

# ESSEX FLOWERS

19 Monroe St  
New York, NY 10002

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Laura Bernstein, *Story Scroll after Bruegel and various accounts of the 'Dancing Plague'*, watercolor and ink on tracing paper, papier-mâché, paperclay, alcohol ink, fabric, ribbon, aluminum wire, steel pipes, wood (dimensions variable), 2024.

## Laura Bernstein

### *The Curse of St. Vitus and the Rat-Catcher*

May 25 - June 23, 2024

Opening Reception: Friday, May 24, 6-9pm

Performance on June 15, in honor of St. Vitus feast day

“Afflictions that depend on the power of suggestion cannot survive without the beliefs that underpin them.”

– John Waller, *A Time To Dance A Time To Die: The Extraordinary Story Of The Dancing Plague Of 1518*

In popular tellings of the folktale of the Pied Piper of Hamelin 1284, the Pied Piper piped scores of rats away from an infested medieval town in Lower Saxony, Germany. After the mayor refused to pay the piper for his work, he mesmerized the village’s children with his lute, leading them into the hills, where they disappeared.

Two centuries later, across Europe, people began to spontaneously erupt into manic dances—reminiscent of the entranced children who followed the Pied Piper. The most famous outbreak is known as the Dancing Plague of 1518.

At the time, those directly affected believed they were subjected to “lesions of fury,” “possession rituals,” or a curse

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Gallery Hours: Saturdays and Sundays from 12-6 PM and by appointment

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sent by Saint Vitus. Some thought it was “caused by opposition to the head of Medusa,” or the direct result of spider bites (Tarantism).

Contemporary historians believe these dance manias to be a result of stress-induced mass hysteria, cultural contagion, chorea or ergot poisoning. Regardless of the true cause, there is one thing on which many scholars now agree: that the afflicted individuals’ subjective interpretations of the events mattered.

Today, we might view the experience of those who danced and shrieked and howled with a combination of horror and delight, as maladaptive or irrational. But we too live in a time of heightened stress and contagion, from climate-change induced disasters like wildfires and floods to novel infections like the COVID-19 pandemic, to the rampant spread of conspiracy theories.

“The Curse of St. Vitus and the Rat-Catcher” reimagines these Medieval manias, asking us to consider our own reactions to the rapid shifts of environmental and social change. How do these stresses permeate our bodies? How do we mimic the ticks of our neighbors and conform to the mass howling? What happens when we misstep and behave in unpredictable and unexpected ways? What is required of us to slow down and contemplate these questions through sculpture — a static, frozen form?

Drawing on sketches that the Dutch master Pieter Bruegel produced after he witnessed several spontaneous dance eruptions, as well as illustrations of the Pied Piper legend, Laura Bernstein creates a series of life-sized theatrical sculptures composed as tableaus, reminiscent of Medieval Miracle Plays. Built to incorporate replaceable parts and installed on casters, they suggest the potential for new configuration and future activations.

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Laura Bernstein is an interdisciplinary artist and arts educator from the Bronx, NY, currently based in Brooklyn. Bernstein holds a BFA from RISD and an MFA from University of Pennsylvania. She creates installations using video, performance, sculpture, and painting. Her work plays with historical mythologies about human and animal behavior in relation to changing climates. She has exhibited at Essex Flowers Gallery, The Children’s Museum of The Arts, New York, NY; BRIC, NURTUREart, Y2K group Project Space, all in Brooklyn, New York; The Bronx Museum of the Arts as part of the AIM Biennial; ArtYard’s Hatch Biennial in Frenchtown, NJ. She has participated in the Sharpe-Walentas Studio Program and The Lighthouse Works Fellowship; and was a Grant Recipient of The Franklin Furnace Fund and Apexart Traveling Fellowship. Bernstein is currently the Toby Devan Lewis artist in residence at ISCP through June ‘24.