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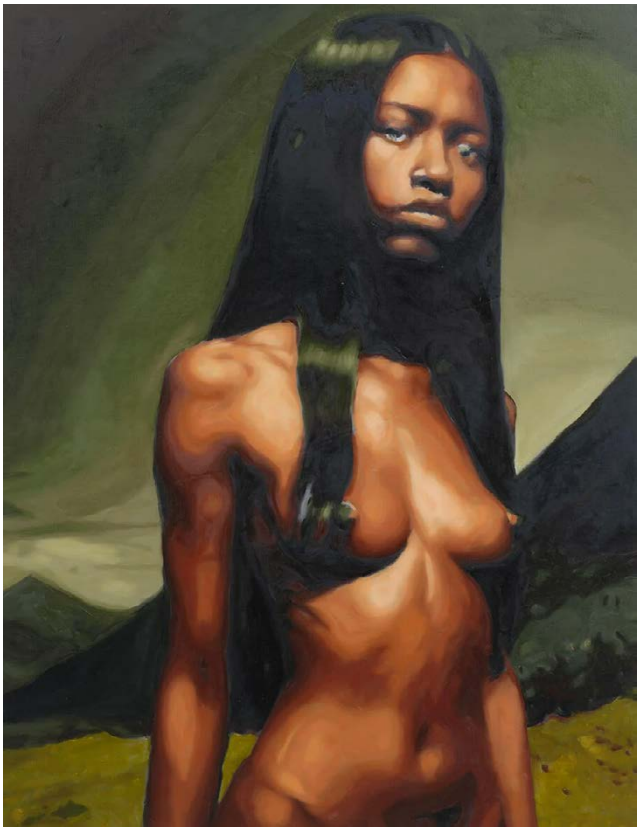
Taína H. Cruz Finds Power in the Grotesque

At Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin, the artist combines folklore, Old Master references and children's book illustrations into a gleefully unsettling vision of the Western canon

BY **SUSAN FINLAY** IN **EXHIBITION REVIEWS** | 02 OCT 26



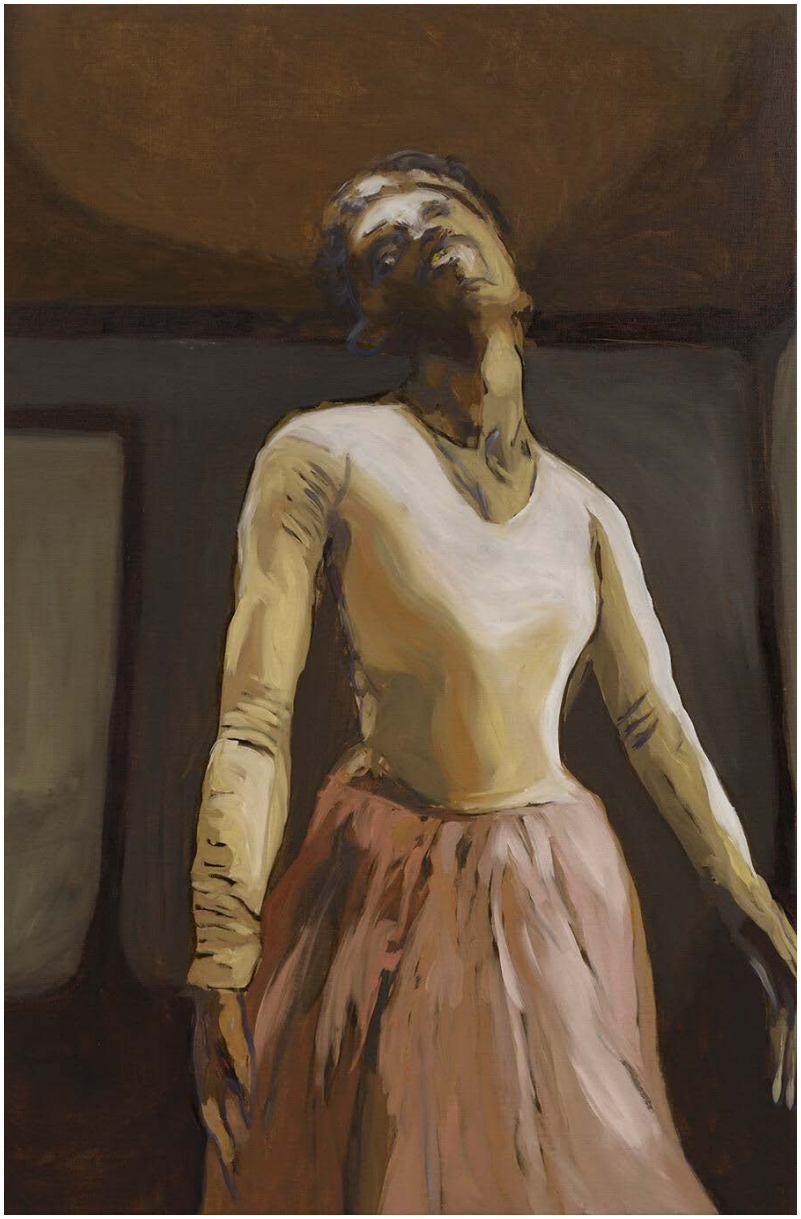
Like 'tummy', 'choccy' or 'girlies', the word 'pixie', to me, is grating when used in adult contexts. These days, we associate the term less with the gender-fluid, dagger-wielding sprites of old than with the 'manic pixie dream girl' trope, or the appropriation of Disney's Pixie Hollow, now used to sell skincare to women with a penchant for pointy ears. Yet 'Pixie Theatre', Taína H. Cruz's second solo show at Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler in Berlin, makes clear the artist thrives on the use of grotesqueries and their absurd and ugly power.



Taína H. Cruz, *You Can Pretend You Didn't See Me*, 2026, oil on linen, 140 × 108 × 2 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler Berlin / Munich; photograph: Marjorie Brunet Plaza

The exhibition brings together a diverse range of female figures in newly commissioned paintings, with references ranging from folklore to children's book illustrations and Old Master paintings. Cruz's subjects – rendered with oils and pastels in loose brushstrokes and a grungy junk-shop palette of greys, yellows, reds and browns – appear in a variety of real and imaginary spaces. The artist's animated short film *Pollen* (all works 2026), meanwhile, functions as a preface to the other pieces: in it, women wander through a dystopian vision of a New York filled with empty office blocks, corporate cafes and supernatural portals that lead… *nowhere*. Its video game-style collage of dreamy, derivative imagery sets the tone for a show that purposefully avoids a clear narrative.

It may be obvious, but it's nonetheless significant that Cruz was born in 1998, hailing from a generation who grew up with the internet, where simultaneously inhabiting virtual, physical and spiritual worlds is common, taxonomies are fluid and authorship is understood as a collective, iterative concept. At the same time, Cruz is an old-school, meaning technically accomplished, painter – a fact apparent in works like *You Can Pretend You Didn't See Me*, which incorporates the hallmarks of soft-porn kitsch in oils that mimic the smooth, airbrushed skin of a moody, topless adolescent, or *Fig*, a Rembrandt-like candlelit interior, where a tiny flame illuminates a gathering of blobby figures in a dark tavern.



Taína H. Cruz, *Sweet Cream*, 2026, oil on linen, 117 v 76 × 2 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler Berlin / Munich; photograph: Marjorie Brunet Plaza

In *Sweet Cream*, a girl faces the viewer but stares upwards, her face a haze of brushstrokes, as if caught mid-movement, while in *Breathing Comes First*, a young woman appears to perform an ab crunch on a reformer machine, although again, there's a deliberate ambiguity to her blurry actions. Both share a repertoire of earthy tones and broken brushwork in which the figures are set against a largely empty background that evokes the shifting, slightly uneasy atmosphere in the works of Walter Sickert – a reference also taken up by Cruz's Gen X predecessor Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. That all of Cruz's figures are also Black creates the risk of inviting the same, often unwelcome reading about identity and tradition that has frequently followed Yiadom-Boakye's works. Consequently, it also raises the question of why this discourse appears to be the default position of every white middle-class audience whenever a Black artist opts to draw from Western art history – and in turn, what alternatives to it might be available to the more discerning viewer.



Taína H. Cruz, *The Usual Way*, 2026, oil on linen, 195 × 375 × 2.5 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler Berlin / Munich; photograph: Marjorie Brunet Plaza

Cruz's concerns have little to do with generalized ideas of Blackness. Rather, she focuses on the grotesque as a means to undermine cultural hierarchies within the Western canon. It's not merely a case of mixing highbrow and lowbrow or even the analogue and the digital; it's also the fact that, in the simultaneity of IRL and online worlds, these distinctions are no longer relevant. The largest painting, which appears at the end of the show, *The Usual Way*, appropriates the visual language of children's picture books. Three unruly children sit or crawl across an otherwise empty canvas, while a fourth examines a loosely worked portrait, which might be of one of the kids – or even the artist herself. The result is simultaneously cute, strange and unsettling – a puckish move indeed.

*Taína H. Cruz's '**Pixie Theatre**' is on view at Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin, until 7 November*

Main image: Taína H. Cruz, Fig, *2026, oil on linen, 80 × 103 × 2 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler Berlin / Munich; photograph: Marjorie Brunet Plaza*