

# OCULA



Advisory Perspective

## In the Studio with Jenna Gribbon

*By Will Hine | London, 20 January 2022*

**J**enna Gribbon's depictions of overlapping figures take on a monumentality in their close frames, approximating undulating limbs to landscapes while subverting the traditions of portraiture.

Ahead of the Brooklyn-based artist's solo show at MASSIMODECARLO in London, Ocula Advisory correspondent Will Hine spoke to Gribbon about her unique dialogue with the act of looking in art history.

**It strikes me that your practice and subject matter has a 'through line' but is always evolving with each body of work. How would you reflect on or characterise what you've been working towards with your recent paintings?**

I think the through line in my work has been the 'looking at the looking' and in a way that has gotten more and more explicit recently.

It started by trying to position myself in a way where my relationship to the subject was really obvious, either by incorporating parts of my own body into the composition or including my shadow or something. Or sometimes I'm implied in the title, which might suggest that I was there looking at something or someone.



Jenna Gribbon, *Me, a lurker* (2020). Oil on linen. 152.40 x 121.92 cm. Courtesy the artist and GNYP Gallery, Berlin Photo: Ludger Paffrath.

**The title for your show at MASSIMODECARLO, *Light Holding*, seems to refer to the use of the prop that recurs throughout these paintings, the clamp light you use in the studio?**

Yes, I decided to include it to highlight the constructedness of the image. I brightly lit my subjects so that they were a little bit uncomfortable and a little bit blinded, to make us—or the viewer—more aware that sometimes being viewed or being the subject can be uncomfortable.

A common misunderstanding is that my work is about intimacy, which it's not. It's just as much about a sort of constructed intimacy or consuming what we think of as other people's intimate moments, which maybe aren't intimate at all.

I'm trying to show the behind-the-scenes way an image is constructed. Light can be a kind of metaphor for the malleability of reality. I thought it was nice to include the actual mechanism, so the whole process is kind of laid bare.

**Scale seems to have an important role in your paintings. Sometimes the smallest works have the most visual information, while the largest paintings are the most immediate and enveloping. How do you decide which image is 'right' for a particular scale?**

Scale is really important to me and the way I make a painting. I've always had a love for small paintings, and the way that they're almost like little worlds you enter into.

I paint them with the assumption that you're going to get very close to them, so I paint them with details that you have to get close to see.

Early on in my exploration of more sexual subject matter, I really enjoyed making very sexually explicit paintings very tiny



Jenna Gribbon, *Bioluminescencescape* (2021). Oil on linen. 203.2 x 162.5 cm. Courtesy the artist, MASSIMODECARLO and Fredericks & Freiser, NY. Photo: Todd-White Art Photograph.



Jenna Gribbon, *When I looked at you the light changed* (2019). Oil on Linen. Courtesy the Artist, Fredericks & Freiser, NY and MASSIMODECARLO. Photo: Cary Whittier.

because I liked the idea that the viewer would have to get extremely close to them.

In a room where someone is viewing the painting, they can't look at the painting without owning the act of looking. Everyone in the room can see that they're looking at the painting, which is how I think it should be if you're going to look at something—that you're going to own your looking.

**Whereas the medium-scale works tend to be a bit more of a typical size for a portrait?**

Yes, the medium-size works are a bit more classically scaled. They tend to refer to the history of portraiture a little bit more.

In the case of the works in this exhibition, however, their relationship to seeing and

being seen is more explicit. When the subject is holding the light, they are sort of in power and we, the viewers, are maybe being blinded, unable to see a lot of detail or something.

When the light is shining on them, they are visibly uncomfortable, in a position that is not traditional for the subject of a portrait.

**I also noticed, perhaps more than I have seen before in your work, that with the largest works there is a greater element of building a scene that maybe isn't based in reality, exploring certain ideas of theatricality in some cases, or the sublime, in your use of backdrops?**

The larger works certainly have more of a physicality. They're very physical to make. I think of them almost like landscapes—that they should feel monumental in some way.

They should dwarf the viewer a little bit. Even though they're nude, I don't think of them as sexual. They're more like landscapes or entanglements. In the case of these 'scape' paintings, it's parts of my body entwined with my partner's body but they're in kind of impossi-



Jenna Gribbon, *Stormy sea tropescape* (2021). Oil on linen. 203.2 x 162.5 cm. Courtesy the artist, MASSIMODECARLO and Fredericks & Freiser, NY. Photo: Todd-White Art Photography.

ble configurations—the limbs don't exactly make sense.

They're not actually in sexual positions—the limbs don't relate to each other in a feasible sexual way, but it's funny how often they get read as very sexual paintings. They're much more, like you said, kind of theatrical.



Jenna Gribbon, *Gushing Crevicescape* (2021). Oil on linen. 203.2 x 162.5 cm. Courtesy the artist, MASSIMODECARLO and Fredericks & Freiser, NY. Photo: Todd-White Art Photography.

The curtain is a recurring thing; like a sort of stage curtain. Or a lot of the backgrounds could be seen as scenic, painted backgrounds that are highly constructed psychological spaces.

**I also wanted to ask about your work in relation to technology, as I understand you take a lot of your compositions from your own smartphone images. I also noticed that there is a subtle gloss on the surface of your paintings, which in some way connects with the reflective surfaces of screens.**

**Is that something you're thinking about when you make them or is it more a by-product of the medium?**

I think it's both. I obviously have had a lifelong romance with painting, and particularly with oil paint. I'm devoted to the material and I love it. But it's kind of about finding a way to both love the medium and question the ways it is and isn't relevant to contemporary life.

We're more image-based than we ever have been. We all carry a camera around at all times, and that's a pretty new thing. We each have countless photos in our pockets, which are essentially marking memories from our lives.

I'm really interested in the way those images inform the way we construct our personal narratives. I think that the photos that we take on our phones inform the way we think of our past, so it seems natural to me to also have photographic imagery of that nature inform the way paintings are made. It feels truer to the reality of this moment.

**It feels like your practice is engaging with both contemporary and historical ideas of the gaze and of looking. Particularly in relation to figure painting and the nude, interrogating that balance between voyeurism and intimacy.**

**Do you deliberately try to explore that friction or duality?**

Definitely. I think it's a subject that is relevant to the history of painting, but also to our daily lives, with the way we are positioned as consumers of other people's lives and intimacy.

It's something that I think about a lot along with the implications and ethics of the consumption of naked bodies. I have no problem with imagery of naked bodies, but I think there is something funny about the history of painting and how it has made such imagery so benign.

That's something that I'm trying to undo: the feeling that a painted body is benign, and to make us see it again as a person in a body and not just a trope. —[O]



Jenna Gribbon, *Lighting me* (2021). Oil on linen. 121.9 x 91.4 cm. Courtesy the artist, MASSIMODECARLO and Fredericks & Freiser, NY. Photo: Todd-White Art Photography.