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Lui Shtini: "Face Paintings" at Kate Werble Gallery

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*Kate Werble Gallery
83 Vandam Street
SoHo
Through January 4*

Lui Shtini, a young artist who came to the United States from Albania 12 years ago, has rapidly outgrown the garden-variety surrealized realism seen in his two previous exhibitions at Van de Weghe Fine Art and is moving toward originality: small, truculent, madly textured presences in oil on board that he calls portraits. They are dominated — filled, really — by wonderfully strange presences denoted by two or three stacked, symmetrical hairy or fuzzy shapes.

The dozen works [here](#) form a rogue's gallery of kin to Cousin Itt of "The Addams Family." Facial features and necks are all but absent. Occasionally, Mr. Shtini plays up familiar resemblances: the red uniform and bearskin hat of the Buckingham Palace guard in his "Royal S," or the abominable snowman creature in the black-on-white "Zift." But strangeness prevails. The black-on-black-on-black "Meno" suggests an empty burqa. Some, like "Duku" — a fuzzy Asian fruit and, lately, a term of endearment in some circles — might be a person with big hair and headgear seen from the back. And the face is not the first part of the body that comes to mind in "Seli," which could be someone bending over or a pair of sheepskin-trimmed boots.

The images have a repulsive allure, a kind of invasive beauty that is common to the grotesque. But these are also extremely formal works made by an artist who seems thrilled by all the textures he can coax from oil paint. These textures contribute greatly to the force of his work, as does an off-key color sense that needs developing. (There could be less black.) In the meantime, this artist is in good company with disparate precedents who include Ken Price, Christina Ramberg and Myron Stout.

This may be Mr. Shtini's third New York solo, but in truth it is his debut.