also instantly readable. You may not know exactly what is going on in their work, but all the symbols and clues are there in the open.



*Gail M. Boykewich's "Peony Boy."*

Rossetti and Burne-Jones achieved these effects through a commitment to the clarity of their lines. Boykewich doubles down on that. Many of her colored shapes, including the facial features of her subjects, are surrounded by hair-thin white borders. These, then, are further offset by black lines of the same width. Because these edges are so narrow, they can be hard to pick up on. But even if you don’t notice them at first, they contribute to the unnerving feeling that her work generates.

In "Moonlight Magnolia," an acrylic on a wooden panel, two women in identical tiger-print dresses and matching "best friends" necklaces clasp hands in front of a lake. Yet those hands are given the double barrier of black and white lines: white fingernail tips, black cuticles, thin white lines around the tips of the fingers enclosed in equally thin black ones. The characters' faces, too, are highlighted by thin lines. It is almost like someone has dropped a clear sheet of acetate over the panel and traced the cheeks, noses, lips and forearms in an effort to understand their contours.

Boykewich's strategy has two immediate consequences. First, it seems to flood the image with illumination. The high contrast between discrete fields of color makes everything as comprehensible as it would be if someone had turned a flashlight on the panel. We know exactly where these women start and stop, and we catch every freckle and follicle. There is a great moon overhead, and it is lunar light that touches their bare skin and imparts a silvery sheen to their necks and the backs of their hands. The big gray ball in the sky is staking a claim on them. As much as they belong to each other, they also belong to the vastness of space.



*Gail M. Boykewich's "Moonlight Magnolia."*

And perhaps they don't belong to each other as much as they initially seem to. Even though the black hair of the two women falls in one continuous curtain and the tigers printed on their dresses stalk freely from gown to gown, there is a subtle wall between them. It is thinner than a razor, but it is there, and it has been erected by a very thorough architect.

We feel it before we see it: two people hovering millimeters away from an embrace. The girl on the right is closer to the red bird who lands on her shoulder and, in a proprietary gesture with sexual connotations, seizes her tresses with his beak.

When Boykewich's subjects are alone, those tiny white and black outlines bestow upon them the same sort of aurora that surrounds the moon. In "Orion's Belt," a tale of gardening by night, an impassive male character seems like an extension of the great lunar disc that hovers behind him. Like the flowers that tickle at his bare shoulders, he is emerging from the ground. His thatch of chest hair – with each strand lovingly rendered by the painter – mimics the root system of the grass, and ladybugs crawl toward his ears.

His face bears a warrior's scar, but his eyes are big, black and starry. He is terrestrial and he lives beneath our feet, but he also seems far away.



*Gail M. Boykewich's "Orion's Belt."*

Boykewich has paired Orion with her "Femme Fatale," a long woman in a domestic setting who seems equally remote. Fern tendrils wrap like serpents around her forearm. With slender fingers, she gingerly holds a cocktail glass. A glass vase on a table behind her is dangerously close to the edge. One good push and everything will shatter.

Elements reoccur from frame to frame: night skies, windows, wildflowers, birds and winged insects, fruit, lush lawns, bodies of water, placid canines and suspicious felines, wallpaper prints. If a human shares a canvas with an animal, it is never clear who is the master and who is the pet. If the painter's subject wears clothes, they will be stylish, and just shy of fabulous. The gray-haired "Mrs. Peacock" (see above), for instance, is thrice-wrapped. Her shoulders are encircled by a blue boa, her wrist is lit by beads and loose golden bangles, and her neck is adorned by a string of green gems. She pulls at these orbs with one hand while clutching a fierce white cat to her midriff. Even as her eyes call to us, she has armored herself against us.

The separation between people, objects and backdrops is taken to its logical conclusion in Boykewich's painted sculptural works. Many of her three-dimensional pieces feel like dioramas with their sides shorn off.

Visitors to Vault491 are greeted by "Podenco," a thick wooden cut-out of a white dog, tail curled up on the grass like a whip, ears huge, fleshy and pointed as if the animal is picking up a distant radio signal. View this beast straight on and it appears to be the Boykewich we are accustomed to; move to the side of the sculpture, and the animal disappears. The artist has peppered the place with purple flowers, each on a circle, affixed to a green stalk, standing at attention behind the dog like great lollipops. Only after a vertical panel of painted-on grass do we get the backdrop: a blue sky, white puffy clouds, a beautiful day.



*Gail M. Boykewich's "Podenco."*

Yet in an important sense, the dog is not part of that day. It is nearby, but it isn't touching that sky. It doesn't just exist on a different plane; it is a different plane. It is a painted panel parallel to the backdrop, and things in parallel do not intersect.

In "Brown Bunny," a smaller piece but one that expresses similar ideas, we are back under the moonlight. The rabbit, like the dog, is his own plank, and she crouches warily behind matchstick-sized shoots of grass. A twilight sky, purple and streaked with cirrus clouds, is right over the bunny's hunched shoulders. By her side, like a boulder she is carrying, is a stone moon. It has heft, and weight, and it is easy to imagine that it is the lunar illumination that makes the rabbit so easy for us to apprehend. It looks like it would have a pleasant weight in the palm of your hand. But neither you nor the bunny can touch it.

It tantalizes and shines. It is plainly visible. And it is far out of reach.

*Gallery491 in Montclair will show Gail M. Boykewich's "Illuminations" through Dec. 12; visit [bravitas.com/properties/vault491-491-bloomfield](http://bravitas.com/properties/vault491-491-bloomfield).*

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