

Jenna Gribbon
Like Looking in a Mirror
September 13 – October 19, 2024
Exhibition Binder

Jenna Gribbon

Like Looking in a Mirror
September 13 – October 19, 2024
Los Angeles

Press Release

David Kordansky Gallery is pleased to present *Like Looking in a Mirror*, a solo exhibition of new paintings by Jenna Gribbon. The exhibition will be on view in Los Angeles at 5130 W. Edgewood Pl. from September 13 through October 19, 2024. An opening reception will be held on Friday, September 13 from 6 to 8 PM.

Over the past two decades, Gribbon has maintained a consistent engagement with portraiture and the ways in which—through the incorporation of props, and the positioning and gaze of her subjects—she can alter the viewer's experience of looking. In a departure from recent work, which predominantly featured her wife Mackenzie Scott, the artist returns to a familiar subject—her son—in an effort to explore the replication of traits, appearance, and mannerisms between parent and child that create a sameness which extends beyond the physical into the experiential.

The artist's past work has depicted sweeping scenes—created with props such as clamp lights, projectors, mirrors, and backdrops—that initially appear intimate, but reveal themselves to be constructed upon closer looking. However, these paintings offer a counterpoint by utilizing the large canvases to portray tighter crops of figures' heads and shoulders, shifting the focus away from narrative towards more psychological, close-up readings. The paintings become examinations of the tensions and anxieties that arise when an artist confronts an image that closely mirrors their own. The works on view also offer a rare glimpse into the dynamics between a parent and child, where the child lives as a double or a projection of a parent, mirroring aspects of their internal self and therefore, heightening the sense of confusion around selfhood and prompting questions about perception.

Reflective surfaces and mirrors play a central role in this body of work conceptually, as a device that can aid in the act of seeing and representing doubles or doppelgangers. While doubles and doppelgangers have existed throughout time and are often perceived as a bad omen or threatening force, which the artist alludes to through the use of predominantly darker tones, Gribbon's impressionistic brushstrokes and empathetic and collaborative approach to figural painting reframe the traditionally disturbing or eerie connotation of doubles to create tender portraits imbued with care. In one example, Gribbon and her son are seen with their arms entangled around one another as their eyes look back at the viewer. The artist's own presence in the painting, along with her stern gaze, reinforces her role as the child's protector, as her arm lightly shields him from behind. This is one of several instances in which Gribbon distinguishes herself by her position as a secondary yet omnipresent figure, simultaneously watching after her son and after the viewers looking at the two of them.

The artist explores ideas of the uncanny and projection—both literally and metaphorically—by utilizing projectors as a tool to further distort an image and blur the lines between her face and her son's. In one work, we see a close-up of her son with an image of Gribbon projected onto—and partially obscuring—his cheek. The eyes,

nose, and lips appear in duplicate. Though this could be a result of image manipulation, it is in fact the result of the physical layering of Gribbon's image atop her son's. The projected image of Gribbon's face originated from a photo taken by her son which appears in several works on view, further emphasizing the artist's commitment to collaboration and a multifaceted engagement with her subjects.

While the larger paintings in the exhibition offer a physical manifestation of replication, the smaller paintings represent the physical passing on of a shared understanding. In the instance where her son is seen reading, it's implied that his thoughts may also be shaped through the same language that shaped Gribbon's thinking. Even though Gribbon isn't visible in the smaller works on view, her presence looms largely in other, and arguably more significant, ways. In Looking at a painting of *Florine Stettheimer's mother with M* (2024), Gribbon's son is seen with Scott in front of a painting by Stettheimer titled *Portrait of My Mother* (1925). In Gribbon's painting, as in Stettheimer's example, the artist's presence exists beyond the canvas in an attempt to represent themselves in the other.

Taken together, the paintings in *Like Looking in a Mirror* connect to Gribbon's larger project, in which she utilizes a cinematic approach to create scenes that appear private, but touch on universal themes; in this case, parenthood, identity, and the transfer of thought and experience between generations. While the artist often pulls from art historical references and techniques, this show exemplifies her commitment to radicalizing—and personalizing—these traditional modes to incorporate the surreal, the psychedelic, and the uncanny.

The Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University is planning a major solo exhibition of Jenna Gribbon's work, tentatively scheduled for Fall 2026. The planned show will be a comprehensive survey of 25 years of painting. Gribbon was the subject of a solo exhibition at Collezione Maramotti, Reggio Emilia, Italy (2022–2023). Recent group exhibitions include *Day for Night: New American Realism*, Palazzo Barberini, organized by the Aishti Foundation, Rome (2024); *Living Histories: Queer Views and Old Masters*, The Frick Collection, New York (2022); and *I will wear you in my heart of heart*, FLAG Art Foundation, New York (2021); and *Paint, also known as Blood: Women, Affect and Desire in Contemporary Painting*, Warsaw Museum of Modern Art, Poland (2019). Her work is in the permanent collections of institutions including Kunstmuseum The Hague, the Netherlands; Dallas Museum of Art; Marjorie Barrick Museum of Art, Las Vegas, Nevada; New Orleans Museum of Art, Louisiana; Kurpfälzisches Museum, Heidelberg, Germany; Rubell Museum, Miami; and FLAG Art Foundation, New York. Gribbon lives and works in New York.

Jenna Gribbon

Like Looking in a Mirror
September 13 – October 19, 2024

Gallery 1



Jenna Gribbon

A Projection Felt, 2024
oil on linen
72 x 92 x 1 3/4 inches
(182.9 x 233.7 x 4.4 cm)



Jenna Gribbon

A Reflection Held, 2024
oil on linen
80 x 64 x 1 3/4 inches
(203.2 x 162.6 x 4.4 cm)



Jenna Gribbon

My Face on His Face (Warm), 2024
oil on linen
80 x 64 x 1 3/4 inches
(203.2 x 162.6 x 4.4 cm)



Jenna Gribbon

My Face on His Face (Cool), 2024
oil on linen
80 x 64 x 1 3/4 inches
(203.2 x 162.6 x 4.4 cm)



Jenna Gribbon

Entwined, 2024
oil on linen
92 x 72 x 1 3/4 inches
(233.7 x 182.9 x 4.4 cm)

DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY



Jenna Gribbon

Looking at a painting of Florine Stettheimer's mother with M, 2024

oil on linen

16 x 12 x 1/2 inches

(40.6 x 30.5 x 1.3 cm)



Jenna Gribbon

Co-constructed in Red, 2024

oil on linen

92 x 72 x 1 3/4 inches

(233.7 x 182.9 x 4.4 cm)



Jenna Gribbon

Me Prismatic and Fragmented, He More Concrete, 2024

oil on linen

92 x 72 x 1 3/4 inches

(233.7 x 182.9 x 4.4 cm)

Gallery 2



Jenna Gribbon

Reading a book that I read at the same age, 2024

oil on linen

12 x 16 x 1/2 inches

(30.5 x 40.6 x 1.3 cm)



Jenna Gribbon

Confusing Obstructions, 2024

oil on linen

72 x 92 x 1 3/4 inches

(182.9 x 233.7 x 4.4 cm)

DAVID
KORDANSKY
GALLERY



Jenna Gribbon

Replication through family recipes, 2024

oil on linen

14 x 11 x 1/2 inches

(35.6 x 27.9 x 1.3 cm)



Jenna Gribbon

Dual Reflection at Home, Early Evening, 2024

oil on linen

80 x 64 x 1 3/4 inches

(203.2 x 162.6 x 4.4 cm)

DAVID
KORDANSKY
GALLERY

Jenna Gribbon
Selected Press

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Gribbon wears a Commission top and jeans; Edgar Mosa necklace; G.H. Bass shoes. Photo by Jeff Henrikson

STUDIO VISIT

Jenna Gribbon Explores the Dynamics of Motherhood

The artist's upcoming show in Los Angeles centers her relationship with her child at a pivotal moment in his life.

by **Maxine Wally**
Photographs by **Jeff Henrikson**
Styled by **Tori López**
July 10, 2024

“Hang on a second.” The painter Jenna Gribbon fiddles with her phone over FaceTime, then switches her camera to front-facing, revealing her Brooklyn studio, filled with the typical detritus of a visual artist’s workspace: jars of brushes, half-squeezed bottles of paint, stacks of canvases. Gribbon, a Tennessee native now based in New York City, wanted to show me one work in particular—a large-scale canvas that will be included in her next solo show, *Like Looking in a Mirror*, which opens at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles on September 13 (through October 19). In the painting, two people who look like Gribbon—long brown hair, sleepy eyes, dignified bone structure—stand beside each other. One is hanging up lights, while the other is taking a picture. They look like identical twins. In fact,



Jenna Gribbon, *A reflection held*, 2024
Photo by Jeff Henrikson

“it’s my son holding the light, and me taking the photo,” the artist says. “He’s kind of my little doppelganger.”

Gribbon’s 13-year-old child, their dynamic, and her experience with what she describes as the “psychedelic” and “trippy” experience of motherhood are all central themes in *Like Looking in a Mirror*. “I’m seizing on this little window in time where he looks more like me than he ever will,” she adds, noting that they have the same hairstyle. “He’s in this androgynous state, where he doesn’t quite look like a child anymore, but he’s not exactly looking like a man yet.”

During this pivotal moment in his life, Gribbon is integrating her son into her paintings for the first time—and also portraying herself in the works. The idea of mirroring the subject and artist, reflecting the self against and toward other people, has been a key part of Gribbon’s artistic practice since 2006, when she first gained notoriety for being commissioned to create three portraits for the set of Sofia Coppola’s *Marie Antoinette*. Group exhibitions at the Frick Madison and Museum of Contemporary Art Jacksonville have included portraits of her wife, Mackenzie Scott, the main subject in many of Gribbon’s most well-known works. *Mirror* is a stark departure from that series.

“It’s even more challenging because not only is the parent-child relationship arguably the most intimate relationship there is, it’s



Maison Margiela shirt; Commission jeans; Edgar Mosa necklace; Comme Si socks; JW Anderson shoes.
Photo by Jeff Henrikson

extra tough to really see kids for themselves and not get your own self-concept entwined in how you view them," she says. Gribbon explores this concept in pieces where the lines between herself and her son are blurred, quite literally. In one example, Gribbon had her son take a photo of her, which she then projected onto him; she then painted what she saw. "The experience of seeing yourself, outside of yourself, in another totally separate human being, with their own world, makes you evaluate what's important to you and what's meaningful to share," she says. "What do you want to pass down? What do you want to replicate and what do you want to not replicate? It becomes a process of assessing your own values, too."



Photo by Jeff Henrikson

Along with the large-format paintings, there will be another group of smaller works that zero in on all the things she’s passed down to him: a family recipe, or books she’s read and loved. “I gave him a CD player and a stack of my old CDs,” she says with pride. “It’s a shared sensory experience. Not only does this person share your genetics, they also share an experience of what food tastes like, or how to make something.”



Photo by Jeff Henrikson

Gribbon has been working on the paintings for *Mirror* over the course of one year. During that time, she’s learned to give her inner child a little more grace. “You have so much empathy for your kid that it turns into empathy for yourself,” she says. “You look back at

yourself and certain things that you maybe disliked, but then you see them in your child, too. And you have so much love for them that you’re able to have empathy for yourself for those things.”



Commission trench coat; Maison Margiela shirt; Commission jeans; Edgar Mosa necklace; Comme Si socks; JW Anderson shoes.

Photo by Jeff Henrikson

Still, the artist is not just in these works metaphorically. “I’m present in the paintings as his guardian,” she says. “You can absorb the image of my child, but I will be watching you. I’m also here. He’s not in this alone.”



Commission blazer, top, and jeans; Edgar Mosa necklace; G.H. Bass shoes.
Photo by Jeff Henrikson

Styling assistants: Celeste Roh and Maia Wilson.

"THE HEART WANTS WHAT IT WANTS"
THE ARTIST AND HER SUBJECT

ALISON M. GINGERAS



Lucian Freud, *Naked Girl with Egg*, 1980–81.
British Council, London



Celia Paul in her studio with her self-portrait, *Painter and Model*, 2012

CLASSIC MUSEOGRAPHY

Throughout the modern era, the artist-muse relationship has been as overtly gendered as it has been richly mythologized. At the mere mention of a “great”¹ artist’s name, a female first name springs to mind with near Pavlovian immediacy: Édouard Manet and Victorine, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Lizzie, Pierre Bonnard and Marthe, Édouard Vuillard and Misia, Gustav Klimt and Emilie, Salvador Dalí and Gala, Lucian Freud and Kitty, Caroline, and Celia (to name but a few of his model conquests). Pablo Picasso’s name unleashes a whole roster of familiar appellations: Fernande, Olga, Marie-Thérèse, Dora, Françoise, and Jacqueline. Writer Zadie Smith brilliantly described this well-worn paradigm in her review of Celia Paul’s book *Self-Portrait*: “Accounts of the muse-artist relation were anchored in the idea of male cultural production as a special category, one with particular needs—usually sexual—that the muse had been there to fulfill, perhaps even to the point of exploitation, but without whom we would have missed the opportunity to enjoy this or that beloved cultural artifact. The art wants what the art wants.”² We have endlessly borne witness to what he wants, but how about what she wants? Traditional art historical accounts have all too often been mono-directional, focusing on what artists needed and ostensibly took from their muses, systematically ignoring the substance of exchange between two people. How many of these famous muses were themselves artists or writers, having long been obscured by the shadow of their “significant other”?

Liberation from the misogynous dyad that entitled the male genius to fetishize his [passive] feminine font of inspiration is a more recent phenomenon. Feminist art historians have toiled to restore creative autonomy, and a last name, to a number of these familiar women: for instance, in breaking Dora Maar free from being a prisoner of Picasso’s gaze.³ Also, this year, for the first time since 1857, drawings, paintings, and poems by Elizabeth Siddal were shown alongside works by her husband, Rossetti, at an exhibition at Tate Britain.

Painter Celia Paul turned to the written word to assert her own artistic becoming and the complexity of her identity beyond her entanglement with Freud. In her book, *Self-Portrait*, she not only shares diaristic recollections of serving as his young lover/model—“I felt his scrutiny intensify. I felt exposed and hated the feeling. I cried throughout these sessions”⁴—but she proposes a counter-model of “musedom,” grounded in the empathy she employs in her own painting practice. Paul wrote, “I couldn’t understand the principle of life drawing. It seemed so artificial to me to draw a person one didn’t know or have any involvement with . . . I needed to work from someone who mattered to me.”⁵ Speaking as a woman who knew what it was like to be seen and be consumed, her own work at the easel demanded a different kind of emotional necessity. More than just a memoir, Paul’s writing attempts to recast the power structures embedded in the age-old paradigm of the gendered muse, laying new groundwork for a more equitable and reciprocal exchange between artist and model. Paul often painted her mother and other family members using her sessions as a form of prayer or spiritual union. When she became her own muse, Paul wrote, “I have it all. I am both artist and sitter. By looking at myself I don’t need to stage a drama about power; I am empowered by the very fact that I am representing myself as I am: a painter.”⁶ To borrow again the word reappropriated by Smith, the ideologies that underpin classic *museography*⁷ are vital and require constant interrogation by the artists who continue to practice it, as well as by those who consume art, old and new. Women artists such as Paul are rare—with both the brush and the pen, she has demonstrated that museography can be a two-way street, an exchange of subjectivities and agencies as opposed to a lopsided power struggle.

DEUX AMIES

Men not only wield the brush, they too have served as muses—the role has not always been inherently female or heteronormative. Historically, the male muse has not inhabited the same romanticized spaces as their female counterparts—their first names, when known, do not haunt the popular imagination in the same way as the obsessed-over wives, and female lovers, who have dominated the Western canon.

Yet the visual representation of gay musedom, in the modern era, is seen in the work of Thomas Eakins, Duncan Grant, Francis Bacon, Paul Cadmus, Jared French, Charles Demuth, and David Hockney: they have all focused their (often eroticized) gaze, and brush, on specific men who recurrently populate their canvases. The visual history of same-sex male desire has increasingly achieved greater visibility and acceptance in the late twentieth century, enabled by the political labors of LGBTQ activists and bolstered by the dominance of male artists, in both art history and the art market. As the early modern canon is retroactively queered, individual muses emerge from the clichéd tropes and homosocial genre scenes of bathers, boxers, sailors, bare-shirted workers, and other veiled homoerotic subjects that male artists have used as outlets to visually explore their desires. Radically shifting social mores have allowed these once-hidden histories to complicate the narrow gendering of museography.

Until the opening decades of the twentieth century, the representation of same-sex relationships between women had been virtually invisible. In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf wrote, "Do not blush. Let us admit in the privacy of our own society that these things sometimes happen. Sometimes women do like women."⁸ Originally written as two lectures for the women-only colleges at Cambridge University in 1928, her open acknowledgment of lesbian desire, within a larger essay on the agency and needs of women artists, is often celebrated as a watershed articulation of queer feminism. Yet, in truth, Woolf's sapphic admission was not a blatant "coming out" moment. Instead, in slyly referencing the censorship of Roddyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), Woolf attempted to counsel aspiring writers on how to circumvent the censorship of lesbian themes while still engaging in same-sex representation in their work. Woolf was careful to make her comments in a safe space—"Are there no men present? . . . We are all women you assure me?"⁹ Emboldened by the single-sex audience, *A Room of One's Own* was delivered in the presence of Woolf's own muse and partner, Vita Sackville-West, who was the inspiration for her boundary-pushing, gender-bending novel *Orlando* (also published in 1928).

While not exactly a loud celebration of women artists and their female muses, 1928 stands out as the "high point of sapphic modernism"¹⁰ in the sphere of literature. As well as Woolf's essay, the year saw the publication of Compton Mackenzie's *Extraordinary Women*, and novels by Djuna Barnes and Elizabeth Bowen. Throughout the 1920s, many writers frequented the Paris salon of Natalie Clifford Barney, an American expatriate and unapologetic, public lesbian. "The Sapphic center of the Western world,"¹¹ is how Barney described her weekly meetings on the rue Jacob. For several years, she hosted luminaries such as writers Alice B. Toklas, Gertrude Stein, and Barnes, Sylvia Beach (founder of the Paris bookstore Shakespeare and Company, and publisher for James Joyce), and poet Renée Vivien, among many others. And while the once-taboo subject of lesbian desire began to explicitly appear on the written page in these circles, lesbian lives painted on canvas were relegated to highly coded representations. Artist Romaine Brooks, who was Barney's lover of three decades, often painted singular portraits of queer women from their circle—sometimes cross-dressing or wearing accessories, such as monocles, that were cryptic signifiers of their sexuality. Brooks's self-portraits showed her donning masculine suits and hats. Her fashionable androgyny was a legible acknowledgment of her identity amongst her circle, yet she never directly portrayed the intimacy of her female relationships in her paintings. The same was true of other *garçonne*¹² artists of the 1920s, such as the Surrealist Claude Cahun and British painter Gluck, whose picturing of butchness broke new ground in avant-garde artistic circles.

Les deux amies (The Two Friends) was a popular yet deliberately ambiguous theme that appeared in a number of works by women artists during the 1920s—it had long been a mainstay of male artists who indulged classic sapphic fantasies (Jean-Baptiste Greuze, Gustave Courbet, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Picasso, et al.). Most notably, Tamara de Lempicka took up this trope throughout the decade in her Art Deco-style, depicting eroticized pairs of female nudes without specific reference to a sustained artist-muse relationship. Similarly, Marie Laurencin (and, in more abstract ways, Marie Vassiliev) would present two female "friends" in varying states of undress, suggestively laying down together, in her post-Cubist, washy visual language. All these examples are landmark



Tamara de Lempicka. *Les deux amies (Perspective)*, 1923.
Musée du Petit Palais, Geneva



Romaine Brooks. *Una, Lady Troubridge*, 1924.
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC

assertions of lesbian visibility, even if they relied often upon inference and coded signs of sexuality, stopping short of more unequivocal representations of queer partnerships on the painted canvas.



Lotte Laserstein, *In meinem Atelier (In My Studio)*, 1928.
Private Collection

In parallel with the Parisian-lesbian-zeitgeist, German-Swedish painter Lotte Laserstein developed a singular oeuvre that legibly revealed her lesbian partnership while simultaneously forging a totally different model of musedom, countering heteronormative exploitation and objectification. Working in Berlin from the mid-1920s, until being forced to emigrate in 1937, Laserstein consistently painted her muse, Traute Rose, in a manner that did not hide behind euphemistic tropes. Though she made a number of nude portraits of Rose, Laserstein did not portray her muse as a merely passive object of her desires. Instead, Rose is an active protagonist in these portraits. Many times Laserstein showed herself engaged with Rose, conjuring a different kind of agency between model and artist, breaking from her heterosexual forebearers. In fact, Laserstein pointedly described the works she made with Rose as being coauthored, referring to those specific pictures as “ours” in their postwar correspondence.

Laserstein was among the first generation of German women who were given access to the same art education as men, including life drawing classes. She met Rose in 1924, while receiving a classical education at the prestigious Berlin Academy of Arts. Her magnum opus, *In meinem Atelier (In My Studio)*, 1928, acknowledges this exceptional training in her deployment of the loaded tradition of the academic nude. Her composition shows a gloriously nude Rose stretched out in the foreground, her pubis unmistakably at the focus point of the composition. In the background, Laserstein places herself at her easel, oversized palette in hand, working in deep concentration. This painting is a double manifesto. First, Laserstein asserts her legitimacy as an artist by using the well-known trope of the artist holding their palette—a mode of self-representation that was pioneered in the 16th century by the rare women artists, such as Catharina van Hemessen and Sofonisba Anguissola. Second, her double portrait is a public statement on sexual identity: the full-frontal nudity and sensuous rendering of Rose’s body leave little doubt about the sexual tension between the two women, especially given the total lack of precedent of woman artists making such luxuriant female nudes. As such, the painting can also be understood as proclaiming the artist’s desire for her model and her model’s willing incarnation of their intimate bond. Furthermore, echoing her Parisian artist-compatriots, Laserstein flaunts her self-identification by using the visual codes of queer women of the time: masculine, cropped hair, no makeup, and the gender-neutral artist’s smock. The painterly virtuosity lavished on the rendering of Rose’s recumbent body betrays Laserstein’s unabashed appreciation of her corporality, without voyeuristic or exploitative connotations. Rose’s posture signals the absolute trust between model and artist. In a letter to Laserstein, some thirty years after the painting was made, Rose acknowledged

the commitment and complicity between them. She wrote, "Although the painting shows the model in a relaxed position, the pose was actually very hard to maintain. I held out all the same because I could see that this was going to be a real masterpiece."¹³ *In My Studio* is the mother-painting of lesbian-muse visibility and a testament to a shared vision of the aesthetic power of representation.

Laserstein made several other double portraits of Rose and herself, each time creating a narrative scene featuring her in the act of painting and interacting with her muse. The carefully composed *Ich und mein Modell* (I and My Model, 1929–30) is a horizontal composition showing Laserstein, paintbrush in hand, with Rose hovering at her shoulder. While the image might be mistaken for a candid snapshot of their shared life, Laserstein has orchestrated an art-historically imbued tableau of closeness between herself and her muse. Shown in the act of painting, the artist captures her own piercing gaze as her eyes meet ours. This compositional gesture is akin to an actor breaking the fourth wall. It is an art historical device famously utilized by artists such as Judith Leyster, Joshua Reynolds, and Courbet. Is the artist looking at herself in a mirror in order to capture a realistic depiction? Or is she engaging the outside observer? Such compositions acknowledge the scopic triangulation between artist, sitter, and viewer that is part of the alchemy of portraiture and a record of their personal bond. We will never know what Laserstein was painting, because only the corner of her canvas is shown at the edge of the composition, unseeable. Rose looks tenderly over Laserstein's shoulder, her hand affectionately perched on her blouse, her gaze intensely focused on the painting in progress. Rose is wearing lingerie which exposes her bare skin, further amplifying the suggestion of their shared domestic space and an erotic charge between them.

Vor dem Spiegel (At the Mirror, 1930–31) is even more radical. Not only does this painting propose a new paradigm for the artist-muse relationship, but it also manifests Laserstein's conflation of painting with erotic desire. Rose dominates the composition, standing nude in front of a full-length mirror, clutching its frame. Laserstein paints Rose's body from behind and shows the front of her body reflected in the mirror. Again, Laserstein presents herself diligently at work, squeezing paint onto her palette, not even looking at her model. The punctum of this double portrait is Rose's grip on the frame. Her facial expression is confident and resolute, as she looks at her own reflection; she is literally gripping her own self-image. In this performative enactment of musedom, it is Rose who is in control—Laserstein has flipped the traditional script. In this reversed power dynamic, Laserstein shows herself standing beside Rose, casting her own gaze downward, focusing intently on the very materials that allowed her to illustrate Rose's empowered stance. It is the artist who is in service of her muse.

Rose was the only model who posed for Laserstein during her years in Berlin. Rose's nickname was Puppy—an endearing reference to their "mutual dependence."¹⁴ Proof of their close and reciprocal partnership appears in their postwar correspondence. Laserstein was exiled to Sweden after the Nazis decreed that, as a Jew, she could no longer work or exhibit her paintings in public. Writing to Rose, who remained in Germany, Laserstein acknowledged, "You were my impetus and support."¹⁵ Both paintings—*I and My Model* and *At the Mirror*—are proclamations of the interdependence between artist and muse. Laserstein inextricably links intimate partnership with creative complicity. It is painful to think how this inspired partnership might have flourished had Laserstein not left Germany in 1937. How many more groundbreaking paintings would have resulted from their radical *pas de deux*? The genocidal menace of the Third Reich separated the couple, forcing them back into the closet in order to survive. The Nazis brutally truncated one of the most powerful manifestations of lesbian visibility in art history and forced a heartbreaking caesura between a formidable artistic and romantic union.

THE HEART WANTS WHAT IT WANTS

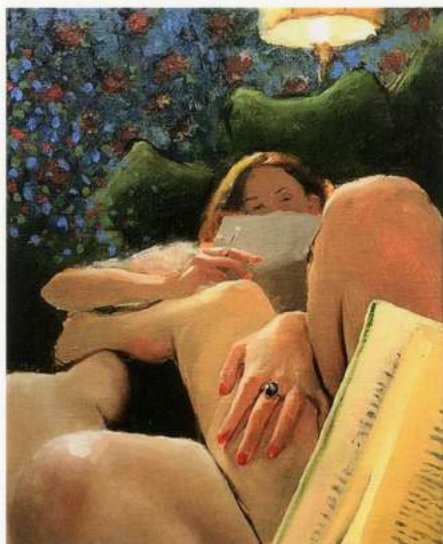
Jenna Gribbon met Mackenzie Scott some eighty years after Laserstein was compelled to leave her muse behind. If any couple has taken up the mantle of Laserstein and Rose, in the twenty-first century, it is Gribbon and Scott. Since their first meeting in 2017, Gribbon's painting practice has taken a profound shift: portraits of Scott, and vignettes



Lotte Laserstein. *Ich und mein Modell* (I and My Model), 1929–30. Private Collection



Lotte Laserstein. *Vor dem Spiegel* (At the Mirror), 1930–31. Bute Collection at Mount Stuart, Scotland



Jenna Gribbon. *Me looking at her looking at me*, 2018.



Jenna Gribbon. *Watching me swim*, 2018.

of their shared life together, have become her primary subject. And like Laserstein, Gribbon has placed the conceptualization of the artist-muse relationship at the center of her practice, forging a complicit and reciprocal creative partnership that has extended the paradigm pioneered by Laserstein and Rose in the late 1920s and '30s. Political gains through legislation and in the courts, supporting equal rights, as well as the ripple effects of the social movement for LGBTQ acceptance, have paved the way for more queer visibility in contemporary art. Gribbon is one of many lesbian or queeridentified women artists working today, but she remains singular in her dual preoccupations. With her wife as her principal, sustained subject, Gribbon simultaneously interrogates the act of looking as a parallel, urgent subject at the core of her practice.

There are two primary modes of representation in Gribbon's figurative work: candid genre scenes featuring a seemingly unposed Scott, with occasional cameo appearances by Gribbon's young son Silas, or obviously theatrical setups in which Scott is deliberately performing or artificially posed. In both types of representation, Gribbon works from photographs: "My photos are sort of sketches. I use photography not just to capture the fleeting moments that interest me but as a reflection of the way that photographic language has completely infiltrated the way we process experience and interact with our memories."¹⁰ This aspect of her practice harks back to the late nineteenth century when the newly invented "photographic eye" dramatically impacted the way painters saw their subjects: catalyzing the introduction of unusual framing, and cropping, in the Impressionist and PostImpressionist compositional lexicon. And like her forebears, Gribbon uses *alla prima* painting techniques so as to have the speed to capture intimate moments with wet-on-wet pigments. A queered strand of DNA from the Nabi painters could also be said to shape how Gribbon selects images for paintings. Intimate, quotidian scenes within domestic spaces were explored by artists, such as Édouard Vuillard and Maurice Denis, who painted cropped compositions of their wives in the bathtub, mending socks, or caring for their children. Gribbon recalls their signature *intimiste* approach and pushes the erotic potential of such prosaic activities. The kitchen and the bedroom, and the living room couch, become charged sites in which Gribbon can record unscripted moments with Scott, who is often portrayed topless, or nude, while emptying the dishwasher, frying an egg, or moving about their house. Snapshots are translated into lush brushstrokes of oil paint, elevating these domestic settings and placing them in dialogue with centuries of human image-making. By immortalizing mundane moments from the lives of two women who desire one another, Gribbon has broached terrain which, until now, has been virtually unexplored in the history of painting, bringing Laserstein's legacy forward into the age of marriage equality.

Me looking at her looking at me (2018), *Watching me swim* (2018), *Watching me paint* (2019), *Regarding me regarding you and me* (2020), *Watching her give/gives me pleasure* (2020)—All these paintings can trace their origins to Laserstein and Rose's watershed work, *At the Mirror*, in which the agency of the muse is equal to, if not greater than, the artist's own. As Gribbon's titles suggest, the gaze itself is as much her signature subject as the people she paints. The act of looking—the consensual, two-way scopophilia between artist and muse—and creating agency for the person being watched (and portrayed) are leitmotifs that run throughout Gribbon's oeuvre. Allusions to ways of looking—mirrors, blindfolds, spotlights—are tropes that pepper her recent works. Likewise, Gribbon and Scott have dramatized the act of looking in photoshoots that foreground the accoutrements of film or stage productions: green screen backdrops, large photography lights, primary-colored velvet curtains, and Vaudeville-style spotlights. By painting these devices and props that vision and help create illusion, Gribbon is able to allegorize the act of looking. She stages, for the viewer, how the viewer's eye and mind should consume her chosen subject, while giving a nod to Scott's own creative practice as an accomplished musician and habituée of the stage.

Gribbon's ongoing interrogation of seeing and depicting, painting and desire, and the porous borders between public and private realms is brought to light in *The Honeymoon Show!* At first, one might think the exhibition consists of two distinct bodies of work—one that takes up snapshots of a tropical honeymoon and a second group of staged portraits. Despite her past use of both types of representation, this ensemble is not just

about the contrasting scenes of the seemingly spontaneous, relaxed closeness of a newly-married couple with the intentional artifice of performed intimacy. Instead, *The Honeymoon Show!* presents one conceptual project through this dialectical relationship, resulting in a radical revision of musedom through a painted spectacle of her postnuptial life.

Painting from photographs taken during the couple's honeymoon in Thailand last winter, Gribbon shows Scott at play in a tropical landscape, capturing the dappled sunlight and lush jungle flora that set the scene for their romantic, beach getaway. Scott is nude, seen from behind, standing knee-deep in the sea. Her fair skin and long, blonde hair contrast with the saturated blues and interlaced banyan trees in the background. Visual puns animate other scenes: one features a larger-than-life Scott looking out at the viewer from the mouth of a cave-cum-vagina, and another shows a seated, pensive Scott with her fingers suggestively wedged into a coconut shell. Aware of the voyeuristic fantasies that such honeymoon images can stir up in the average viewer, and the loaded, gendered history of the gaze, Gribbon seizes upon these sexually suggestive moments with a knowing provocation, underscoring how these images are constructed consensually from total complicity between an artist and her muse. The audacious scale of Gribbon's Honeymoon paintings magnifies the overt queerness of these paintings. Transforming these seemingly intimate snapshots of Scott into larger-than-life figures in paint, she creates a public icon of lesbian desire. This suite of pictures concludes with a full-length nude of Scott, shown in profile and appearing to be encased within the glass shower in their hotel room. With the rumpled bedsheets lusciously evoked by Gribbon's skilled hand, the composition is framed by burgundy-red drapery on the windows, hinting at possible artifice in these ostensibly unposed, documentary compositions, previewing the dialectical construction that unfolds in the corresponding theatrical works.

The *Show!* part of Gribbon's ensemble is comprised of theatrically-posed portraits of Scott. Based on a series of staged photographs, shot against velvet curtains, three monumental works are close-ups of Scott's face, enacting various emotive states. Intensified by the primary colors of each backdrop, the artifice of her facial expressions—pouting, with eyes looking upward; the corners of her mouth turned down, eyes bulging in mock disgust; scratching her nose, looking downward with insouciance—is pure pantomime. Scott performs for Gribbon, with the red/yellow/blue backdrop reinforcing the constructed performativity of this staged "show" as well as functioning as a painter's color wheel joke. One of the largest theatrical canvases reveals a naked Scott, seated in a chair, with the couple's rambunctious young dog jumping onto her lap. Titled *The magician's assistant* (2023), it is ambiguous as to who is assisting whom in this artist-muse-animal trio.

Whether candid or staged, all the paintings in *The Honeymoon Show!* are constructed in such a way that both the *depicter* and the *depicted* are active agents. Discussing these new works, Gribbon explains, "I'm painting subjecthood and what it feels like to be looked at as a woman who knows how it feels to be regarded. The work is made with a lot of empathy for the subject. The purpose of using Mackenzie, over and over, is to familiarize the viewer with her, so she becomes not just 'the subject' but herself. The more we come to know her the more we can feel for her in her various pictorial predicaments. I think it's important to see visual evidence of women's desires. We don't have enough examples of feminine desire and even fewer examples of what it looks like for a woman to desire another woman."¹⁷

No matter what mode of representation Gribbon chooses to portray her subject, it could be said that her work fully embodies Emily Dickinson's famous line: "The Heart wants what it wants."¹⁸ There is much debate about the original intent behind these words, addressed to Mary Bowles in a letter from 1862. Bowles was one of several intimate friends that scholars suspect may have been Dickinson's lover or at the least her romantic crush. It feels appropriate to reclaim this phrase and apply it to a queer, female artist whose practice is rooted in representations of her muse, not only because of the conjecture about Dickinson's lesbianism, "The Heart wants what it wants" (or "the art wants what the art wants," to recall Smith's deconstruction of museology) has provided a perfect alibi for



Jenna Gribbon. *Watching me paint*, 2019.



Jenna Gribbon. *Regarding me regarding you and me*, 2020.



Jenna Gribbon. *Watching her give/gives me pleasure*, 2020.

uncontrollable or inappropriate desires. “Monster” male artists, like Picasso or Woody Allen, could crib from the great poet to justify exploitative relationships, dubious representations, and other types of amorous transgression.¹⁹ Their muses could be objectified, their motives unquestioned, because of the implication in Dickinson’s prose that love and desire lack logic. Gribbon’s oeuvre revolts against this paradigm and restores a more complex ethic that is actually embedded in Dickinson’s words. Her paintings demonstrate how a muse can also be a full-fledged subject, as opposed to a one-dimensional object of desire, and that looking as well as depicting can be an ethical, equitable exchange, and that desire or love can be conjured reciprocally without recourse to objectification, an ethos similarly articulated in Paul’s *Self-Portrait*. Gribbon’s heart (and art) wants her wife, Scott, while it also wants equity, shared vision, and compassion—“The Heart wants what it wants—or else it does not care.”²⁰

NOTES

1. Linda Nochlin’s essay, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” (1971), single-handedly launched the discipline of feminist art history by enumerating, for the first time, the multiple systemic reasons why it was “institutionally made impossible for women to achieve artistic ‘excellence.’” She underscored how the very construct of greatness is rife with gender bias. Nochlin shone a light on the impact of generations of exclusively male tastemakers, and gatekeepers, who solely dictated which artists were acknowledged, sold, and collected, let alone anointed as “great.” She meticulously deconstructed the biases inherent in her titular question while underscoring the centuries worth of misogyny intrinsic to received ideas around the myth of genius. Hence the very historical construct of “greatness” must be understood as profoundly gendered, and this explains my need to deploy scare quotes around the term in this essay.
2. Zadie Smith, “The Muse at Her Easel: Celia Paul’s ‘Self-Portrait,’” *The New York Review of Books* (November 21, 2019): www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/11/21/muse-easel-celia-paul-lucian-freud.
3. See Alicia Dujovne-Ortiz, *Dora Maar: Prisonnière du regard* (Paris: Grasset, 2003).
4. Celia Paul, *Self-Portrait* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2019), 97.
5. Paul, 21.
6. Paul, 2.
7. See Smith, “The word museography properly refers to the systematic description of objects in museums, but it might also do for the culture and ideology surrounding that dusty old figure of legend, the artist’s “muse.”
8. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929), 86.
9. Woolf, 86.
10. Susan S. Lanser, “1928: Sapphic Modernity and the Sexuality of History,” *Modernism/modernity* 1, no. 3 (October 25, 2016): www.modernismmodernity.org/forums/posts/1928-sapphic-modernity-and-sexuality-history.
11. Jane Alison and Coralie Malissard, *Modern Couples: Art, Intimacy and the Avant-Garde* (London: Prestel, 2019), 66.
12. “Garçonne” is a neologism, coined in the 1920s, which feminizes the French word for boy. The term was used to describe the emergence of gender-bending style, and it empowered behaviors not traditionally ascribed to women. In Weimar Germany, the garçonne was also called the “New Woman.”
13. Anna-Carola Krause, *Lotte Laserstein: Meine einzige Wirklichkeit / My Only Reality* (Dresden: Philo Fine Arts, 2003), 92.
14. Krause, 106.
15. Krause, 106.
16. Unpublished conversation with the author, October 10, 2023.
17. Unpublished conversation with the author, October 10, 2023.
18. Emily Dickinson, letter to Mary Bowles, Spring 1862: www.archive.emilydickinson.org/correspondence/mbowles/1262.html.
19. “The heart wants what it wants.” / It was one of those phrases that never left your head once you’d heard it; we all immediately memorized it whether we wanted to or not. It’s monstrous disregard for anything but the self. It’s proud irrationality. Woody goes on: “There’s no logic to those things. You meet someone and you fall in love and that’s that.” Claire Dedeter, *Monsters: A Fan’s Dilemma* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2023), 31. Previously published as “What Do We Do with the Art of Monstrous Men?” *The Paris Review* (November 20, 2017): www.theparisreview.org/blog/2017/11/20/art-monstrous-men.
20. Dickinson.

"Jenna Gribbon in Conversation with A. M. Homes," *Jenna Gribbon: The Honeymoon Show!*, New York, Lévy Gorvy
Dayan, 2024

JENNA GRIBBON IN CONVERSATION
WITH A. M. HOMES

A. M. HOMES When did you get married?

JENNA GRIBBON In November of last year. And then, this year, we got this puppy, Sylvia. She's the other character in this body of work.

AMH The dog in some ways is another eye or another viewer.

JG Yes, exactly. This painting is called *I am the dog* (2023). The dog is a humorous way to depict my position in relation to my subject.

AMH In your work, I'm curious about the position of the viewer or the camera. There's another eye. You're there as the painter or the narrator, but then there's also, it seems to me, a third party.

JG There always is a third party. There's the artist, the subject, and the viewer. I like thinking about that triangulation and drawing attention to it. In these paintings with the curtains, I'm trying to establish her as not just the subject but as a performer. In the previous body of work I did with her, there were a lot of green screens. That was about showing the seams of production, questioning truth and narrative. These are about highlighting her participation, her kind of action in being the subject and performing her role.

AMH I also wonder if, after the three people . . . I suspect that there might be a fourth eye. There's the painter's view, which is different from the viewer's, and the camera's eye, or dog's eye, which is different from the painter's.

JG That's what I'm getting at with the dog. I don't know who that fourth eye is, but the dog is standing in for that presence or that awareness. Maybe it's our animal selves.

AMH I was thinking of that eye as a neutral eye, or an untrained eye, that's not thinking about art history, about women and men, about all of the educational or intellectual prospects, which would make it actually more of an animal eye.

JG It is. I get tired of thinking about the male gaze and painting in relation to the male gaze. I want to paint my own gaze, regardless of the male gaze, but it's unavoidable, obviously. So then maybe I do want to take the innocent dog position.

AMH We grow up in this world where we're indoctrinated into the male gaze. Thinking about you as a painter, I would say it's hard to escape having taken on the male gaze in some way.

JG I just have to believe that, since I'm not a man, the perspective is automatically going to be different. And, for me, one of the main differences is to work from a more empathetic position. As a woman, I know the feeling of being regarded in this way, so I approach the subject with a certain amount of empathy and an understanding of what it is to be in that position. As much as I'm painting her, from a distance, I'm painting about my own experience of being in that position. It's also about me and my own discomfort—being lit, and watched, and photographed, or just regarded in this particular way that women are regarded.

AMH Is painting your partner easier than painting yourself? I was thinking about women artists like Carolee Schneemann, Barbara Hammer, and Marina Abramović who work with their body, and it's interesting that you're working with the body of your partner.

JG Yes, that partly comes from the fact that I'm a painter who is inspired by what I see. I don't see myself, so I have to do this in some other way, using what I look at. I should mention here that the lower half of my body, the parts I can see without a mirror, also appears in the work. It's a way of having skin in the game and of not asking something of my subject that I wouldn't give of myself. Generally speaking though, I spend so much time looking at Mackenzie that painting her comes naturally. By painting her, over and over again, I want to familiarize the viewer with her so much that she becomes personalized—she stops just being the subject; she becomes a recognizable figure and you start to feel you know her. And, importantly, you feel empathy for her and you think, Oh, what's she doing there? Is she uncomfortable?

In the past I frequently painted her with light shining so brightly in her eyes that she's shielding her face. You start to have this feeling for her and for her experience of discomfort in these situations. In reality though she's much more comfortable being photographed, or watched, than I am, so she's a great vehicle for me to depict my own unease with these things without actually making my model suffer. She's sometimes performing my discomfort.

AMH You're often painting her naked. Does painting somebody naked, theoretically vulnerable and exposed, engender more empathy? Or is that evoking our animal desires, as in some people will consume the work with voyeuristic pleasure?

JG I think it's both at the same time. I'm in no way against taking pleasure from looking at these works. I don't see any reason to be against that. It's part of life, and it's pleasurable to consume images of naked bodies—it's why we do it. But also I think her nakedness makes her extremely vulnerable. If we can feel empathy for her vulnerability, that's doing something. I enjoy the idea of a painting that people don't know how they're supposed to feel about—the idea that someone would be a bit uncomfortable or not know if they're allowed to enjoy it.

I go back and forth, maybe too much, thinking about the way these things operate out in the world and, in a sense, wanting to control the narrative. Then the other side of me just wants to embrace the chaos and let the painting exist in whatever way it does, just knowing my own intentions and feeling good about those. It ends up being a kind of thought experiment, to see what happens and how other people read it and react. Seeing the way other people read the painting tells me as much about them as it does about what I've made.

AMH Along that line, can you talk a little about the ways in which you think about that narrative in painting?

JG Well, initially I was attracted to these particular images of her in front of the curtain. I didn't know why, but then as I painted them I was like, oh, it's so obvious, the idea of performing these tiny, extremely intimate gestures in this staged setting—trying to pick at an ingrown nipple hair, or something, but on a stage in front of a curtain. I wanted the exhibition not to be divided in this way: the honeymoon setting is intimate and this setting is just purely cold and performative. Actually, the lines are very blurred as to which scenarios are authentically intimate and which are staged and performed. I guess what I mean is that I wanted to complicate the presumed narrative by flipping the script and finding intimacy in staged moments, and then sometimes serving artifice when the viewer is perhaps expecting authenticity.

When I was documenting these moments in our honeymoon, I was specifically drawn to moments where she walked into a lighting situation that had a sort of spotlight effect, where the sun was shining on her in some dramatic way, or in the case of *Soft butch sunset* (2023) there's a bright streetlamp lighting her from the front, which gives the whole scene a feeling of artificiality. A lot of times, especially in the past with my small paintings, I would try to catch these little moments without her noticing and then have other paintings that were clearly posed. But in Thailand I was having her do a lot of posing—like standing at the mouth of a cave, looking directly at me and being aware that she's part of this process. With *Coconut lover* (2023), I was like, "Can you do that again?" And, "Just angle the coconut more towards me," directing in a way that I haven't usually done in the past.

AMH This exhibition is also all Mackenzie. Can you talk about the collaborative aspect of that?

JG Mackenzie is a performer by trade. That's something that interests me with her, depicting a performer performing in paintings. I'm in her work too, and I enjoy the sort of reciprocal creative relationship that we have. I mean, she definitely collaborates in my work more than I collaborate in hers. I'm just sort of in the songs sometimes, but in these paintings, a lot of times, what she does really influences the painting that gets made. We talk a lot about my paintings and her music. It's a continuous conversation.

AMH Does painting her and literally working with her flesh while she's not there . . . Does that change your relationship to her? In reality you're like, Oh, I spent all day with you.

JG Yes, it does feel like that sometimes, but painting is this thing where you're lost in a world of light and dark, and color. Meaning, as I'm painting her she's not necessarily her, she's a bunch of formal elements. But then if I've been staring at her face all day, painting her face, and I see her in real life, it does get a little psychedelic. I'm like, Oh, you're a painting moving around!

AMH The act of painting is meditative and in your head, your mind's eye. That, to me, is the definition of intimacy.

JG It is intimacy. And one of the things I'm really interested in is what it is to truly see another person. I could never see her as clearly as maybe I want to. We're all constantly mutating and showing up as a slightly different person in the world than we were the day before. And seeing someone you're close to is extra challenging, because it's so hard not to just fill in the blanks all the time, with what we already know about them. I'm trying to show this process—what it is to try to see, and re-see, someone close to me.

AMH And is seeing the same as knowing?

JG Yes. It's all about trying to grasp this reality we exist in, and what's going on in this other vessel that I'm spending all this time with—a person who's having a completely different experience to me. All I have to glean information from are my senses—one of them is my eyes, and they give me a lot of information. And painting helps me understand the information I'm receiving.

AMH Can we talk about the fluorescent pink of the nipples? You've talked about the desire to make her nipples inescapable—noting that

all through art history there've been breasts and nipples, but the idea is that we're not supposed to look too carefully. Here they're fluorescent pink! It's like a brain thing: you're condemned to look. In the organization of the painting your eye is drawn there and keeps going back—I want to see the rest of it, but the eye keeps going back to the nipples.

JG It does several things at once, and in my mind the fluorescent pink gives the feeling of what a nipple really is. This sort of nipple sensitivity, it's about that. And, again, putting you in the position of like, Oh God, she's so vulnerable. Her nipples are so pink and sensitive, and she's in this situation, but hot pink to me is simultaneously vulnerable and powerful. It's a way to address our hypersensitivity around the female nipple too—the opposite of a censored nipple. And it does this anachronistic thing: it keeps her body from being able to slip comfortably in place with the classical nudes of art history. A painting with hot pink nipples operates in a different way. To me it also has this sci-fi effect where you're like, Is this a light source? I just listed probably too many ideas for one symbolic gesture to carry, but those are things I think about when I'm painting them.

AMH The relationship to art history, the relationship to queer history or lesbian history, and in art, and also to time travel and the motion of space and time—you're playing with that.

JG Oh, okay, where do we start?

AMH Let's work backward, despite that these are fixed moments. There's also an element of the passage of time and compression of time in them, which I find interesting.

JG Working with oil paint, and referring to the history of painting, has a time travel element, because you inherently include hundreds of years of history in your experience of looking at this present moment. So you're looking at the past and the present simultaneously, when you're looking at something that uses traditional methods and makes traditional references, which I enjoy because our moment is not discreetly separated from history. We are in this continuum, and it's just the next page in the book. I'm more comfortable having that history in the painting than not having it there. I love painting and the history of painting and, yes, I don't love everything about the way women have been painted throughout history, but I do love a lot of those paintings—it's not wanting to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

AMH You are female. Your partner is female. Is that gaze different from the heteronormative male gaze? What is that? And how do we find language for that?

JG It is different, partly because of what I was talking about before. As another woman, I think I have more empathy for her bodily reality—I understand it in a different way and that's in the paintings. I don't think the paintings would be made in the way they are if I were a man, obviously. I also enjoy the impulse to completely obsess over your partner and embrace celebrating an obsession.

I recently sent this meme to Alison Gingeras, when she was writing her essay for this catalogue. It's Queen Latifah on the ground, photographing her partner from below—the woman is just standing there, but Queen Latifah is literally laying on the ground to take this photo. Across Queen Latifah it just says, "Lesbians." On the woman it says, "Their girlfriend doing literally nothing." I do think there's something particularly queer about that. There's a kind of freedom that queerness

gives to women specifically—to be obsessive in this way, embracing the other’s image and persona. Maybe it’s because it’s not threatening.



If a man is completely obsessed with a woman’s body and image, and making hundreds of paintings of them, you might wonder if that woman is safe. You know what I mean? There’s somehow a threat to that. It feels more celebratory in the context of a queer relationship. Not to say that queer women can’t have unhealthy obsessions and unhealthy relationships. Obviously they can, but there does seem to be this prevalent impulse, and lack of self-censorship, to obsess over a partner.

AMH In some ways, is it a less predatory eye?

JG Maybe it is. Maybe that’s what I’m getting at with the safety question.

AMH I also wonder if there’s something in a queer relationship that’s the expectation that the other person—if you’re a woman dating a woman—that they’re the same as you. But they’re not the same and there’s the impossibility of reconciling that because you, as a woman, think you experience things the same way I experience them. Then the

realization is, Absolutely not! You do not experience things the same way I do.

JG Maybe that’s partly what’s in the paintings too—this attempt to understand the otherness of this person that I’m so close to, and live with, that is also a woman. What is her otherness? What is her experience?

AMH Do you think queer desire is different from heterosexual desire? Does it look different?

JG Yes, I think it does. I’m laughing because I was about to say it’s hard to put your finger on what that difference is, but Mackenzie always says, instead of “I can’t quite put my finger on it,” she says, “I can’t quite get my finger in it.” It’s funny. So, anyway, I can’t quite get my finger in it. But there’s a difference.

I was with men in the past and I think one difference is in the dynamics of desire. There’s much more freedom desiring and being desired by a woman, without this sort of having to be on guard. It’s partly a bodily freedom that exists in a relationship with a woman; a bodily, embodied comfort of not feeling like you have to be seen a certain way. I mean, obviously, there are still aesthetic preferences, there’s still the question of beauty and all these things, but women don’t have the same expectations for each other as maybe a man has. Maybe part of the freedom comes from that. In my personal experience I feel much more comfortable in expressing desire and welcoming desire in relationships with women.

AMH Right. That’s so interesting. It also, again, brings up these classic old things about power, and what is consumption of a person? And it’s a little bit animal too. You’re like, Are you literally going to eat me alive?

JG And, for me, it’s important to show what that desire, on the part of a woman for another woman, even looks like. Because I think most people don’t know what it looks like or how it feels. So to paint about that feeling and that experience, to put that out in the world, feels important to me because it doesn’t really exist much.

AMH I was going to ask you about history and representations of history, and what is left out of history, and, definitely, what is entirely left out of history.

JG There are no lesbians. I’m joking, of course, but art history, especially before the late twentieth century, would have us believe that lesbians don’t exist.

AMH What are the things that I should be asking that I’m not even thinking about?

JG In terms of queerness, one thing that we haven’t talked about—that I think people don’t really tend to focus on in the paintings—is how she’s dressed. Queer signifiers. She’s wearing this outfit—a sports bra, shorts, and cowboy boots—and in this painting she’s in this kind of men’s underwear. And, here, in a men’s button-down shirt. It’s masculine leaning. Her clothing is important. She’s female. Her pronouns are she/her, but she’s a kind of character, or subject, that we don’t see a lot of in art history.

AMH The idea of a gay woman and in her own experience of being gay—toggling sometimes more masculine or feminine, not necessarily presenting or embracing traditional female clothing or poses.

JG I'm painting about my desire for her. This is very sexy to me; this is sexy underwear. So maybe that's the other piece of the puzzle? What makes it less for the male gaze. Because maybe a man is not going to look at that and think that's sexy underwear.

AMH Or the sports bra with the cowboy boots and the backward ball cap?

JG Exactly. It's this kind of thing that signifies lesbian. I love romanticizing her and romanticizing this very dykey look. Again, something that's missing from the history of painting—the romanticized dyke.

AMH Right. Yes. In the image you can look at the light in that and the sense of desire, flesh as desirable, and that this is the beauty of the dyke, who was traditionally sidelined by society as not beautiful.

JG For me it's, look how hot this is! It's a little bit of proselytizing—look how sexy it is to be a dyke! These nuanced modes of expression, self-expression, are beautiful and interesting, and underrepresented still. Lesbian visibility is still very, very much a problem.

AMH The invisible people. That's why they have to wear their hats backward, so they can find each other.

JG Exactly. I think it's because there's a sense that female sexuality doesn't exist unless it's validated by a man.

AMH There is no female sexuality without the male gaze.

JG And I'm here to tell everyone otherwise. It's part of why I like the work to have some element of sexual explicitness: to make it very obvious that queer desire is every bit as lusty as any hetero desire. Because I think some people do, somewhere in the back of their mind, have this misconception that lesbians . . .

AMH Just have cats?

JG Yes. They're not really doing anything hot.

AMH Because they can't, they couldn't possibly. How would that even work?

JG When I first started making these paintings, I did hesitate about it. But then I was like, You know what? Fuck it. I'm not going to think about men and whether or not, because of the way men have behaved, I'm allowed to make these paintings. For me, it's a very present aspect of the work, but it's also not the only one. I don't even think it's necessarily foregrounded in the work most of the time, but it's . . .

AMH But your wife is naked.

JG Exactly. And she's my wife.

AMH Except for the dog in the foreground, it feels pretty foregrounded.

JG She's not always naked; she's sometimes clothed. But she is my wife. I can't tell you how many people think that these are self-portraits. People come up to Mackenzie all the time and say, "I love your paintings." And she's like, "Oh, my wife makes the paintings. I'm in the paintings." They see that it's a woman's name on the wall card and that

it's a woman in the painting. They assume they're self-portraits because how could a woman see another woman like this? A woman would never paint a sexy painting of a woman.

AMH You just said something really very important: A woman would never see a woman like this. That goes back to what you were saying earlier about the obsessive and the question of if that's a sexualized gaze. Or is it just the seeing of that which is the same as you?

JG When I look at a painting of a naked body, I don't come in with the assumption that it has anything to do with sex. To me, it's a body first and foremost and then I'm like, well, is this sexual or is this not? But the question does come up: Is this a sexual scenario or is it not a sexual scenario?

AMH Well, you seem to be painting both, and that's another interesting thing too. You're painting: What is intimacy? That is personal intimacy, one's own intimacy. That's not necessarily . . .

JG Yes. This is not sexual, but this is sexual. How do we know? In this painting she's singing in the shower. It's not sexual. The only thing sexual about that this is the voyeuristic perspective—it's sexual on the part of the viewer, but she's not in a sexual scenario.

AMH It's complicated. What do your parents think about . . .

JG I think that they're very . . . that they're deeply uncomfortable.

AMH I think about Barbara Hammer's work, which has its links to pornography in the most classic sense. In painting, and portraiture, the erotic is perhaps different from the pornographic, but it raises the question too of how much desire can the viewer take? That also goes to the super-pink nipples and the confrontation of how much is too much?.

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AMH Did you grow up in a religious family?

JG Yes. I'm Southern and I was raised Mormon. My dad wasn't Mormon. His family is Southern Baptist, but my mom and my stepdad converted to Mormonism when I was a little kid. They've since left the religion, but they're still Christian identified.

AMH Earlier you were talking about being with another woman and a sense of freedom you feel. How does that fit with you in terms of your upbringing and finding full expression for yourself?

JG When you're brought up in a culture that teaches women to expect desire to come to them, then you're sort of waiting for that approach. And the approach comes from men. I think if I was growing up now and had been approached in this way by a woman (or a girl when I was young), I would've been like, Oh!—light bulb

going off. Because that didn't happen to me until I was in my thirties, I didn't understand. I didn't know lesbians existed. The world did a really good job hiding that from me. It was hard for me to understand myself and to understand that you're supposed to feel embodied when you have sex. Being raised in this religion that's all about repressing everything—you're not even supposed to masturbate—how can you really have a fantasy life? Your desires are not important. The only thing that's important is making babies and having a family. You don't even know to desire something, or how to picture it, or conceive of it, or fantasize about it, if you don't know it exists. And that's another reason that made me want to make these paintings as overt as they are—inescapably gay. Hopefully for some people who need it, the paintings can act like a mirror, reflecting an aspect of self that might have been hidden from them.

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It's valuable to remember all the ways that everything that's fed to us has been mediated. Light is a great manipulator, which is why I like to play with it a lot. It completely changes the narrative. If you manipulate the light it changes the way you read something. Paint is another form of mediation. The way something's painted gives you a feeling about it. I'm interested in all these layers that sit between us and the subject and influence our interpretation.

AMH In writing fiction, there's an emotional truth that in some ways feels more accurate than, say, journalism. I feel like painting has that too—the arts are the true keepers of our histories. When we study history, we look back at the painting, and the literature, and find a truth that evades the other documents of the time.

JG As artists we can't help but betray our real feelings. You might be making a history painting, but when someone looks at that painting they see details not only about that event. They inherently understand something about how the artist felt about it. I might be painting ideas about this triangulation between the subject, the artist, and the viewer, but you're also going to start to understand how I feel about my wife. Hopefully you can glean a lot from the way that I'm looking at her and by the way that she's painted, and you're left able to consider where you stand in relation to it all.

New York, October 2023

"Jenna Gribbon in Conversation with A. M. Homes," *Jenna Gribbon: The Honeymoon Show!*, New York, Lévy Gorvy
Dayan, 2024

JENNA GRIBBON IN CONVERSATION
WITH A. M. HOMES

A. M. HOMES When did you get married?

JENNA GRIBBON In November of last year. And then, this year, we got this puppy, Sylvia. She's the other character in this body of work.

AMH The dog in some ways is another eye or another viewer.

JG Yes, exactly. This painting is called *I am the dog* (2023). The dog is a humorous way to depict my position in relation to my subject.

AMH In your work, I'm curious about the position of the viewer or the camera. There's another eye. You're there as the painter or the narrator, but then there's also, it seems to me, a third party.

JG There always is a third party. There's the artist, the subject, and the viewer. I like thinking about that triangulation and drawing attention to it. In these paintings with the curtains, I'm trying to establish her as not just the subject but as a performer. In the previous body of work I did with her, there were a lot of green screens. That was about showing the seams of production, questioning truth and narrative. These are about highlighting her participation, her kind of action in being the subject and performing her role.

AMH I also wonder if, after the three people . . . I suspect that there might be a fourth eye. There's the painter's view, which is different from the viewer's, and the camera's eye, or dog's eye, which is different from the painter's.

JG That's what I'm getting at with the dog. I don't know who that fourth eye is, but the dog is standing in for that presence or that awareness. Maybe it's our animal selves.

AMH I was thinking of that eye as a neutral eye, or an untrained eye, that's not thinking about art history, about women and men, about all of the educational or intellectual prospects, which would make it actually more of an animal eye.

JG It is. I get tired of thinking about the male gaze and painting in relation to the male gaze. I want to paint my own gaze, regardless of the male gaze, but it's unavoidable, obviously. So then maybe I do want to take the innocent dog position.

AMH We grow up in this world where we're indoctrinated into the male gaze. Thinking about you as a painter, I would say it's hard to escape having taken on the male gaze in some way.

JG I just have to believe that, since I'm not a man, the perspective is automatically going to be different. And, for me, one of the main differences is to work from a more empathetic position. As a woman, I know the feeling of being regarded in this way, so I approach the subject with a certain amount of empathy and an understanding of what it is to be in that position. As much as I'm painting her, from a distance, I'm painting about my own experience of being in that position. It's also about me and my own discomfort—being lit, and watched, and photographed, or just regarded in this particular way that women are regarded.

AMH Is painting your partner easier than painting yourself? I was thinking about women artists like Carolee Schneemann, Barbara Hammer, and Marina Abramović who work with their body, and it's interesting that you're working with the body of your partner.

JG Yes, that partly comes from the fact that I'm a painter who is inspired by what I see. I don't see myself, so I have to do this in some other way, using what I look at. I should mention here that the lower half of my body, the parts I can see without a mirror, also appears in the work. It's a way of having skin in the game and of not asking something of my subject that I wouldn't give of myself. Generally speaking though, I spend so much time looking at Mackenzie that painting her comes naturally. By painting her, over and over again, I want to familiarize the viewer with her so much that she becomes personalized—she stops just being the subject: she becomes a recognizable figure and you start to feel you know her. And, importantly, you feel empathy for her and you think, Oh, what's she doing there? Is she uncomfortable?

In the past I frequently painted her with light shining so brightly in her eyes that she's shielding her face. You start to have this feeling for her and for her experience of discomfort in these situations. In reality though she's much more comfortable being photographed, or watched, than I am, so she's a great vehicle for me to depict my own unease with these things without actually making my model suffer. She's sometimes performing my discomfort.

AMH You're often painting her naked. Does painting somebody naked, theoretically vulnerable and exposed, engender more empathy? Or is that evoking our animal desires, as in some people will consume the work with voyeuristic pleasure?

JG I think it's both at the same time. I'm in no way against taking pleasure from looking at these works. I don't see any reason to be against that. It's part of life, and it's pleasurable to consume images of naked bodies—it's why we do it. But also I think her nakedness makes her extremely vulnerable. If we can feel empathy for her vulnerability, that's doing something. I enjoy the idea of a painting that people don't know how they're supposed to feel about—the idea that someone would be a bit uncomfortable or not know if they're allowed to enjoy it.

I go back and forth, maybe too much, thinking about the way these things operate out in the world and, in a sense, wanting to control the narrative. Then the other side of me just wants to embrace the chaos and let the painting exist in whatever way it does, just knowing my own intentions and feeling good about those. It ends up being a kind of thought experiment, to see what happens and how other people read it and react. Seeing the way other people read the painting tells me as much about them as it does about what I've made.

AMH Along that line, can you talk a little about the ways in which you think about that narrative in painting?

JG Well, initially I was attracted to these particular images of her in front of the curtain. I didn't know why, but then as I painted them I was like, oh, it's so obvious, the idea of performing these tiny, extremely intimate gestures in this staged setting—trying to pick at an ingrown nipple hair, or something, but on a stage in front of a curtain. I wanted the exhibition not to be divided in this way: the honeymoon setting is intimate and this setting is just purely cold and performative. Actually, the lines are very blurred as to which scenarios are authentically intimate and which are staged and performed. I guess what I mean is that I wanted to complicate the presumed narrative by flipping the script and finding intimacy in staged moments, and then sometimes serving artifice when the viewer is perhaps expecting authenticity.

When I was documenting these moments in our honeymoon, I was specifically drawn to moments where she walked into a lighting situation that had a sort of spotlight effect, where the sun was shining on her in some dramatic way, or in the case of *Soft butch sunset* (2023) there's a bright streetlamp lighting her from the front, which gives the whole scene a feeling of artificiality. A lot of times, especially in the past with my small paintings, I would try to catch these little moments without her noticing and then have other paintings that were clearly posed. But in Thailand I was having her do a lot of posing—like standing at the mouth of a cave, looking directly at me and being aware that she's part of this process. With *Coconut lover* (2023), I was like, "Can you do that again?" And, "Just angle the coconut more towards me," directing in a way that I haven't usually done in the past.

AMH This exhibition is also all Mackenzie. Can you talk about the collaborative aspect of that?

JG Mackenzie is a performer by trade. That's something that interests me with her, depicting a performer performing in paintings. I'm in her work too, and I enjoy the sort of reciprocal creative relationship that we have. I mean, she definitely collaborates in my work more than I collaborate in hers. I'm just sort of in the songs sometimes, but in these paintings, a lot of times, what she does really influences the painting that gets made. We talk a lot about my paintings and her music. It's a continuous conversation.

AMH Does painting her and literally working with her flesh while she's not there . . . Does that change your relationship to her? In reality you're like, Oh, I spent all day with you.

JG Yes, it does feel like that sometimes, but painting is this thing where you're lost in a world of light and dark, and color. Meaning, as I'm painting her she's not necessarily her, she's a bunch of formal elements. But then if I've been staring at her face all day, painting her face, and I see her in real life, it does get a little psychedelic. I'm like, Oh, you're a painting moving around!

AMH The act of painting is meditative and in your head, your mind's eye. That, to me, is the definition of intimacy.

JG It is intimacy. And one of the things I'm really interested in is what it is to truly see another person. I could never see her as clearly as maybe I want to. We're all constantly mutating and showing up as a slightly different person in the world than we were the day before. And seeing someone you're close to is extra challenging, because it's so hard not to just fill in the blanks all the time, with what we already know about them. I'm trying to show this process—what it is to try to see, and re-see, someone close to me.

AMH And is seeing the same as knowing?

JG Yes. It's all about trying to grasp this reality we exist in, and what's going on in this other vessel that I'm spending all this time with—a person who's having a completely different experience to me. All I have to glean information from are my senses—one of them is my eyes, and they give me a lot of information. And painting helps me understand the information I'm receiving.

AMH Can we talk about the fluorescent pink of the nipples? You've talked about the desire to make her nipples inescapable—noting that

all through art history there've been breasts and nipples, but the idea is that we're not supposed to look too carefully. Here they're fluorescent pink! It's like a brain thing: you're condemned to look. In the organization of the painting your eye is drawn there and keeps going back—I want to see the rest of it, but the eye keeps going back to the nipples.

JG It does several things at once, and in my mind the fluorescent pink gives the feeling of what a nipple really is. This sort of nipple sensitivity, it's about that. And, again, putting you in the position of like, Oh God, she's so vulnerable. Her nipples are so pink and sensitive, and she's in this situation, but hot pink to me is simultaneously vulnerable and powerful. It's a way to address our hypersensitivity around the female nipple too—the opposite of a censored nipple. And it does this anachronistic thing: it keeps her body from being able to slip comfortably in place with the classical nudes of art history. A painting with hot pink nipples operates in a different way. To me it also has this sci-fi effect where you're like, Is this a light source? I just listed probably too many ideas for one symbolic gesture to carry, but those are things I think about when I'm painting them.

AMH The relationship to art history, the relationship to queer history or lesbian history, and in art, and also to time travel and the motion of space and time—you're playing with that.

JG Oh, okay, where do we start?

AMH Let's work backward, despite that these are fixed moments. There's also an element of the passage of time and compression of time in them, which I find interesting.

JG Working with oil paint, and referring to the history of painting, has a time travel element, because you inherently include hundreds of years of history in your experience of looking at this present moment. So you're looking at the past and the present simultaneously, when you're looking at something that uses traditional methods and makes traditional references, which I enjoy because our moment is not discreetly separated from history. We are in this continuum, and it's just the next page in the book. I'm more comfortable having that history in the painting than not having it there. I love painting and the history of painting and, yes, I don't love everything about the way women have been painted throughout history, but I do love a lot of those paintings—it's not wanting to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

AMH You are female. Your partner is female. Is that gaze different from the heteronormative male gaze? What is that? And how do we find language for that?

JG It is different, partly because of what I was talking about before. As another woman, I think I have more empathy for her bodily reality—I understand it in a different way and that's in the paintings. I don't think the paintings would be made in the way they are if I were a man, obviously. I also enjoy the impulse to completely obsess over your partner and embrace celebrating an obsession.

I recently sent this meme to Alison Gingeras, when she was writing her essay for this catalogue. It's Queen Latifah on the ground, photographing her partner from below—the woman is just standing there, but Queen Latifah is literally laying on the ground to take this photo. Across Queen Latifah it just says, "Lesbians." On the woman it says, "Their girlfriend doing literally nothing." I do think there's something particularly queer about that. There's a kind of freedom that queerness

gives to women specifically—to be obsessive in this way, embracing the other’s image and persona. Maybe it’s because it’s not threatening.



If a man is completely obsessed with a woman’s body and image, and making hundreds of paintings of them, you might wonder if that woman is safe. You know what I mean? There’s somehow a threat to that. It feels more celebratory in the context of a queer relationship. Not to say that queer women can’t have unhealthy obsessions and unhealthy relationships. Obviously they can, but there does seem to be this prevalent impulse, and lack of self-censorship, to obsess over a partner.

AMH In some ways, is it a less predatory eye?

JG Maybe it is. Maybe that’s what I’m getting at with the safety question.

AMH I also wonder if there’s something in a queer relationship that’s the expectation that the other person—if you’re a woman dating a woman—that they’re the same as you. But they’re not the same and there’s the impossibility of reconciling that because you, as a woman, think you experience things the same way I experience them. Then the

realization is, Absolutely not! You do not experience things the same way I do.

JG Maybe that’s partly what’s in the paintings too—this attempt to understand the otherness of this person that I’m so close to, and live with, that is also a woman. What is her otherness? What is her experience?

AMH Do you think queer desire is different from heterosexual desire? Does it look different?

JG Yes, I think it does. I’m laughing because I was about to say it’s hard to put your finger on what that difference is, but Mackenzie always says, instead of “I can’t quite put my finger on it,” she says, “I can’t quite get my finger in it.” It’s funny. So, anyway, I can’t quite get my finger in it. But there’s a difference.

I was with men in the past and I think one difference is in the dynamics of desire. There’s much more freedom desiring and being desired by a woman, without this sort of having to be on guard. It’s partly a bodily freedom that exists in a relationship with a woman: a bodily, embodied comfort of not feeling like you have to be seen a certain way. I mean, obviously, there are still aesthetic preferences, there’s still the question of beauty and all these things, but women don’t have the same expectations for each other as maybe a man has. Maybe part of the freedom comes from that. In my personal experience I feel much more comfortable in expressing desire and welcoming desire in relationships with women.

AMH Right. That’s so interesting. It also, again, brings up these classic old things about power, and what is consumption of a person? And it’s a little bit animal too. You’re like, Are you literally going to eat me alive?

JG And, for me, it’s important to show what that desire, on the part of a woman for another woman, even looks like. Because I think most people don’t know what it looks like or how it feels. So to paint about that feeling and that experience, to put that out in the world, feels important to me because it doesn’t really exist much.

AMH I was going to ask you about history and representations of history, and what is left out of history, and, definitely, what is entirely left out of history.

JG There are no lesbians. I’m joking, of course, but art history, especially before the late twentieth century, would have us believe that lesbians don’t exist.

AMH What are the things that I should be asking that I’m not even thinking about?

JG In terms of queerness, one thing that we haven’t talked about—that I think people don’t really tend to focus on in the paintings—is how she’s dressed. Queer signifiers. She’s wearing this outfit—a sports bra, shorts, and cowboy boots—and in this painting she’s in this kind of men’s underwear. And, here, in a men’s button-down shirt. It’s masculine leaning. Her clothing is important. She’s female. Her pronouns are she/her, but she’s a kind of character, or subject, that we don’t see a lot of in art history.

AMH The idea of a gay woman and in her own experience of being gay—toggling sometimes more masculine or feminine, not necessarily presenting or embracing traditional female clothing or poses.

JG I'm painting about my desire for her. This is very sexy to me; this is sexy underwear. So maybe that's the other piece of the puzzle? What makes it less for the male gaze. Because maybe a man is not going to look at that and think that's sexy underwear.

AMH Or the sports bra with the cowboy boots and the backward ball cap?

JG Exactly. It's this kind of thing that signifies lesbian. I love romanticizing her and romanticizing this very dykey look. Again, something that's missing from the history of painting—the romanticized dyke.

AMH Right. Yes. In the image you can look at the light in that and the sense of desire, flesh as desirable, and that this is the beauty of the dyke, who was traditionally sidelined by society as not beautiful.

JG For me it's, look how hot this is! It's a little bit of proselytizing—look how sexy it is to be a dyke! These nuanced modes of expression, self-expression, are beautiful and interesting, and underrepresented still. Lesbian visibility is still very, very much a problem.

AMH The invisible people. That's why they have to wear their hats backward, so they can find each other.

JG Exactly. I think it's because there's a sense that female sexuality doesn't exist unless it's validated by a man.

AMH There is no female sexuality without the male gaze.

JG And I'm here to tell everyone otherwise. It's part of why I like the work to have some element of sexual explicitness: to make it very obvious that queer desire is every bit as lusty as any hetero desire. Because I think some people do, somewhere in the back of their mind, have this misconception that lesbians . . .

AMH Just have cats?

JG Yes. They're not really doing anything hot.

AMH Because they can't, they couldn't possibly. How would that even work?

JG When I first started making these paintings, I did hesitate about it. But then I was like, You know what? Fuck it. I'm not going to think about men and whether or not, because of the way men have behaved, I'm allowed to make these paintings. For me, it's a very present aspect of the work, but it's also not the only one. I don't even think it's necessarily foregrounded in the work most of the time, but it's . . .

AMH But your wife is naked.

JG Exactly. And she's my wife.

AMH Except for the dog in the foreground, it feels pretty foregrounded.

JG She's not always naked; she's sometimes clothed. But she is my wife. I can't tell you how many people think that these are self-portraits. People come up to Mackenzie all the time and say, "I love your paintings." And she's like, "Oh, my wife makes the paintings. I'm in the paintings." They see that it's a woman's name on the wall card and that

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AMH It's complicated. What do your parents think about . . .

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AMH Did you grow up in a religious family?

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AMH Earlier you were talking about being with another woman and a sense of freedom you feel. How does that fit with you in terms of your upbringing and finding full expression for yourself?

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JG The question of truth versus reality is the quintessential question of our moment in time. It's the most interesting thing there is to consider: public versus private, and reality versus fiction. It's almost impossible for us to know what's real and what isn't anymore. And that's becoming increasingly true. I'm interested in taking down this notion that art is somehow full of truth. It's a construction of the artist—we made these things. I'm reminding the viewer by showing the seams of production—showing the lights, the curtains, the green screen—as if to say, Don't forget! I made this up. You may think something about me or my relationship, my experience, but you're only getting what I'm showing you. This is the narrative that I've created. The image looks the way it does because I've made it that way.

It's valuable to remember all the ways that everything that's fed to us has been mediated. Light is a great manipulator, which is why I like to play with it a lot. It completely changes the narrative. If you manipulate the light it changes the way you read something. Paint is another form of mediation. The way something's painted gives you a feeling about it. I'm interested in all these layers that sit between us and the subject and influence our interpretation.

AMH In writing fiction, there's an emotional truth that in some ways feels more accurate than, say, journalism. I feel like painting has that too—the arts are the true keepers of our histories. When we study history, we look back at the painting, and the literature, and find a truth that evades the other documents of the time.

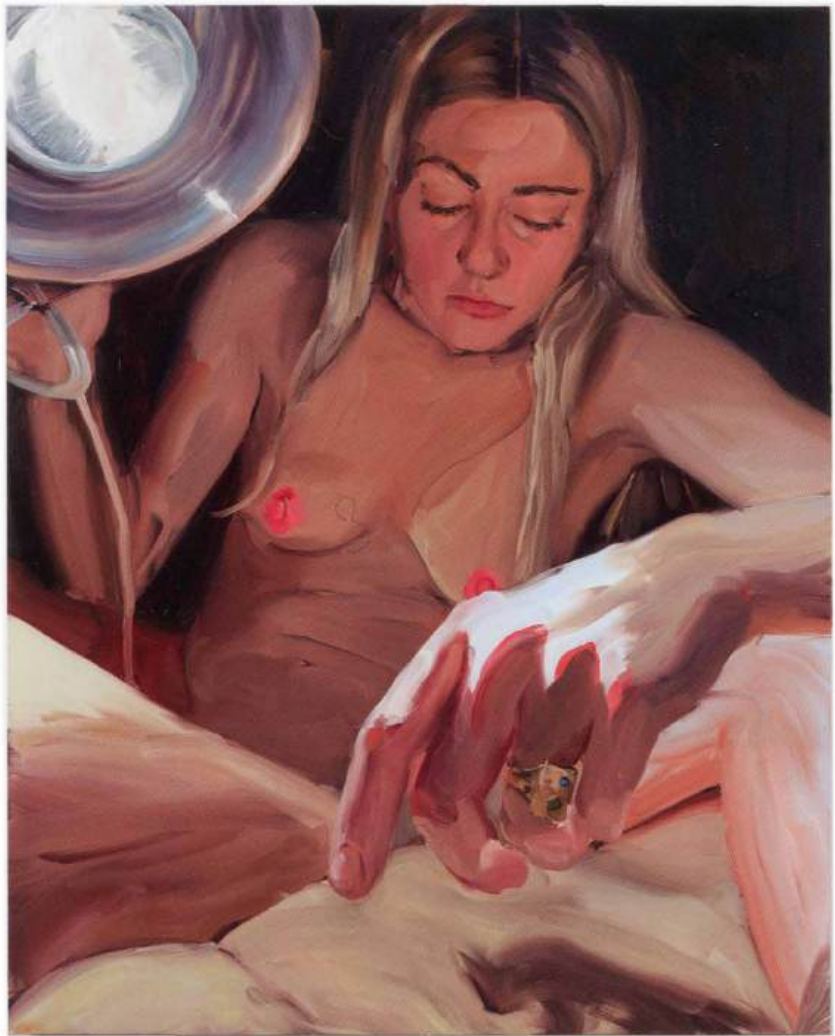
JG As artists we can't help but betray our real feelings. You might be making a history painting, but when someone looks at that painting they see details not only about that event. They inherently understand something about how the artist felt about it. I might be painting ideas about this triangulation between the subject, the artist, and the viewer, but you're also going to start to understand how I feel about my wife. Hopefully you can glean a lot from the way that I'm looking at her and by the way that she's painted, and you're left able to consider where you stand in relation to it all.

New York, October 2023

Jenna Gribbon's portraits of her most recognizable subject, her wife the musician Mackenzie Scott, are prolific, from candid domestic scenes and sexually tender moments to staged compositions that employ exaggerated lighting, such as *Examinationscape*. Her approach to painting dismantles the traditional relationship between artist, subject and viewer, shifting the power dynamics within the frame by

revealing the tools of construction involved in the artistic process, from the thick texture of the brushstrokes to the harsh shadows cast by the visible clamp light. Through the monumentally romantic gesture of repeated looking and truly seeing, built on a foundation of consent and mutual respect, Gribbon crafts an allegorical figure, weaving together myth and reality in her representation of queer intimacy.

Jenna Gribbon



Examinationscape,
Jenna Gribbon, 2021, oil on canvas,
203.2 x 165.1 cm (80 x 65 in)

T THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLE MAGAZINE

IN EARLY 2021, Jordan Casteel, the painter known for her tender, exquisitely detailed oil portraits of Black men and other people of color in and around her Harlem community, made two unexpected moves. First, she relocated from New York City to a rural part of the Catskills, a far less populous place where she barely knew anyone. The second move, this one artistic but no less momentous, was that Casteel, 35, began painting pictures of flowers.

The first floral painting she made after arriving upstate was born of a moment of disorientation: Casteel was trying to determine how her practice would work, "being so far from people,

and so far from a familiar landscape," she says. While mulling over this predicament, she was spending hours tending her garden, a pastime that felt as generative to her as her art. At one point, she says, her husband, the photographer David Schulze, asked, "Why don't you make a painting of the garden?" She resisted: "Nope. Couldn't do that. Nobody cares about my garden." But in the end, she painted "Nasturtium" (2021), a stylized rendering of the plant

climbing up a wire fence, done in the incandescent, unorthodox colors (here, an almost neon violet and shades of garden greens) that Casteel often employs for human figures.

By Amanda Fortini

The following year, with "In Bloom" at Casey Kaplan gallery in New York, Casteel unveiled more florals and plants. There was the show's titular painting, a wild, verdant evocation of her capacious backyard that, with its characteristic blend of her loose and tight brushstrokes, was as precisely and lovingly evoked as the people in her Alice Neel-esque portraits; and "Daffodil" (2022), pale flowers set in a candy apple red vase on a dark wooden table, done in the cinematic, blue-tinged hues of prestige television (the palette she often uses for the skin of her Black male subjects); and "Field Balm" (2022), a small painting of bare ankles emerging from a pair of celery green Crocs (on which a "Black Lives Matter" pin has been appended) standing on mulchy ground. They're the artist's feet as self-portrait, and a wink, perhaps, to the fact that she's planted herself firmly in this new botanical subject matter. As it turned out, a lot of people, viewers and collectors and critics, *did* care about her garden.

A few months before the show opened, Casteel appeared in an interview magazine conversation with EJ Hill, the 38-year-old Los Angeles-based artist whose intensely physical, durational performances explore the racial and gendered ideas viewers hold about the human body. Like Casteel, Hill is known for making identity-focused art — whereas Casteel paints her community, Hill explores his personal experience of being Black and queer — but has recently been creating floral paintings. His first, "Joy Studies," a collection of small, whimsical works made in acrylic and crayon on wood, were on view (alongside a flamingo pink roller coaster that he designed for museumgoers to ride)

in "Brake Run Helix," his show that ran through last month at Mass MoCA. Hovering between realism and abstraction, these pieces, with their pink roses, puffy clouds and old-school amusement park rides drawn in rough, crosshatched lines, telegraph an almost childlike delight. Hill's next group of flower paintings — soft, sprightly renderings made during the height of the pandemic and shown at Oxy Arts in Los Angeles in 2022 — portray roses, daisies and daffodils in saturated pastel hues, their simple floral motifs an apparent nod to Henri Matisse, who, in his 1947 book, "Jazz," writes, "There are always flowers for those who want to see them."

STILL
Many artists who made their names in figurative, identity-driven work are now painting flowers in addition to people. Are these also portraits?

LIFE



Delton Gata's "Jardin Para Margarita" (2023).

Jennifer Packer's "Absence, a Condition" (2020).



FROM TOP: DALTON GATA, "JARDIN PARA MARGARITA," 2023. ACRYLIC ON COTTON-LINEN CANVAS © DALTON GATA, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND GALLERIA AUGUSTINA FERREIRA, SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO; JENNIFER PACKER, "ABSENCE, A CONDITION," 2020. OIL ON CANVAS © JENNIFER PACKER, COURTESY OF SNEAKY THINGS INC., NEW YORK. CORY ADAMS, LONDON

SHUTTERSTOCK/ISTOCKPHOTO.COM; NEW YORK: JENNA GIBBON, "FAKE FLOWERS IN MY KITCHEN," 2023. COURTESY OF MASSIMO DE CARLO AND DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY; PHOTO: ADAM REICH



Louis Fratino's "Large Roses" (2022-23).

"If I'm painting flowers, people have a really difficult time with it unless I'm there to explain," Hill told Casteel in Interview, expressing, in one sentence, the public's assumptions about Black artists and the kind of art they make, as well as his frustration with how reductive those expectations can be. "I was sad and tired, so I decided to buy myself flowers," reads the press release for his Oxy Arts show — a seeming allusion to the famous first line of Virginia Woolf's *"Mrs. Dalloway"* (1925). "I just hope that someone will stand still and stay quiet long enough to listen to what the work has to say for itself," Hill tells me. "It's possible I'm being too romantic about it all, but I think my job as an artist is simply to make works that reflect the time in which I live."

Are floral paintings somehow reflective of our time? Until recently, it might have seemed that figurative paintings — and portraits specifically — were the definitive works of our era, a moment focused on identity, the body and the perceptions and experiences inherent in either. One might even argue that still-life painting, in which flowers have always played a crucial cameo role, had once again quietly, if not explicitly, been relegated to the lesser, more decorative status it had occupied before the French Realists and Impressionists came along and upended old hierarchies in the 19th century. ("You know, pretty girls, flowers, you can't be serious," the 96-year-old painter Alex Katz has said, echoing this sentiment.) There are, of course, contemporary artists like Katz, Dike Blair and Ann Craven, who have long painted flowers as part of their larger oeuvre. But in the past few years the Western art world has seen a re-emergence of natural imagery and a preference for the pastoral from painters best known for paintings of friends, spouses, loved ones and neighbors, for pictures of celebrities, for self-portraits — for evocations of the human form in all its incarnations.

Take Kerry James Marshall, the 68-year-old Chicago-based artist who's celebrated for inserting the Black figure into the Western art canon starting in the early '90s, and who is widely considered one of the most important painters living today. Since 2020, he's been making paintings of birds amid colorful tumbles of flowers as part of an ongoing series, "Black and Part Black Birds in America," in which he reimagines John James Audubon's 19th-century "Birds of America" watercolors. Flowers have always had a place in Marshall's iconography, but here he forgoes the human figure completely in favor of flora and avian fauna. In the seven paintings in this series, black birds and birds with some black on them — an oblique reference to segregationists' one-drop rule of Blackness — bear an obvious metaphorical weight as they swoop among bright florals.

There's also Doron Langberg, 38, who paints luminous, lyrical evocations of friends and lovers. At Victoria Miro gallery in Venice, he's currently showing a group of grassy florals conjured with his usual swift, sensual marks, but in an earthier palette than his customary magenta, ultramarine and blood orange. Vanessa Prager, 39, who until 2022 was making pastel oil paintings of faces and figures that explored her selfhood as a woman and recalled the Pointillism of Georges Seurat, emerged in early 2023 with "Portraits" at Diane Rosenstein Gallery in Los Angeles: a series of anthropomorphic flower heads that gesture toward the Italian Mannerist Giuseppe Arcimboldo. (A new show of her colorful, exuberant blooms, "Winter Flowers," is at the Hole in New York until early March.) Daniel Gibson, 46, the Los Angeles-based artist whose childhood along the California-Mexico border informs his fantastical imagery, also has a show of floral dreamscapes, "Big Sky," at Almine Rech in TriBeCa until early March. Numerous other contemporary artists in their 30s and 40s are creating floral work, as well, Awol Erizku, Louis Fratino, Dalton Gata, Jenna Gribbon, Sam McKinniss and Wardell Milan among them.

Many of these artists have made their identities the focus of their work, by painting themselves — as queer artists or artists of color or women — into the canon. What does it mean, now, for them to turn toward plants and flowers? Is this a rebellion, a resistance to making what the public, critics and collectors expect to see? Do flowers offer a reprieve from the rigors and responsibilities of representational art, from putting the figures and faces of their communities up for consumption? Or are flowers, which have long been deployed as political symbols (think of the sunflowers adopted by American suffragists in 1867 or the red rose associated with socialism since at least the 1880s) more subversive than they appear?

WHEN CASTEEL AND I meet via Zoom in early winter, she has a new show, "Recent Landscapes," up at Casey Kaplan gallery: seven small, intimate paintings executed en plein air in her yard. The palette is light and fresh — yellow zinnias set against a green backdrop; purple pansies on a swath of punk electric pink — and the pieces feel playful, brisk and immediate. Casteel says that the move to the country was about "self-preservation and seeking a certain peacefulness and space," and that she has found both in her garden. Behind her, in the windowsill, I see a collection of small potted plants and, peering through a half-pulled



Jenna Gribbon's "Fake Flowers in My Kitchen" (2023).

shade, a sliver of that brown earth from "Field Balm." "The paintings that you saw came explicitly from my garden, where I had cultivated all those flowers," she says. The delicate specificity of each is such that you can sense the personality of the flowers: pensive sunflowers on a dreary, rainy day; an innocent, angelic pink dahlia; a pair of sexy scarlet nasturtium blooms.

While some might call this foray into plants a departure from her usual practice, Casteel says her florals represent a continuation of her prior work. She has, for instance, previously painted still lifes: There's "Memorial" (2017), in which a spray of beribboned funeral flowers sits atop a trash can on a street corner in Harlem. All of her art feels observational at its core, an act of noticing who or what often doesn't get seen. Casteel has always painted her subjects' surroundings — pictures hanging on a bedroom wall, a floral-patterned couch, a terra-cotta tile floor — with as much detail and solicitude as she has lavished on their figures. "I was often drawn to people by the way that they sat in their environments," she says. Now, the environment she's painting is quite literally her own: "Nasturtium," she tells me, "felt like the most honest self-portrait" she's ever done.

The Cuban-born, Puerto Rico-based painter Dalton Gata, 46, agrees that flora and fauna can be deeply personal. "As an immigrant, sometimes flowers, fruits, food are all easy things that make us remember where we come from: our colors, our flavors, our smells," he says. Gata, who in 2022 painted a series of unsettling figurative portraits that emphasize the alienation of passport photos, has recently been making lush, Surrealistic acrylic paintings of colorful potted florals, which he calls "as human, alive and diverse as any other character I paint." These works — one of which, "Jardín Para Margarita" (2023), will be shown at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth later this month — are all heavily inspired by his Caribbean background: "My plants are the gardens of our mothers, our aunts, our grandmothers, our neighbors; they're our parks, our balconies, our beaches, our jungles; they're us," he says.

And yet, as personal as flowers can be for the artist who paints them, and as much meaning as they hold for a particular place or a culture, they're obviously not people. "That's one of the nice things about painting a flower," says Jenna Gribbon, 45, who's celebrated for her explicitly queer female portraits and whose next solo show opens at Los Angeles's David Kordansky Gallery in September. "No one is concerned with the agency or objectification of a flower, or with perpetuating unrealistic beauty standards in a flower." Gribbon's 2023 solo show, "A Domestic Cast," at Massimo De Carlo gallery in Hong Kong, featured, among her unflinchingly intimate large-scale portraits of her wife, the musician Mackenzie Scott; Gribbon's 13-year-old son, Silas; and the artist herself, three moody paintings of flowers in vases set on tables in their Brooklyn home. All were executed *alla prima* (a technique also known as wet on wet, where paint is applied to the canvas in a single sitting) in her sensuous, dreamily lit, nouveau Impressionistic style. "It's nice to freely indulge in the beauty of the thing, which is a lot more complicated when you're painting people," Gribbon says. "A lot of us make work that gets sort of bogged down in identity politics, and it can be a respite from that."

Casteel believes that we are seeing a strategic move away from portraiture: "There are many of us who came up at a heightened moment of Black figuration, pushing against those bounds." The relentless focus on the figure, she explains, is too limiting to encompass the expansiveness of her practice and those of her peers. "We're thinking about composition. We're thinking about color and light and form and telling a story," she says. "That often gets overlooked."

Daniel Gibson, whose riotously colorful paintings are populated by anthropomorphized flowers of the imagination, has thought a lot about the ethics of portraying a real person in a work of art, particularly when one is painting marginalized people. The Mexican American artist, who grew up in Plaster City, Calif., where his father worked in the local gypsum plant, and in the nearby town of El Centro, remembers watching immigrants cross the Mexican border, just as his own parents had. "I knew where they would hide," he says. "I also knew they never wanted their faces shown." In his elemental, almost mystical paintings, flowers often stand in for human beings and appear alongside other symbolic imagery like butterflies, clouds and mountains in the desert landscape of his childhood. Gibson says that when he "started to want to talk about people crossing and the struggles they went through," portraiture seemed too exploitative. "I didn't feel right selling a painting to hang on a rich person's wall. It just felt way too weird. But I needed to tell a story, so I turned them into flowers."

SO MANY ARTISTS have painted flowers that one could write an alternative history of art by studying these pictures: Claude Monet's ethereal, sun-dappled water lilies floating on the light-reflecting pond at his home and studio in Giverny, France; Vincent van Gogh's thick, tactile impasto sunflowers and irises — representations



Jordan Casteel's "Garden (Pansy)" (2023).



Doron Langberg's "Yokneam 5" (2023).

FROM TOP: JORDAN CASTEEL, "GARDEN (PANSY)" (2023); DALTON GATA, "JARDÍN PARA MARGARITA" (2023); DANIEL GIBSON, "YOKNEAM 5" (2023). ART BY JORDAN CASTEEL, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND CASSEY KAPLAN, NEW YORK. PHOTO: GIAN BRACCIO, DORON LANGBERG, "YOKNEAM 5" (2023). ART BY DORON LANGBERG, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND VICTORIA ARRI



Sam McKinniss's "White Roses and Pink Roses in a Footed Glass (After Fantin-Latour)" (2023).



Kerry James Marshall's "Black and Part Black Birds in America (Grackle, Cardinal and Rose-Breasted Grosbeak)" (2020).

of the artist's turbulent emotions — and Georgia O'Keeffe's magnified, tumescent, suggestive blooms. More recently, the 39-year-old New York-based painter Jennifer Packer has reinvented the still life as funerary bouquet — several artists I spoke with cited her as an influence. In these pieces, a delicate, melancholy beauty, rendered with a poetic calibration of fluidity and exactitude, is often used to mourn the loss of Black life.

"I feel like anyone who makes a floral painting today is already in dialogue with the painters of the past, whether intended or not," Hill says. "I want to be part of art history; I want to be in the soup," Gibson tells me. Gribbon cites as a reference "The Last Flowers of Manet," an elegant book about the 16 small floral paintings that Édouard Manet made in the winter of 1880, three years before he died. You can see the influence of Manet on Gribbon's floral works — in the silvery reflections off the glass vases, and in the softness of the brushstrokes that conjure the velvety petals, as short-lived as any tender moment of domesticity.

Temporality, mortality, the fragility of beauty and life: These are the great themes of art and literature, and they're all embodied in the life span of a flower. Perhaps for these reasons, floral imagery has "preoccupied queer artists for a long time," Langberg says. Ross Bleckner, Joe Brainard, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Keith Haring, David Hockney, Jim Hodges, Robert Mapplethorpe and Andy Warhol all explored the symbolic and aesthetic possibilities of flowers, a lineage that Langberg thinks about often when making his own work. In many of his paintings, he depicts the landscape of New York's Fire Island — where he sketches outdoors in the Meat Rack, a gay cruising area that's also a natural expanse of sand dunes, brambly shrubs and fairy-tale trees — and "random patches of grass or dried-up sunflowers" in Yokneam Moshava, the town in Israel where he grew up. Flowers offer "an opportunity to really indulge in a subject that's already so indulgent," he says. "To me, that kind of indulgence in pleasure and beauty is the queerness of those paintings."

While younger artists like Langberg see in flowers an affirmation of life's possibilities, an older generation saw the ephemerality of existence. Indeed, the last time flower paintings had a moment akin to the current one was arguably in the '80s and early '90s, against the backdrop of the AIDS epidemic. In Bleckner's haunting, spectral, scraped-away paintings of that era, flowers function as metaphors for death, often resembling blood cells under a microscope; likewise, in the series of five bold

Pop-graffiti floral prints that Haring made months before he died in 1990 of complications from the disease. Such works recall the vanitas and memento mori paintings of the 17th-century Dutch and Flemish masters, in which flowers denote the fleetingness of life and the folly of material desire.

For some artists, the decision to paint flowers is simply about tapping into their dazzling allure: seductive colors, fleshy textures, shapely forms. Prager, who lives in Glendale, Calif., says that in 2022, with two small boys and a third baby on the way, she was "still in shock about the world," waiting for it to return to its prepandemic state, when she had an epiphany: "I knew that the world was different, and it was going to be that way and I was just going to do my part, basically, to make it beautiful." Her whimsical floral busts, which she renders in her signature sculptural impasto technique and vibrant Southern California palette of bougainvillea magentas, jacaranda purples and palm frond greens, are her attempt to share a hopeful vision for the future: "To me, this was the most obvious way to do it: with the sheer beauty and joy that flowers hold so universally."

"Beauty," as the American critic Dave Hickey once wrote, "is and always will be blue skies and open highway." Whether we want to admit it or not, it's a powerful, exhilarating, galvanizing, transformative force. It could even be said that flowers, with all their in-your-face glamour, are in fact slyly radical. Sam McKinniss, 39, who paints uncannily realistic works of iconic cultural images — Prince seated on his "Purple Rain"-era motorcycle; Joan Didion with her spooky oversize sunglasses — has, since 2010, also been making "copies," to use his word, of floral still lifes by the 19th-century French painter Henri Fantin-Latour. McKinniss, who divides his time between New York City and Litchfield County, Conn., tells me that one reason he started painting Fantin-Latour's flowers was "to assert style as a political tool." Then he shares an anecdote: Some years ago, he and a friend went to a group show at a Lower East Side gallery, where there were "paintings of flowers done in a kind of hyperpop, ultramannered way — like big, flashy paintings of flowers," he recalls. McKinniss thought they looked pretty good, but his friend, who, as McKinniss puts it, "fancied himself an intellectual," said, "Yeah, but they don't do anything." McKinniss pauses for effect. "And I thought, 'What did you expect them to do?' It's a painting. It's just there on the wall looking great. What else does it need to do?"

1

Jenna Gribbon

What Am I Doing Here? I Should Ask You the Same

2022

Oil on linen, 48 × 36 in. (121.9 × 91.4 cm)

Brant Foundation, Greenwich, Connecticut

Straw-blond hair frames the subject's impassive face. The expression is stern, with brows furrowed and chin set, cold blue-green eyes trained forward. Flecks of white paint on the tip of the nose and around the eyes mark where the strong lamplight reflects on pink skin, while below, the flesh of the neck, breasts, and abdomen is paler, punctuated by one of Gribbon's signature neon-pink nipples and by the contours of breasts and a crease in the belly. Laid on splayed legs, two hands, each adorned with three rings, are set off against the deep purple of velvet pants, matched to the blazer above, itself encased by a red velvet coat draped over the shoulders. More velvet—the green fabric seat of the chair—forms a triangle below the figure, its apex pointing up between the legs.

The sitter is Gribbon's partner, Mackenzie, a near-constant subject in the artist's work. In the domestic setting of the home the couple share, mundane features like baby-blue walls, a radiator, and the wood floor contrast with the ostentatious and somewhat dramatic appearance of the figure. A shadow looms above, cast on the door behind. The intensity of light evokes a scene of interrogation or examination, or the blinding spotlight on an actor on stage. The subject is seated frontally and facing the viewer, like an enthroned Madonna in Christian art. In art-historical terms, the pose is called *in maestà*, meaning "in majesty." In a seated position and exposing one breast, the figure recalls the sacred image type of the Maria Lactans, the nursing Madonna (fig. 9), but without the baby and demure countenance.

Displayed at Frick Madison alongside Hans Holbein the Younger's portrait of Thomas Cromwell (fig. 10), Gribbon's painting temporarily replaced Holbein's *Sir Thomas More* (see fig. 16). The installation interrupted the century-old pairing of the two men's portraits in the Frick's galleries, their profiles facing each other as if as equals, though they were enemies. The turn of Gribbon's figure to face the viewer—rather than in profile to mirror *Thomas Cromwell*—denies a visual exchange between peers. Turning away from Cromwell, Gribbon's subject asserts a higher status and addresses the viewer. As if to mimic the tension between More's and Cromwell's portraits, Gribbon creates an exchange between Mackenzie and the viewer, complicated further by the painting's title. *What Am I Doing Here? I Should Ask You the Same* anticipates criticism and questions of validity—of the artist, subject, and beholder—and reflects the artist's consideration of individual human encounters with the painting in this gallery space. It also exposes the assumed validity and belonging of artists like Holbein and subjects like More and Cromwell in storied institutions like the Frick.



What Am I Doing Here? I Should Ask You the Same



Fig. 9. Gerard David, *Virgin and Child*, 1470–1510. Oil on panel, 16 $\frac{3}{8}$ $\times$ 14 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (44.2 $\times$ 36.9 cm). Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

Gribbon presents an excess of velvets in three jewel tones, a plethora of rings, the irreverence of a neon nipple—in contrast to the buttoned-up men painted by Holbein. “I decided to play up these seductive features to the level of camp,” Gribbon says, paying tribute to camp as a “cornerstone of the Queer aesthetic.” In this regard, Gribbon’s exaggeration and humor are a reminder of the instability of symbols, of the shifts in meaning of an object or gesture in different contexts. For example, though they appear as respectable markers of status and wealth in the sixteenth-century *Sir Thomas More*, puffy red velvet sleeves, ornate gold chains, and fur-lined jackets have different associations in twentieth- and twenty-first-century cultures and fashions and for some modern viewers may align with camp and Queer aesthetics. Inspired by Holbein’s meticulous attention to detail, Gribbon creates illusions of tactility of flesh, hair, and fabric. Whereas Holbein’s extreme fineness in paint application seems to efface the hand of the artist, Gribbon’s efficient, broad brushstrokes instead create convincing illusions while leaving evidence of facture, of the hand holding the brush.

The circulation and experience of images through social media—its aesthetics, voyeuristic elements, and the visual relationships between image and text, among other things—informs Gribbon’s practice. In contrast to this, the physical setting of Gribbon’s work at Frick Madison (the “here” referred to in the painting’s title) activates the work. Only here, standing before the painting on the second floor of Frick Madison, adjacent to the sixteenth-century *Thomas Cromwell*, and apprehending Gribbon’s title, one is prompted to become aware of oneself and to consider what one is doing in that place. The site of viewing becomes part of the painting’s experience. Gribbon continued

What Am I Doing Here? I Should Ask You the Same



Fig. 10. Hans Holbein the Younger, *Thomas Cromwell*, 1532–33. Oil on oak panel, 30 $\frac{3}{4}$ $\times$ 25 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (78.1 $\times$ 64.1 cm). The Frick Collection, New York



Fig. 11. Installation view of *Living Histories*.
Left: Jenna Gribbon, *What Am I Doing Here? I Should Ask You the Same*, 2022 (cat. 1).
Right: Hans Holbein the Younger, *Thomas Cromwell*, 1532–33 (fig. 10).

What Am I Doing Here? I Should Ask You the Same

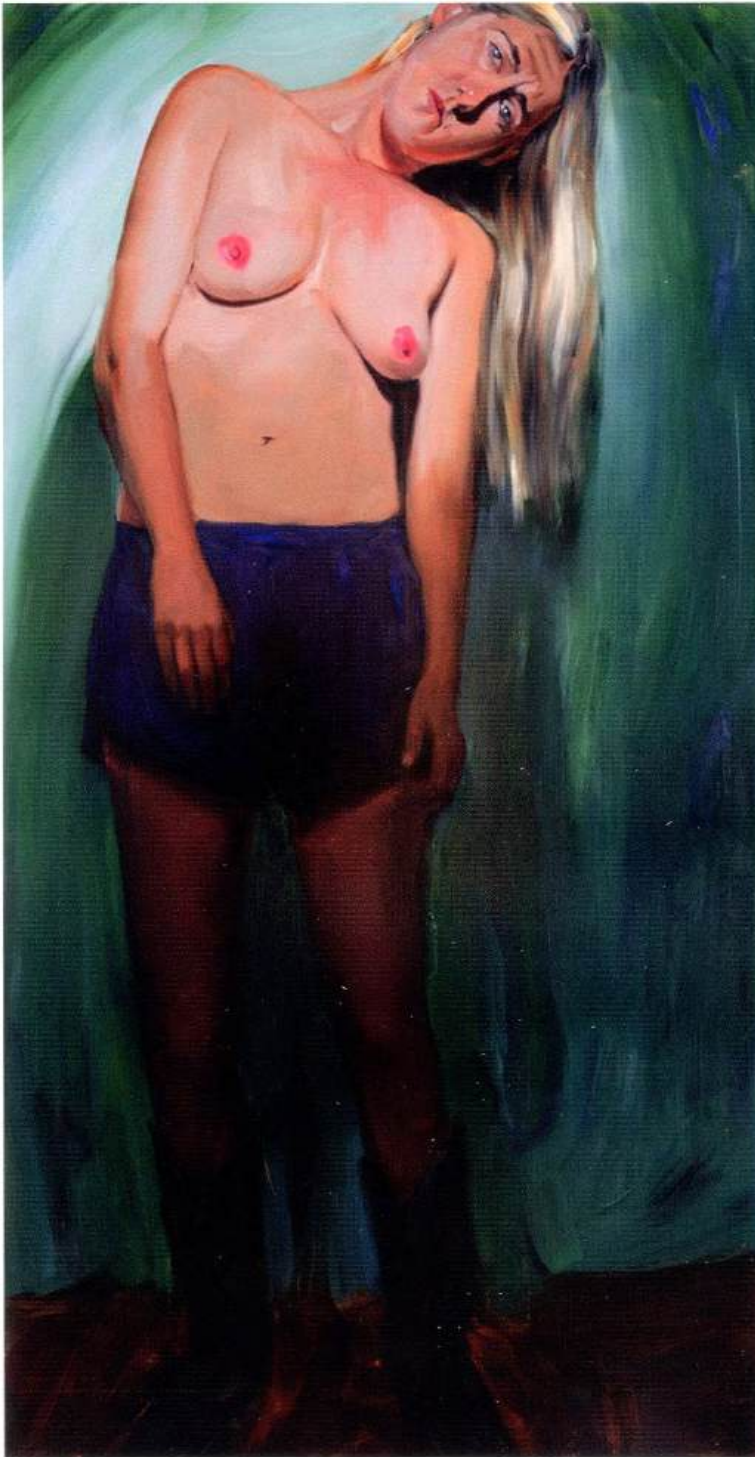


Fig. 12. Jenna Gribbon.
Too Big for the Painting, 2022.
Oil on linen, 80 × 42 in.
(203.2 × 106.7 cm). Collection
Aishti Foundation, Lebanon

to explore the limits and possibilities of the physical experience of painting in a subsequent 2022 exhibition at the Isaac Bell House in Newport, Rhode Island.¹ Set in a room of a Gilded Age Newport mansion, her *Too Big for the Painting* (fig. 12) presents a topless Mackenzie contorted within the bounds of the painting's edges, a reflection on physicality, on viewers' expectations, and on transgressing the norms of portraiture (these tensions were amplified by its display adjacent to a work by John Currin of a nude woman with enormous, comically inflated breasts).

It is central to the installation of *What Am I Doing Here? I Should Ask You the Same*—both in the context of the meager representation of women artists in collections of European art like the Frick and in the historic context of Holbein, More, Cromwell, and the king they worked for, Henry VIII, whose dispensing of wives has long served as the background of a story about men and power—that the artist and subject are women. Gribbon asserts her subject's presence in ways very different from the demure portraits of women typical in Holbein's time and for centuries later. That artist and subject are Queer women and partners further underscores the painting's tensions with history, denying the dominance of heteronormative power structures and patriarchy. All the while, Gribbon's work remains seductive, its color, forms, and illusions of lush materials and impeccable white flesh pointing to the fraught and enduring tension between conventions of beauty and depictions of women. AN

Note

1. Installation view of *Pictus Porrectus: Reconsidering the Full-Length Portrait*, Isaac Bell House, July 1–October 2, 2022.



Jenna Gribbon

in Conversation with Legacy Russell

LEGACY RUSSELL — Perhaps the best place to start is with the title of your painting, *What Am I Doing Here? I Should Ask You the Same*. Can you unpack that a bit?

JENNA GRIBBON — The title is meant to be open-ended in that you’re not sure if it refers to me or the subject. It kind of refers to both of us because when you see a portrait in a museum, I think one of the first things you think about is who that person is and why they got to be there. My intention was to make the painting a little confrontational in that way and also to put the viewer in a position where they’re questioning their usual role in consuming a portrait in a museum and what it means to consume a portrait in a museum. Seeing this Queer woman in this confrontational position with this confrontational expression raises a lot of questions. A lot of questions I wanted to pose came from my own feelings about being included in this space. Museums are really aspirational spaces for me. As a child, I never went to art museums, so I carry with me such gratitude for even getting to enter one, and the idea of exhibiting in one is almost mind-boggling. When I was approached to do this project, it was kind of unbelievable. It triggered a bit of imposter syndrome: “Do I deserve to be in the space? Is this really going to happen?”

While the “I should ask you the same” part of the title is confrontational, it’s also an invitation because I really want to ask you the same. I want to ask the viewer, “What are you doing here? And what are your experiences with museums?” Maybe some people have spent their lives going to museums and not really thinking about their role as consumers of art. Maybe it’s just an interesting thing to contemplate, and maybe many museum visitors have never been asked to interrogate their own role in this dynamic before.

LR — Growing up in New York, I did go to museums, but I was always very much aware of not being able to see myself in some of these uptown spaces. In entering a place like the Frick, you are hyperaware of the way in which there are so many people in the room but how so few of them, if any, look like you. So, for me, this idea of speaking as a Black woman, as a Queer-identified woman, is really important in the context of the imposter syndrome. Your work being at the Frick is this incredibly decadent, gorgeous, strategic, volatile proposition. It allows the institution to do something different in a way that is nonetheless super historical. And, of course, with the artists who are in the series—Doron and Salman, you and Toyin—this is a really important moment to grapple with

Jenna Gribbon

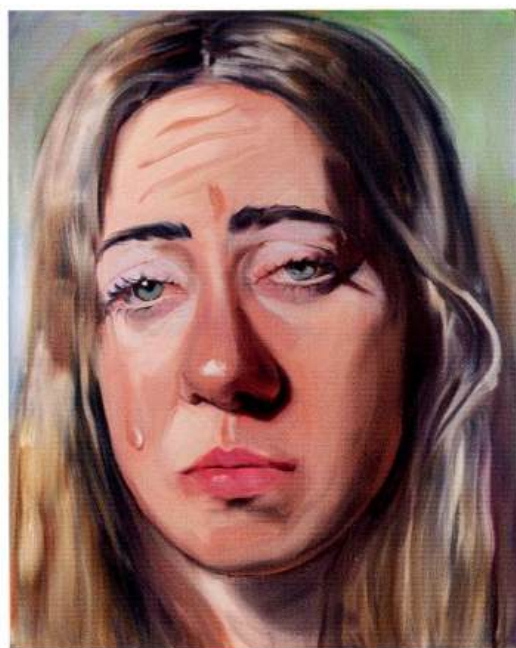


Fig. 13. Jenna Gribbon, *Fake cry*, 2022. Oil on linen, 80 × 64 in. (203 × 162.5 cm). Private collection

the histories of subjecthood, of representation, of Queerness, of visibility. So the presence of your painting does this important, intimate work of bringing folks into this question of “What am I doing here? I should ask you the same.” Can you talk a little bit more about what this question means?

JG — There are so many paintings at the Frick that I have looked to over the years and so many artists who are my painting heroes. But it’s complicated because there are almost no women in the collection. So I wanted to deal with that but also express how much I love the collection. I wanted to show the reality of that complicated relationship.

I also wanted to embed in the painting a bit of institutional critique—something that doesn’t really exist in the core collection. Everyone is very pleased with themselves and not questioning anything. Everyone’s like, “Oh, it’s great, this world of no women or people of color or Queer people. We’re all very happy sitting here with our placid expressions and our nice clothes, and no one is poor.” But it’s a weird world to walk around in. You walk around at the Frick, and you’re like, “What is this reality?” This doesn’t reflect any reality I’ve ever lived in. I’m sure it didn’t reflect the reality that these people lived in either.

LR — Even though your painting is in a public space, there’s a privacy that is created, almost as a kind of secret, encrypted exchange. That provides an opportunity to ask questions about what it means to participate in being represented and have that be an empowered experience versus something that feels more extractive. What has that felt like, being somebody who is female-identified, who is Queer, doing that act of representation and having

that be a participatory exchange that allows for everybody to come to the table in a way that feels equitable.

JG — Choosing my partner as the subject was important (figs. 12–14) because I know her so intimately, and I know how she sees herself, how she likes to be seen. Throughout the process, she can tell me how she feels about things; so it's very collaborative and participatory. The other thing is that my partner is a performer, a musician, and also something of a public figure; so the work ends up being a lot about public versus private. My paintings vacillate between depictions of private moments that are kind of stolen and more about intimacy and others that are more performative, like this one. A lot of times you can tell that I'm working in that performative sphere because I'll use dramatic lighting that's glaring and almost like a spotlight, as opposed to natural light or light that looks convincingly domestic.

LR — You have the sitter posed theatrically in this decadent purple velvet—with her jacket open and a nipple exposed. Everything else in the frame might tell us that this is a real image, but there's something about the hypersaturated colors that brings a deep intensity of character, of eroticism, of fantasy. Seeing your amazing painting at the Frick helps us understand just how staged so many other works are.

JG — Some of the biggest questions of our time are, "What are we looking at? Is it real or is it fake?" The line between fiction and reality is so blurred now. I often like to highlight the artificiality of the painting with this over-the-top, bright, almost theatrical lighting. So even though the sitter is in this domestic setting—in our home—she's in this extremely bright light that makes the clothes brighter. And this theatricality ties it into the Queer aesthetic of camp and theatricality and fantasy, which I wanted to reference. As a Queer person, I find fantasy so important, because in terms of representation—especially lesbian representation—there's so little of it that fantasy is required just to imagine yourself as a part of anything or to be able to see yourself in relation to a fictional character, for example. I enjoy going through the museum and looking at everything through a camp lens because so many of those images are completely over the top. It's a very lighthearted, loving, and humorous way to go through the museum and experience those works. Through my painting, I want to encourage viewers to think about some of the other paintings in that

Jenna Gribbon

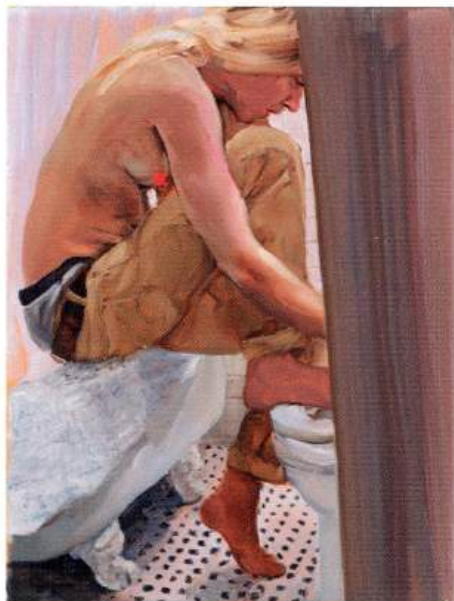


Fig. 14. Jenna Gribbon, *Toe nail trim*, 2021. Oil on linen, 12 × 9 in. (30.5 × 22.9 cm). Private collection

way also, to be like, all this velvet is pretty ridiculous, and all of these jewels are really over the top, and that hat is silly or whatever. Once you look at one painting that way, you can look at them all that way. There's a lot of drama.

LR — This may be a tricky question, but I'm wondering if there is any spiritualism in your painting practice?

JG — Art fills a part of my life much the way religion does for others. Painting is very meditative for me. And, obviously, my partner and I have a very spiritual connection, which I hope comes through in the painting. There's definitely something alchemical about the exchange between her creative force and mine, and I don't think it's an accident that my work ignited in a different kind of way when we began our relationship. But the painting isn't religious in any way that Thomas More would recognize. Another thing that's important in terms of your question is that she's too unashamed to have the religious affiliation that most of the people in that gallery have, which is a mostly Catholic version of religion and full of shame. Most of the women depicted in the Frick's collection are blushing demurely. When I paint women blushing, I want it to be clear they're blushing out of pleasure. Mackenzie's face, though, is almost drained of color. There's nothing coy or demure about her. And she's completely unabashed in her power and her sexuality, in her nakedness. She's very clearly not wearing her hair-shirt.

LR — Yeah, there is no hair-shirt in the image, and More definitely was a fan of the hair-shirt. Something that I've watched grow over time is the celebration of your practice as the images of your work travel online. Can you talk about that?

JG — So much culture in our time takes place on the Internet, and I don't think that's a bad thing. If your work isn't being disseminated in that sphere, then maybe it's not really relevant to what our time is thinking about. So I'm very happy that my work translates well and communicates something to people in that sphere. But I'm a painter who makes these physical objects, so I'm always happy for people to have the experience of engaging with the physical object, seeing the surface of the painting, and feeling the physicality of the paint. The Frick really prioritizes that experience. Going to see a painting at the Frick is like an old-school pilgrimage. That's very different from just scrolling through, coming across the painting, pondering it for a few seconds, and then moving on, and you aren't even allowed to take photos, so you have to be very present and commit the works to memory with only your eyes and bodily experience. I really value the opportunity to have people engage with my work in that really deep, meaningful way that I think is only possible in person.

LR — Can you talk about what painting has given you in the context of these rich traditions, some of which are inside the walls of the Frick and some of which reside beyond them and probably would never enter into that space.

JG — I grew up in a family that didn't have art books, in a part of the country that didn't have many museums. I didn't see any paintings in real life until I was twelve or thirteen. So it was a revelation to discover, through painting, this whole other world that existed outside of my world. It gave me the gift of possibility. It was like if this could exist, then anything is possible, like there's a whole world outside of what I know. And that's so hopeful for a child. That's what painting has given me.

LR — As a last question, what do you imagine as the future of this painting as it goes beyond the walls of the Frick, as it takes on other lives?

JG — The painting is going to the Brant Foundation, where it will pose very different questions. It's so interesting to think about what we want to get out of our experience when we go to a museum and what I, as the artist, want people to walk away with after encountering my work and spending time with it. Thinking about those questions will carry over into all future projects. It's in the work, and it will continue to be.

The New York Times

The Artists Depicting the Power and Strangeness of Breasts

New generations of women painters are challenging centuries of art history with their nuanced, empathetic renderings of bare-chested bodies.



Hayv Kahraman's *Boob Gold* (2018) is one of several works by the artist addressing the objectification of immigrants and refugees.
© Hayv Kahraman. Courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, and Vielmetter, Los Angeles

By Zoë Lescaze
May 16, 2023

Women's breasts have been a fixation of Western artists since Western art began. The prehistoric sculptor who carved a hunk of mammoth ivory into the “Venus of Hohle Fels” — the earliest known depiction of a human being, unearthed in Germany in 2008 — gave her proportions fit for the pages of Jugs magazine. Since then, male artists have portrayed breasts as erotic objects, fonts of nourishment and sometimes both at once, as in the case of racy Baroque depictions of the Roman virtue Caritas as a young woman nursing her father. Bare-chested women have represented our brightest political ideals (as in the French Romantic painter Eugène Delacroix's 1830 allegorical work “Liberty Leading the People”) but also our worst transgressions: In medieval European art, lust

often appeared as a woman with snakes biting her breasts, an allusion to their supposedly ruinous seductive power. Indeed, these humble mounds of tissue, as the feminist scholar Marilyn Yalom writes in her 1998 book, "A History of the Breast," have long been the focal points for various desires: "Babies see food. Men see sex. Doctors see disease. Businessmen see dollar signs."



Bare-breasted women have served as allegories for political causes in paintings such as *Liberty Leading the People* (1830) by Eugène Delacroix. © 2013 RMN-Grand Palais (Louvre Museum). Photo: Michel Urtad

But what do female painters see? It was only in the early 20th century that women began to regularly depict their own nude bodies. In 1906, the German artist Paula Modersohn-Becker, who had recently left her husband to pursue a bohemian life in Paris, scandalized viewers with two portraits of herself wearing little more than a favorite amber necklace. The French model turned painter Suzanne Valadon began to produce nude self-portraits in 1917 and continued to do so as she aged — a radical pursuit then as now. By the end of the century, the American artist Joan Semmel had taken the project of women regarding their own bodies to its logical extension by painting first-person views of herself — incandescent landscapes of pink and other flesh in which breasts dominate the foreground — and the British artist Jenny Saville had launched a career depicting, with urgent slashes and stippled patches of oil paint, bulging breasts that flop and sag on bodies that defy mainstream standards of beauty.



Left: the German artist Paula Modersohn-Becker was the first woman known to have painted and exhibited nude self-portraits, including "Self-Portrait on Sixth Wedding Anniversary" (1906). Right: the French model turned artist Suzanne Valadon's "Autoportrait aux Seins Nus (Topless Self-Portrait)" (1931), currently part of a retrospective exhibition at the Centre Pompidou-Metz. From left: Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum, Bremen; © Akg-Images

When women paint nude women, it's often said that they are "reversing" the male gaze that has dominated art history. But the reality is more complex, and the range of perspectives among these artists is broader than this shorthand would suggest. New generations of painters are depicting breasts in unorthodox shapes and colors, adding them to figures who are not necessarily female and challenging other conventions, both social and stylistic. We might think we know what a breast looks like, but even the most basic preconceptions falter in much of their work.

"In some ways there are parallels between my gaze and the male gaze," says the Brooklyn-based artist Jenna Gribbon, 44, who mostly paints her spouse, the musician Mackenzie Scott. "There is a sexual and romantic component to my depictions of my wife. But the difference is, as a woman, I'm painting her from a deep well of experience of knowing what it is to be seen and regarded and to have my image consumed." Tall and blond, Scott appears semi-undressed or fully naked in everyday domestic settings — hunched over a laptop on the couch in one canvas, clipping her toenails above the toilet in another — and in more theatrical tableaux involving harsh lights, mirrors, blindfolds and green-screen backdrops. In all these works, Gribbon renders Scott's nipples in a searing shade of fluorescent pink, a hue so electric, it makes the viewer inescapably aware of themselves as a voyeur and, Gribbon hopes, more empathetic with the person on display.



Jenna Gribbon paints her wife, the musician Mackenzie Scott, with fluorescent pink nipples, infusing domestic scenes such as *Toe Nail Trim* (2021) with a dash of science fiction. Courtesy of the artist and David Kordansky Gallery

Hayv Kahraman, 42, who was born in Baghdad and now lives in Los Angeles, remembers wandering the halls of Florentine museums as a young woman, surrounded by pale painted bodies with small, spherical breasts. "I was so enamored with that aesthetic," she says. "I still thought Europe was the epitome." Kahraman spent her adolescent years in Sweden, where she perfected a

Stockholm accent and bleached her dark hair blond, and in her 20s, this cultural dissonance unleashed a hybrid avatar in her work: an alluring, almond-eyed woman with a jet black unibrow, white skin and impossibly round breasts. She has rendered the character as an acrobat, whose body contorts without breaking, and with breasts mutating into the mortars Kahrtaman saw on the streets of Baghdad as a child — a comment on the idea of being “at war with one’s own body.” Breasts become weapons in less literal ways in other works. The woman in “Boob Gold,” an oil painting on wood from 2018, stares defiantly back at us as she tugs open her dress to expose a coin slot, the kind you might find on a donation box, at the center of her chest. The work addresses what Kahraman sees as the exploitative dimensions of humanitarian aid. “Your body becomes a spectacle,” she says. “But on the other side, she’s exuding this power.” Sexual objectification may be an unavoidable condition of being a woman, especially one seen as exotic by the West, but Kahraman suggests it comes with its own forms of strength.



Left: Sarah Slappey, who painted *Cloud Tangle* (2020), has chafed against erotic interpretations of her work. Right: nipple hairs are proudly on display in the work of Larissa De Jesús Negrón, including *Soy Libre Mami* (2023). From left: courtesy of the artist and Sargent's Daughters; courtesy of the artist.

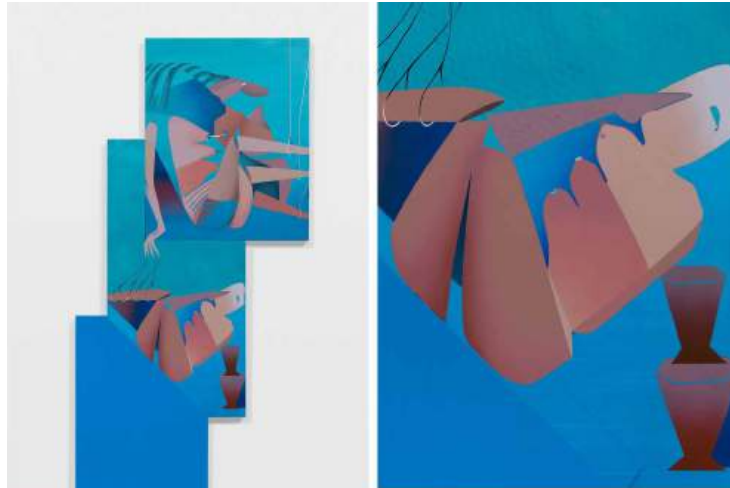
Not all artists painting breasts are interested in them as sexual objects, but their erotic associations can be difficult to shake. In 2020, the American artist Sarah Slappey, 39, exhibited a series of surreal canvases in which disembodied arms, creamy lozenges and liquid tendrils collide with petal pink breasts resembling long balloons, complete with puffy areolas and noodle-like, upturned nipples. Some breasts ooze drops of milk that morph into strings of pearls. Slappey, who painted these works after night feeding her nephew with a bottle for several weeks, was thinking about the transformation of nipples after childbirth, and the mingled pleasure and pain of being in a woman’s body (she compares it to a “cupcake full of thumbtacks”). Still, viewers were quick to read the tangles of rosy limbs as erotic. “Maybe in our language we don’t have enough separation between eroticism and sensuality or touch and the body, so people just overlap them too much,” says Slappey. “Or people just like sex.” Frustrated, she took a temporary break from breasts to focus on ankles and hands.



In oil paintings such as *Figure and Monstera* (2022), Somaya Critchlow imbues her subjects with a sense of interiority and unapologetic sensuality. © Somaya Critchlow. Courtesy of the artist, private collection, London, and Maximilian William, London. Photo: Prudence Cuming Associates

The British artist Somaya Critchlow, 30, who depicts Black women with big hair and pneumatic breasts in compact oil paintings saturated with warm earth tones and jewel-hued shadows, has similarly expressed exasperation with one-note readings of her work. "People try to position my work as being sex-positive or political or whatever — and it's not, it's just investigative," she told *The Guardian*. Her subjects might lie back luxuriously or bend forward, squeezing their breasts together, like pinup girls, but they also tend to exude a strong sense of interiority — mingled states of ambivalence, mischief and desire that make them whole human beings. Endowing them with exaggerated breasts is a provocation to the viewer to move past the obvious. "I'm just going to blow this up as big and silly as I can," she told one journalist, and still "make it a serious painting. And what can you say to me about that?"

Larissa De Jesús Negrón, 28, renders breasts more realistically than some of her peers, using airbrushed acrylic and soft pastels to create subtle gradients of color, but they also speak, in her work, to the ways in which selves can transform. Raised in a devout Christian family in Puerto Rico with what she describes as "really harsh rules revolving around being modest and not showing too much skin," she began painting naked women as a teenage rebellion. Soon it became a form of therapy. "I was able to process a lot of self-hate and shame that I felt around my body, and nudity in particular," she says. Now based in Queens, De Jesús Negrón portrays herself, in all-consuming bouts of worry, spells of serene self-acceptance and ambiguous moods somewhere in between, flaunting the nipple hairs her mother once told her to pluck. In "*Soy Libre Mami*" (2023), a close-up view of a single breast in shades of green and mauve, the curlicue strands form cursive letters spelling the first two words of the title. Translation: "I'm free."



According to the artist Maryam Hoseini, breasts are “a place of transformation” in many of her works, including *Hello-Goodbye Bad Dreams* (2020), above left. At right, a detail of the painting. Courtesy of the artist and Green Art Gallery, Dubai. Photo: Lance Brewer

Queer painters, perhaps because they understand better than most that body parts aren’t always reliable indications of identity, are creating some of the most original images of breasts, ones that topple assumptions and rigid categories. The New York-based Iranian artist Maryam Hoseini, 34, depicts breasts without necessarily depicting women. Some of the headless figures in her paintings — bodies composed of flat, interlocking shapes inhabiting science fiction landscapes and fragmented rooms rendered in vivid shades of violet, teal and acidic blue — have three or more. Others have needle-sharp nipples or geometric voids instead. “For me, breasts are a place of transformation,” says Hoseini, whose desire to imagine alternative, futuristic worlds in art reflects, among other things, her experiences with restrictive laws dictating gender expression and sexuality in Iran. “I use them in a way to subvert this power structure, as a place to empower my figures.”



Christina Quarles, whose work *They'll Cut Us Down Again* (2020) is pictured here, observes that factors beyond sex and gender, including age and weight, can determine the presence or absence of breasts. © Christina Quarles. Courtesy of the artist, Hauser & Wirth and Pilar Corrias, London. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen

The 38-year-old Los Angeles-based painter Christina Quarles, whose riotously unpredictable figures embrace, merge and collide in kaleidoscopic environments of gestural shapes and patterns, is always amused when critics call her characters women just because they have what look like breasts. "Sometimes, gender is the last thing in the world that's indicated by a breast," says the artist, who regularly attends life drawing classes and references a range of different models with each figure she paints. A woman whose fair skin belies her multiracial heritage, Quarles is acutely aware that physical features can be misleading. "Boobs are an interesting marker of gender because they interact with age and weight so much," she says. "I think, regardless of your gender identity, it's a part of your body that does shift over time." Her figures have breasts that dangle low, point skyward or sink into what might be rolls of flesh or stacks of ribs.

When Quarles was pursuing her M.F.A. at Yale University, a teacher once told her, "The boobs in your paintings are like the eyes: the windows to the soul." She remembers thinking this "was kind of a weird thing to say," but that it "may be true in some ways." Depictions of breasts — objects of both obsessive fascination and strict social control — have long provided insight into the mores and politics of their time. But in the work of these painters, breasts also communicate something more personal; not simply metaphors for larger ideas, they give form to individual experiences. They are weird, unruly and sometimes playful. If this work conjures something universal, it's the constant flux of flesh — the bizarre phenomenon of being in a body that is changing by the second.

CULTURED

Artists Jenna Gribbon, Mickalene Thomas, and Lily Stockman on How Motherhood Has Impacted Their Work

"I am an artist. I am a woman. I am a wife. I am a mother (random order)," Mierle Laderman Ukeles wrote in her 1969 "Maintenance Art Manifesto." Motherhood is a broad canvas, but it often demands similar traits as art-making: resilience, patience, and originality, to name a few. Ahead of Mother's Day, hear from some of CULTURED's favorite artists about the dialogue between parenthood and their respective practices.

WORDS

Sarah Harrelson

May 12, 2023



Photography by Dani Okon. Images courtesy of Jenna Gribbon.

Jenna Gribbon

How has being a mother informed your art practice in unexpected ways?

Being an artist is about having open channels and tapping into them. Motherhood is an incredible channel opener. There's also this shedding of ego in certain ways that's helpful. As a mother, you have to get used to some states of being you would've found embarrassing before. Not getting easily embarrassed is completely invaluable in art making.

How have you handled the delicate balance of being a working mother?

I think part of it is to not treat it too delicately. Things will get messy and that's OK. You're juggling eggs and occasionally you drop one. I have this mantra when I'm overwhelmed. I just repeat to myself, "It's all getting done," and it's miraculously true. The important eggs rarely fall.



Photography by Mackenzie Scott.

What are the lessons you learned from your mother that you hope to also impart to your child?

My mom is a fighter. She's always willing to speak up in the face of injustice or on behalf of someone with less of a voice. She's also always helping someone. She and my stepdad adopted four kids from the foster care system. I hope I can instill in my son a sense of responsibility to his community and a willingness to fight on behalf of the most vulnerable among us.

VOGUE

The Female Gaze

When Jenna Gribbon met musician Mackenzie Scott, it changed the way she thought about painting—and the possibilities for female portraiture. By Dodie Kazanjian. Photographed by Clément Pascal.

Jenna Gribbon's life as a figurative painter made a sharp turn in 2017, when she was 38. "It took me so long to understand myself and my sexuality," she tells me, "and that could be attributed in large part to the lack of images of women in relationships with each other. There's a bit more history of gay men depicting and depicted in romantic situations, but I'd seen so few examples when I was growing up of queer identity among women. I wanted to make work that was impactful, but also more direct and more pleasurable," she says.

Jenna had been married to and divorced from a man, Matthew Gribbon, and she was then living with her partner, the novelist Julian Tepper, and their son, Silas. (Jenna and Julian were not married and had an open relationship.) It was at this moment that she met Mackenzie Scott, the indie-rock singer and composer known as Torres. Scott, who is 12 years younger, became her lover and main subject.

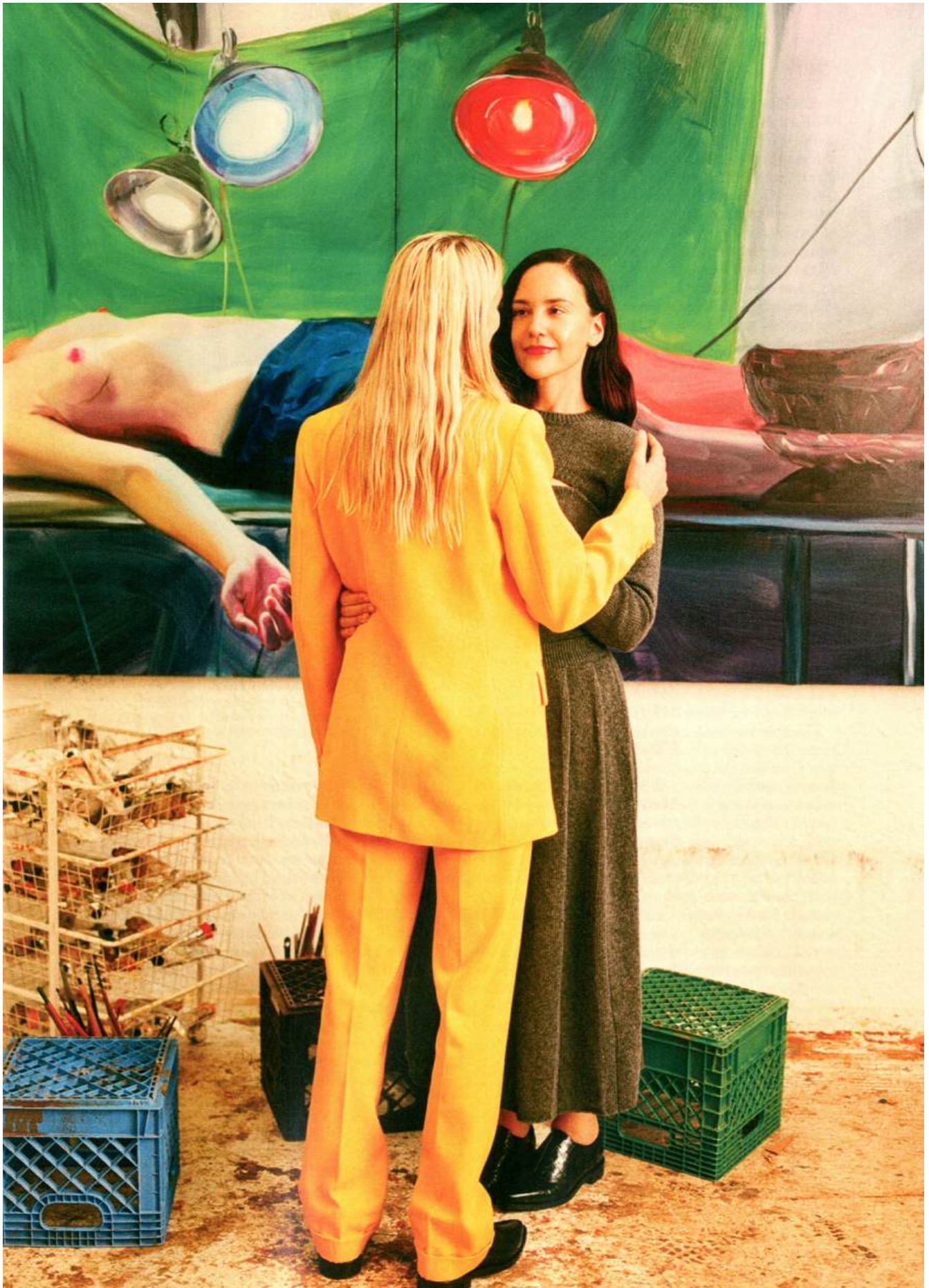
When I visit Gribbon in late August, she leads me to her Brooklyn studio through a magical secret garden

WATCHING YOU WATCHING ME

Jenna Gribbon (FAR RIGHT) in Prada, pictured with her muse and fiancée, Mackenzie Scott, in Michael Kors Collection, in front of Gribbon's *Here for you*. Hair, Tsuki; makeup, Kuma. Details, see In This Issue.

Fashion Editor: Jorden Bickham.





with tall trees, low stone walls, and gravel paths. We head down a flight of steps into a smallish, double-height room with a skylight.

It may be New York's most charming studio: Paintings for "Mirages," her show at the Collezione Maramotti in Northern Italy (her first solo show in a European museum, which opened in October), hang on the whitewashed brick walls, and nine of the show's 10 paintings are of Mackenzie. The eye-catcher is *Here for you*, a 13-foot-long stunner of Scott lying supine on a slab, under five floodlights, against a greenscreen background, naked except for short-shorts and cowboy boots. Scott's long ash-blond hair cascades over the slab's edge. Her extra-pink nipples stand out as though she's put lipstick on them. Her head is turned, looking at me as I look at her, a somewhat troubled expression on her beautiful face. The patient in Thomas Eakins's *The Gross Clinic* or the half-dead giant in Dana Schutz's *Presentation* come to mind. But this one is something else: Scott's pose may echo female odalisques throughout art history, but we're a long way from the male gaze. "People have become so accustomed to looking at unclothed bodies in art," Gribbon explains. "Those are nudes, and they're considered tasteful. But I want people to understand that it's not a passive act to consume the image of another person's unclothed body, which is why I like to make them feel more naked. Like, 'Oh, maybe I'm not supposed to be looking at this.' It's a way to make the nude body less benign and more true to what it really is, which is extreme vulnerability on the part of the subject."

There are two more extra-large greenscreen paintings in the show—one of Scott literally (and somewhat hilariously) on fire; the other, a close-up of her face, one eye peeking out from under a blindfold. (Both paintings had to be removed to give Gribbon enough room to paint *Here for you*.) The other pictures in the show are smaller and much less fierce. Most of them are scenes from Gribbon and Scott's domestic life together—Scott, blindfolded and naked, reaching out to touch her reflection in a mirror; Scott, clothed, turning to look at Gribbon (and us) as she unloads the dishwasher. Gribbon thinks of the smallest ones as "documentary" paintings, but the sensuous, virtuoso paint handling and the sunlight falling on that ash-blond hair make them delicious to look at, no matter what size they are. The pleasures that oil painting can give, and so rarely do these days, are here in full. "I wanted my work to be visibly pleasurable, to reflect the pleasure I feel in what I'm making," she tells me. "I had just started to go in that direction, and then I met Mackenzie."

A week before they met, in August 2017, Scott had a dream. "It was a sad one, about a woman leaving me," she recalls. "She was holding my face, saying that she loved me but had to leave. About a year later, Jenna did leave me—but she came back." They had met by chance at St. Dymphna's, an Irish bar in the East Village, two very tall young women with long hair, dark in Gribbon's case, inescapably blond in Scott's. Both of them had had



THE PLEASURE PRINCIPLE

"I wanted my work to be visibly pleasurable, to reflect the pleasure I feel in what I'm making," says Gribbon. *Acid rococo tenderscape*, 2021.

romantic relationships with women before, and they talked and talked, about their backgrounds and their work and everything else. "I'm from Tennessee and I went to college in Georgia, and she's from Georgia and went to college in Tennessee," Gribbon says. Scott kept ordering more neat vodkas, and Gribbon poured half of them under the table. "There was definitely a lot of chemistry, and before the end of the night, we were physically entwined at the bar," Gribbon tells me. A few months later, she made a painting of Scott, the first of many. Scott became her muse—Gribbon paints her almost exclusively these days (paintings of her son, Silas, now 11, are the exception).

The muse-dom is a two-way street. "Her paintings somehow always feed into the songs I'm making," says Scott, on whose right arm Gribbon has legibly tattooed the words "Jenna and Silas." "There are so many songs about and for Jenna—'Silver Tongue,' 'Gracious Day,'" Scott says. The lyrics on a recent song, "Don't Go Puttin' Wishes in My Head," are all about Gribbon:

If we're calling off the funeral
Then I'm calling for a hitching
Just when I thought that it was over
It was only just beginning

Born in a suburb of Knoxville, Tennessee, Jenna Brown spent much of her childhood reading and drawing on her own. Her parents divorced when she was two. When she was five, she moved with her mother and her older brother to an area outside Savannah, Georgia, where her mother supported the family with a variety of jobs and was also a foster mother to several children. (Her mother, remarried, eventually adopted four of them.) "I don't know where that need to draw came from," Gribbon remembers. "I don't think anyone in the family was aware of contemporary art. But when I said I was going to be an artist, even though I didn't know what that meant, nobody argued with me." Her first-grade teacher complained to Jenna's mother that Jenna was always drawing in the margins of her papers. "My mother asked if I was getting my work done, and the teacher said, 'Yes.' 'Then you're not allowed to tell her that she can't draw,' mother said. 'My daughter is an artist.'" In college, all Jenna wanted to do was hang out in the art department and make paintings.

She spent four very happy years at the University of Georgia, in Athens, which had a very good art department. In addition to painting, she got interested in filmmaking—especially the works of Jean Cocteau, Jacques Rivette, Agnès Varda, and other French cinéastes. (Last year Gribbon had a show at Sim Smith gallery in London, in which stills and film clips from Varda's work were juxtaposed with Gribbon paintings that mixed both documentary and invented moments of intimate daily life.) Gribbon made a lot of

Silas was born in December 2010. A year later, Gribbon and Julian Tepper, Silas's father, started the Oracle Club in Long Island City. It was a workspace for artists and writers and a hangout for members who would gather there to talk, attend poetry readings, and listen to music on a piano and a record player, while Silas slept upstairs with a baby monitor turned on. (Gribbon and Tepper and Silas lived on the floor above.) At this point, Gribbon was making life-size, full-body portraits of people she knew, talking and gesturing. She hung the paintings at the Oracle, and it looked as though they were talking to one another. "I loved it all, but I also found it really frustrating and distracting," she says. Having a child was not the problem. "People just thought of me differently. I'd go into galleries with Silas and people would say, 'Oh, are you still painting?' This kind of thing was said to me all the time, and it was so enraging. If a man brings his child to an opening, people think it's charming. If a woman does, they think you're done." When the rent on Oracle went way up in 2016, they closed the club, and Gribbon, feeling stuck, decided to go to graduate art school. She applied to Hunter and got in. While there, things started to happen for her. "I don't think it was about grad school," she says. "I think it was the resurgence of interest in figuration and the way people were using social media to find new art."

Gribbon was in a four-person group show at the New York gallery Fredericks & Freiser in Chelsea, and every one of her five paintings sold. The following year, soon after she graduated, she had her first solo show there, and again everything sold. "Ever since that '4 Artists' show, she's had a waiting list," Andrew Freiser tells me. "When I Looked

"I want people to understand that it's not a passive act
to consume the image of another person's unclothed body,
which is why I like to make them feel more naked"

experimental Super 8 films of her own at college, and she continues to be interested in this kind of work. (She made a music video, "Too Big for the Glory Hole," for Scott, in summer 2020.) In college, Jenna met Matthew Gribbon, another art student, and they were married in her senior year. The marriage didn't last long, but the two remain close friends.

When Gribbon moved to New York in 2003, figuration was still taboo, and she couldn't get a gallery to look at her work. She did all the young artist things: lived in Williamsburg, above the Legion of Doom biker headquarters with four roommates (one was Matthew); worked as one of Jeff Koons's many assistants (she quit after a year so she could do her own work); got connected with Sofia Coppola through a friend of a friend and painted copies of the historic portraits in Coppola's film *Marie Antoinette*, which in 2006 led to her first solo show, at Sarah Bowen Gallery in Williamsburg. There were two more solo shows a couple of years later—one in Los Angeles, another in Chelsea. "But young artists doing figuration were not establishing themselves at that time," Gribbon says. "I had many people tell me that I was fighting an uphill battle, that I needed to de-skill. But I'm very stubborn. I ignored everyone and just kept doing my paintings. It took about 15 years before I had any luck at all."

at You the Light Changed," the solo show, featured nude or seminude women wrestling with other women—an ironic take on an art trope with a long, all-male history. She had invited friends to a wrestling party in her living room and taken photographs that served as raw material for the paintings. (Gribbon doesn't paint from life.) "Jenna is hands down an *alla prima* master," the curator and writer Alison Gingeras tells me. "I see her as a direct heir to the legacy of artists like Cassatt and Morisot, pushing the gendered spaces that they explored to a new level of intimacy, of the female gaze, and of desire that is captured with paint in a way that no camera could render."

In "Uscapes," Gribbon's last show at Fredericks & Freiser, six of the 20 paintings were very large, nearly seven feet tall by five and a half feet wide. All six show Gribbon and Scott larger than life, their naked, intertwined bodies in cropped close-ups, too big to fit in the rectangle. We see Scott through Gribbon's long, parted legs, just as Gribbon sees her. Breasts, thighs, pubic hair, fluorescent pink nipples—everything is right before our eyes. Gribbon had told me that she greatly admires Courbet's 1866 *The Origin of the World*, which still startles viewers with its unrelenting focus on a woman's genitalia. "I can't think of any other canonized painting that continues

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THE FEMALE GAZE

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to be so shocking," she says. "I would love that painting more if it was painted by a woman, but the premise that we all come from a woman's body is a very human one. It's the opposite of objectifying a woman's anatomy—it considers the physical and spiritual realities of a woman's body." Gribbon made a painting in response to Courbet's *Origin*. Called *A Simple Demonstration*, it shows Scott on a

sofa, naked from the waist down, legs spread open, and arms inviting us to enjoy the view. We don't see the head on Courbet's woman—she has no personal identity. Gribbon gives us Scott in full, in this and in all her large "Uscapes" paintings. Her labyrinths of female sexuality read as love songs, embracing vulnerability and queer sex as facts of life.

"Our art enters into almost everything we do," Gribbon says. Gribbon and Scott love going for walks in the neighborhood and going out to art galleries, movies, and concerts—and for dinner or just drinks, but inevitably, they always end up talking about their work, while Gribbon snaps pictures for future reference. "We saw Roxy Music and Willie Nelson within a week of each other recently," Scott tells me. Scott makes a perfect Manhattan for the evenings they stay home and read, listen to records, play chess or card games with Silas.

Jenna Gribbon's star keeps rising. This year, she was one of four artists invited to show a work in the Frick museum's "Living Histories: Queer Views and Old Masters" project, which presented new works in conversation with old ones. Gribbon's *What Am I Doing Here? I Should Ask You the Same*—Scott, in regal red and purple velvet, draped to show her intensely pink right nipple—sat in for Hans Holbein's portrait of Thomas More and next to Holbein's portrait of Thomas Cromwell. (The two paintings of male subjects are usually hung side by side; Gribbon's work replaced the More while it was out on loan.) This past summer, she left her New York gallery, Fredericks & Freiser, which had put her on the map, and joined the powerhouse uptown gallery LGDR, a merger of Dominique Lévy, Brett Gorvy, Amalia Dayan, and Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn. The Massimo De Carlo gallery in Europe had recently taken her on, and, as of this month, she adds the David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles. "They all bring different strengths to the table," Gribbon explains. "I also like that no one person or gallery holds all the cards of my career in their hands."

Gribbon and Scott plan to get married on November 12, in a quiet ceremony at a friend's house in Montauk. They will move into the Brooklyn

town house that Gribbon recently bought—she hopes that the renovations will be finished by the end of the year, the start of her 20th anniversary in New York. Getting married will make Scott available as a subject and muse permanently. And vice versa. "Painting her over and over again means that the viewer gets to know this recurring character and watch her change," Gribbon tells me. "She's no longer just a subject. She's a person you recognize, and this will become more interesting over the years." □

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ARTnews

Jenna Gribbon, Painter of Intimate Portraits, Joins David Kordansky

BY **ANGELICA VILLA**

November 14, 2022



Portrait of Jenna Gribbon.
ANNIE KLEBANOFF, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

Jenna Gribbon, whose intimate paintings of her partner have attracted a cult following, is joining the roster at David Kordansky gallery in Los Angeles. She will continue to be co-represented by Massimo De Carlo and LGDR, which are headquartered in Milan and New York, respectively.

The Brooklyn-based figurative painter's work has gained significant attention from collectors. Gribbon's partner, the musician Mackenzie Scott, also known by her stage moniker TORRES, is the subject of much of her work.

She has cited artists such as Édouard Manet, Jean-Honoré Fragonard, Karen Kilimnik, and Mary Cassatt, as well as the filmmaker Agnès Varda, as being among her influences.

For dealer David Kordansky, Gribbon's paintings go beyond mere trends in the contemporary art scene.

"The current fascination with figuration tends toward a well-worn Surrealism," he said, describing the artist's vision as "bolder" than many of her peers trafficking in similar imagery. According to him, her work presents "a picture of desire not normally made available to viewers."

Gribbon often portrays Scott in up-close, cropped shots, making for portraits that are more like the diaristic imagery seen on social media platforms than traditional portraiture. Kordansky said that he sees in the work an invitation to a "psychosexual personal space."

"I wanted to make paintings that could only come from the privileged, up-close, and unguarded perspective of a romantic relationship," Gribbon told ARTnews, adding, "Seeing her over and over produces a feeling of familiarity and specificity. She's no longer 'the subject'—she's herself."

This closeness between Gribbon and Scott runs both ways—references to Gribbon can be found in Scott's music.

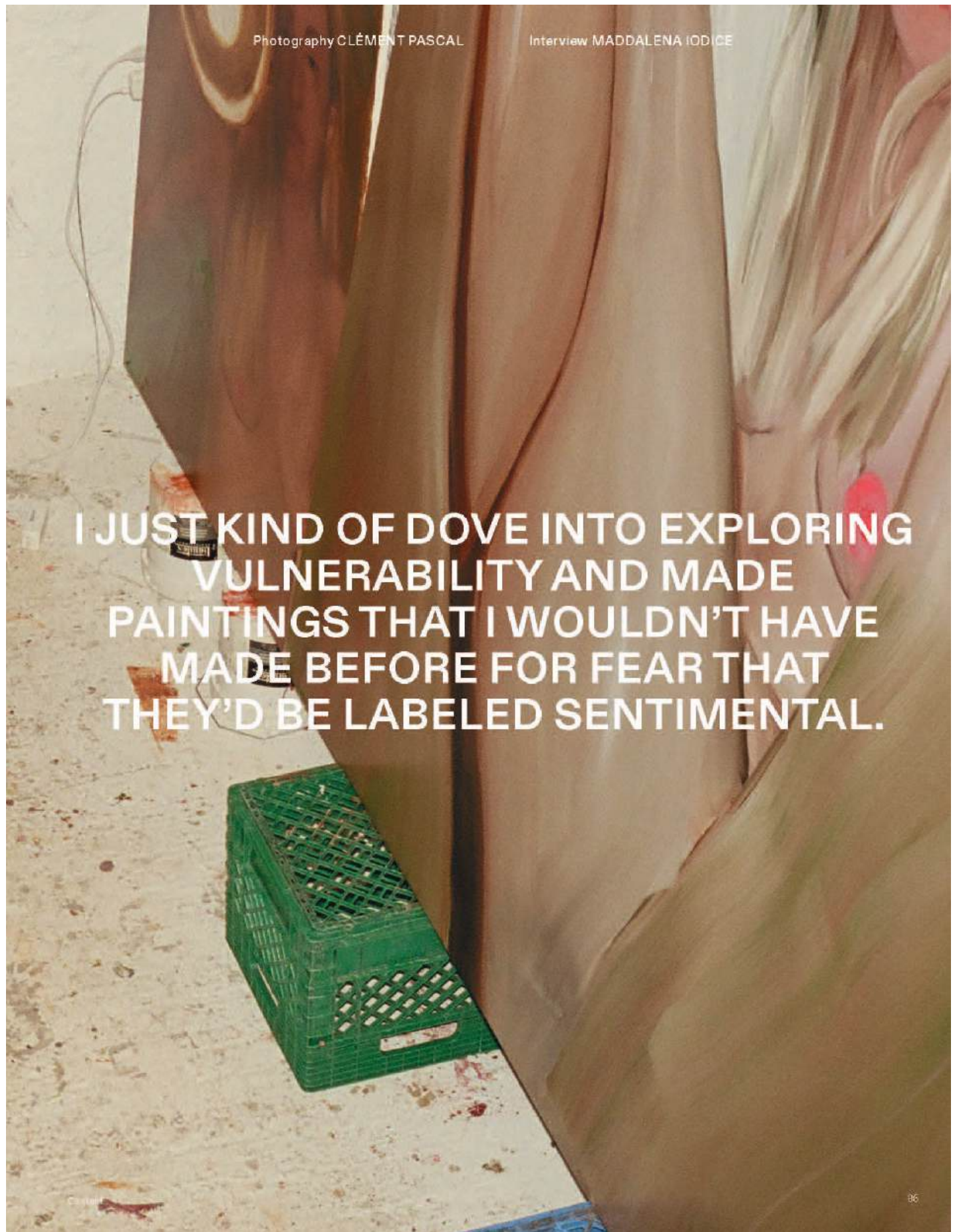
This January, curators at the Frick Museum in New York showcased one of Gribbon's recent portraits of Scott, titled *What Am I Doing Here? I Should Ask You the Same* (2022). That work, showing a partially nude Scott, appeared alongside a portrait by Hans Holbien.

The news comes on the heels of Gribbon's addition to LGDR in June, making her one of the few contemporary artists the gallery—the result of a merger between several major New York spaces—took on after its founders shed many others they previously represented. She was among the several artists the power dealer brought for its inaugural booth at Art Basel's newly-minutened French flagship, Paris+.

Gribbon's paintings have also garnered attention on the auction circuit. Since the debut of her work at Phillips in 2020, when her work first fetched prices around \$14,000, records for her paintings have been rising. The current benchmark of \$100,800 was set when her painting *Polyanna Wrestlers* (2018), featuring two brawling women, sold during a Phillips contemporary art evening sale in May. It had been given an estimate of \$75,000.







JENNA GRIBBON IN CONVERSAZIONE CON MADDALENA IODICE

Esplorare il lavoro di Jenna Gribbon significa accedere alla parte più intima e personale della sua vita. Siamo spettatori silenziosi di una narrativa privata alla quale accediamo assumendo il punto di vista dell'artista. Attraversando con lo sguardo le sue gambe socchiuse, intrecciate a quelle della compagna Mackenzie, ci confrontiamo con il nostro senso di pudore, intimità e voyeurismo. In un mondo saturo di narrazioni stereotipate e immagini compromesse della realtà, Jenna ci libera, mostrandoci esattamente ciò che abbiamo bisogno di vedere: la verità.

MI Ciao Jenna, è un piacere parlare con te in occasione di questo numero di MUSE. Come stai? Come procede la nuova serie di opere alla quale stai lavorando? Ho avuto modo di vedere una prima preview, e mi sembra tu abbia esplorato ulteriormente quello che ad oggi è il tema centrale del tuo lavoro: "il vedere e l'essere visti". Come nasce questa nuova serie?

JG Sto benissimo grazie! Ho finito proprio ora le opere oggetto della prossima mostra, e le ho spedite a Londra. Adesso sono felice di avere del tempo per rilassarmi.

Si tratta di opere che insistono sull'esplorazione del *guardare chi guarda*. Sono una prosecuzione della mostra "*Uscapes*", presentata presso la galleria Fredericks and Freiser lo scorso Settembre a New York. È lì che ho introdotto le opere di grande formato nelle quali ritraggo i miei arti e quelli della mia compagna intrecciati in modo confuso, divengono quasi elementi astratti, simili a un paesaggio. In quei lavori, il mio corpo nudo attira lo spettatore al centro della scena, talvolta il punto d'accesso è tra le mie gambe socchiuse. Sono quadri che mostrano e raccontano l'intimità, il piacere e la scomodità di essere vicini.

MI Il tuo lavoro rivela la stretta relazione che hai con i soggetti ritratti. Sono particolarmente interessata al modo con il quale hai ritratto Mackenzie nel corso degli anni. Man mano che nella vostra relazione fiducia e intimità sono cresciute, è cambiato anche il tuo modo di ritrarla?

JG Mackenzie è per me un soggetto ideale, non solo perché essendo la mia compagna ho accesso a momenti di grande intimità con lei, ma anche perché come musicista, è una figura pubblica; e anche il rapporto pubblico vs privato è un tema chiave del mio lavoro.

Le mie opere hanno sicuramente subito un'evoluzione nel corso della nostra relazione. Quando l'ho ritratta in "*Erotic hand in public*", si coglieva essere l'inizio di un nuovo rapporto. Oggi, la dipingo in posture ed espressioni meno composte, e questo per me è un privilegio, mostra la solidità che caratterizza il nostro rapporto. Sono ritratti ancora più intimi, perché lasciare che qualcuno veda il tuo viso ed il tuo corpo così spontaneamente è indice di vicinanza e grande fiducia.

MI Quando lo spettatore guarda le opere assume il tuo punto di vista, che è anche lo sguardo di una mamma come in "*Pose of an artist's child*". La maternità ha influenzato il tuo lavoro? E qual è l'importanza di questo tema nel contesto dell'arte contemporanea oggi?

JG Quel lavoro racconta dell'innato senso di preservazione del soggetto ritratto. Credo che i bambini abbiano un istinto naturale nel ritrarsi da sguardi indesiderati, un aspetto per me molto interessante da esplorare in un dipinto, raffigurando solo una parte del viso di mio figlio, quella che lui mi ha permesso di vedere. Il tema della maternità è stato ampiamente marginalizzato negli ultimi cent'anni, e sono felice di vedere

come oggi molte artiste abbiano deciso di dargli spazio. [02]

MI Sei mai stata vittima di sessismo nel mondo dell'arte? Come hai reagito?

JG Sì assolutamente. Soprattutto quando ero più giovane. Ero molto seria riguardo il mio lavoro, ma mi sono presto resa conto di non essere presa sul serio. Non penso che gli uomini abbiano tanti problemi in questo campo. Il mio modo di reagire è stato creare solidi legami con altre artiste donne. Ci supportiamo a vicenda e questa fino ad ora è stata un'efficace maniera di tutelarci.

MI "*Ho sempre creato i dipinti che volevo vedere, ma presto mi sono resa conto esserci dipinti che le persone avevano bisogno di vedere*", leggendo una tua recente intervista, sono rimasta colpita da questo concetto. Divenire consapevole dell'impatto socio-politico del tuo lavoro sulla narrativa queer, ha influenzato il tuo modo di creare e scegliere le scene che ritrai?

JG Non ci sono raffigurazioni di relazioni amorose tra donne con le quali io mi potessi identificare, c'è quindi stato un momento in cui ho sentito il bisogno di raccontare la mia vita attraverso la pittura. Questo vuoto permene, ma in un mondo sovraccaricato dalle immagini trovare un luogo dove ancora possibile esprimersi è stimolante. Non mi piace l'idea di aggiungere ad un mondo saturo. Comunque al di là delle questioni di genere, credo ormai sia chiaro che il mondo ha bisogno di arte che non rifugga dalla vulnerabilità e dalle complessità della sfera personale. Io mi sono lasciata andare all'esplorazione di questi aspetti realizzando dipinti che non avrei mai fatto in passato per paura che fossero giudicati come sentimentali. Onestamente, mostrare il mio punto di vista in modo completamente sincero è la cosa più rischiosa che potessi fare, ma le persone lo hanno accolto in modo positivo.

MI So che hai un ampio archivio di foto fatte con l'i-phone, è da lì che arrivano molti spunti del tuo lavoro. Quando scegli un'immagine, qual è il ruolo della memoria nel momento in cui inizi a dipingere? Resti fedele allo scatto o lasci che i ricordi ne modifichino la percezione?

JG I dipinti, come i nostri ricordi, sono un'amalgama di immagini fotografiche, sensazioni astratte e invenzione. Io sono attratta dal modo in cui costruiamo le nostre narrative personali, e dal ruolo della fotografia rispetto alle immagini alle quali ci affezioniamo e che utilizziamo come fondamenta del nostro passato e spesso di chi siamo.

MI Hai sempre saputo di voler essere una pittrice?

JG Sì, anche se non ho sempre saputo cosa significasse essere una pittrice. Non conoscevo affatto il mondo dell'arte e crescendo non ho mai avuto reali confronti con altri artisti, eppure in qualche modo dentro di me ho sempre sentito di essere un'artista.

MI Sei cresciuta in Tennessee, hai studiato in Georgia e poi ti sei trasferita a New York. Che tipo di evoluzione ha avuto il tuo lavoro durante questo processo? C'è stato un momento in cui ti sei resa conto di aver davvero trovato la tua voce come artista?

JG Ci sono aspetti fondamentali che hanno caratterizzato gli ultimi vent'anni, ma nell'ultimo periodo c'è senz'altro stata una trasformazione alchemica. La mia vita e il modo in cui le cose sono cambiate attorno a me hanno determinato un'evoluzione anche nel mio lavoro.

MI Come immagini il tuo lavoro in futuro?

JG La cosa meravigliosa è che non ne ho idea!

JENNA GIBBON IN CONVERSATION
WITH MADDALENA IODICE

Exploring Jenna Gibbon's work means entering her very personal life and sense of intimacy. As silent spectators, while we access moments of private narration through her parted legs softly entangled to those of her partner Mackenzie, we may find ourselves dealing with our own sense of modesty, intimacy and voyeurism. In a world saturated by stereotyped narrations and compromised representation of reality, Jenna sets us free showing us exactly what we need to see: truth.

MI Hi Jenna, I'm so glad having the opportunity to chat with you on the occasion of this issue of MUSE. How are you today and how is this new series of paintings taking shape? I have only seen a raw preview but it seems you are further delving into that intimate "*seeing and being seen*" your work stands out for...What is the impetus for this new show?

JG I'm doing great. I actually just finished painting this show and shipped it off. Now I'm pretty excited for some down time. Yes, the new show goes further down the path of looking at the looking. It's really a continuation of my show "*Uscapes*" which was at Fredericks and Freiser in New York this past September. That's where I introduced the much larger than life paintings of my partner and I with our limbs entangled in confusing ways that become almost abstract or like landscapes. In those works, my naked body kind of drags the viewer into the frame, sometimes the entry is through my parted legs. They're about a kind of staged intimacy, and about the pleasures and discomforts of getting close.

MI Your works reveal the intimate relationship you have with the subjects and I am particularly interested in the way you have been portraying Mackenzie throughout the years. As trust and intimacy developed during the course of your relationship has your approach to the way you portray Mackenzie changed?

JG Mackenzie is an ideal subject for me not only because she's my partner and I have access to very up close intimate moments with her, but as a musician, she's also a public figure, and public vs private portrayal is a key subject in my work. The paintings have definitely evolved with the relationship. One of the first paintings I made of her was "*Erotic hand in public*" and that felt like a very "new relationship" painting. Recently I've begun showing her in less flattering postures and expressions, which feels like a privilege of the security of a very solid established relationship. Those portrayals feel more intimate because allowing someone to see your face and body so unselfconsciously arranged is evidence of closeness and trust.

MI When watching your paintings the spectator enters the scene through your point of view which is also that of a mother as shown in "*Pose of an artist's child*". How has motherhood influenced your work? And what's the importance of such subject in the context of contemporary art today?

JG That painting is about depicting a subject's reflexive sense of self preservation. I think children have a natural good instinct to shield themselves from an unwanted gaze, and that seemed like an interesting thing to make a painting about, only painting the part of my son's face he allowed to show. I think motherhood is a subject that has been largely marginalized for the last hundred years or so, and I'm glad to see a lot of artists starting to take it on. ⁰²

MI Have you ever experienced sexism in the art world? And how have you coped with it?

JG Yes of course. It was worse when I was younger. I was very serious about my work as a young woman, but I found I was rarely taken seriously. I don't think young men have as much trouble in that realm. One way that I've coped with it has been to form bonds and alliances with other women artists. We're very supportive of each other and it's been a pretty effective buoy system.

MI I was captivated by a sentence you said during a recent interview "*I've always made the paintings that I wanted to see, but then it became evident that there were paintings that people needed to see.*" Becoming aware that your work has a socio-political impact on queer narrative has influenced the way you create and choose scenes you paint?

JG I definitely got to a point where I wanted to render my life in paint, because I hadn't really seen any depictions of women together in romantic relationships that I identified with. There's still such a void there, and finding territory that's got some space in it is always exciting in an image saturated world. I never want to feel like I'm just adding to the noise. Identity issues aside though, I think it's become clear that a post 2016 world was thirsty for art that didn't shy away from vulnerability and the deeply personal. I just kind of dove into exploring those things and made paintings that I wouldn't have made before for fear that they'd be labeled sentimental. Honestly, experimenting with earnestness felt like the riskiest thing to do, but people really responded.

MI I know you have a wide archive of photos taken with the i-phone and that's where most of your work starts from, but when picking a moment, an image, what is the role of memory in painting it? Usually are you faithful to the photo or you let memory take its own detour?

JG The paintings, much like our memories, are an amalgam of photographic imagery, abstract impressions, and things that are just made up. I'm interested in the way we construct personal narratives, and the role that photography plays in the images that we attach to and use to cobble together a sense of our past and even who we are.

MI Have you always known you wanted to be a painter?

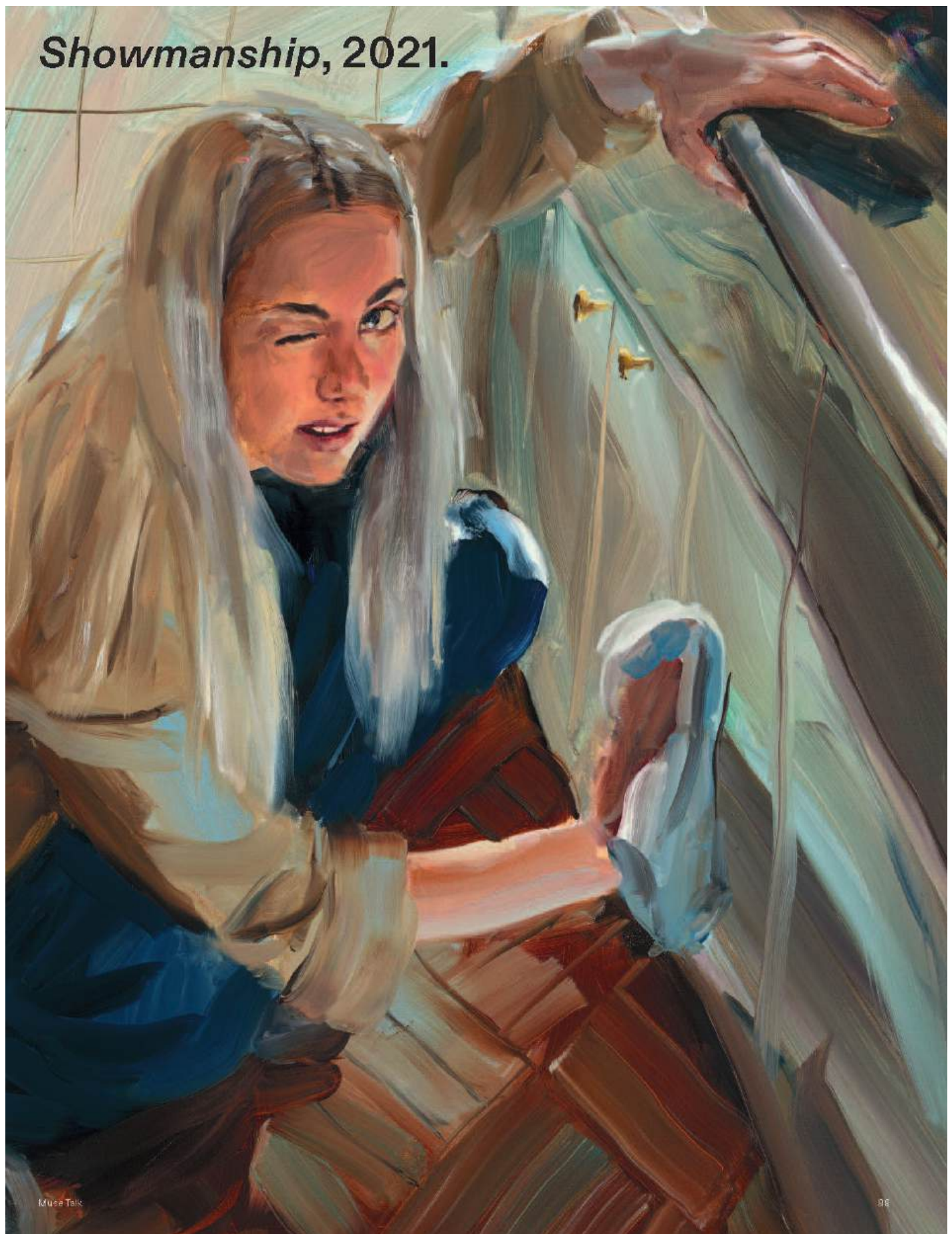
JG Yes, though I didn't really know what that meant or would look like. I didn't know any working artists growing up, and I certainly had no knowledge of the contemporary art "world". I somehow always conceived of myself as an artist though.

MI You grew up in Tennessee, studied in Georgia and then moved to New York city. How has your work developed throughout this process and was there a moment when you actually realised you found your voice as an artist? Sort of a turning point?

JG I think there are through-lines that are observable throughout the last 20 or more years, but there was definitely an alchemical transformation that occurred a few years ago when where I was in life combined with what was happening around me and produced a dynamic shift in the work.

MI How do you see your work evolving in the future?

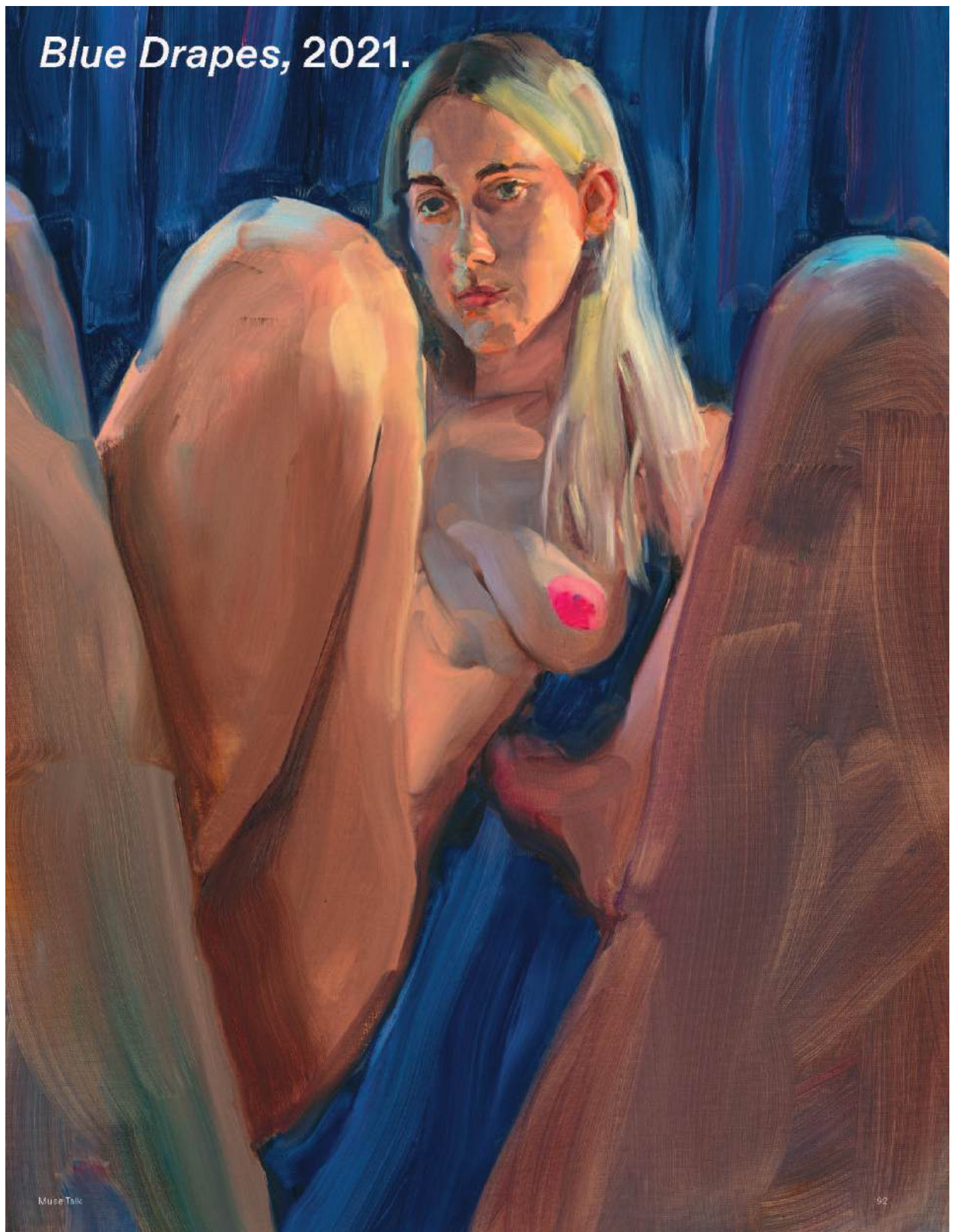
JG The exciting thing is that I have no idea.















02
J. GRIBBON

**I THINK MOTHERHOOD IS A
SUBJECT THAT HAS BEEN LARGELY
MARGINALIZED FOR
THE LAST HUNDRED YEARS OR SO,
AND I'M GLAD TO SEE A LOT OF
ARTISTS STARTING TO TAKE IT ON.**



Jenna Gribbon was born in Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1978. She currently lives and works in Queens, New York, US. Gribbon's paintings explore the feelings and implications of seeing and being seen. Her paintings are intimate portraits of her friends, partner, family and fellow painters which encourage the viewer to reflect on their role as a consumer of beauty, intimacy and as voyeurs of the narratives of others.

Exhibitions include: *Female Body: The view of the feminine from Albrecht Dürer to Marina Abramović*, Kurpfälzisches Museum Heidelberg, Heidelberg, D (2021); *Romancing the mirror*, curated by Yvra Rouse, filoCA, Jacksonville, FL, US (2020); *Paint, Also Known as Blood: Women, Affect, and Design in Contemporary Painting*, Warsaw Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw, PL (2019). A new series of work has been presented at Massimo De Carlo London on January 20th, 2022. Although her diastatic portraits reveal insights into her own daily life, Gribbon's style and themes are rooted in art history: *fêtes galantes* echoed in outside gatherings of friends, wrestling pairs and reclining nudes. These art historical allusions serve to recontextualise these traditional themes in the present by depicting women, not as decoration or passive objects in scenes, but people that the artist knows and paints with a loving knowledge of their character.

CULTURED

ART

Jenna Gribbon and Her Musician Muse Mackenzie Scott Blend Love and Paint

With a current exhibition at MASSIMODECARLO in London, painter Jenna Gribbon and her muse, musician Mackenzie Scott, AKA Torres, discuss the potential dangers of mixing pleasure and business, art and love.

WORDS

Kat Herriman

PHOTOGRAPHY

Flora Hanitijo

February 16, 2022

"A reluctance to be painted was something I was really trying to get into the work," Jenna Gribbon tells me. We are sitting on a leafy rooftop in Brooklyn overlooking her skylighted studio where the artist has been focused on portraits big and small of her lover, musician Mackenzie Scott. Gribbon shares that recently her desire to capture reticence has manifested in the form of a favorite prop: the clamp light. In the largest, most lubricious works in the studio bound for a January 2022 solo show with MASSIMODECARLO in London, her girlfriend is depicted blinding herself in an almost cop-like interrogation. In others, Scott turns the bulb on Gribbon, and then on us. Now we are the suspects. This follows on the heels of recent paintings like *Comment Section* (2021), in which the musician holds up her fingers as a temporary shelter, Kanye in his shutter shades. "Comment sections are crazy and when they're about you, they're even crazier," Gribbon says. "It's that thing of being seen, your image being consumed and then having to deal with every person's thoughts about who you are or what you've said or what you've done." Scott, who performs as Torres, the indie rock star, makes a rich subject for inquiries into how our images are constructed and distributed with and without our blessings. "I'm always interested in the way that people are seen versus the way that they think they are or the way they want to be," Gribbon says. "Because my partner is a public figure, it ends up also being about public versus private, how she's depicted outside of our home versus inside of our home and what those two things look like next to each other."

Scott shares Gribbon's fascination with Zen and the art of image maintenance. "We are co-conspirators," Scott diagnoses a few days later, on a group FaceTime. "When you have a romantic relationship with an artist of any kind, you're signing up for exhibitionism at the mildest and, at the most extreme, maybe exploitation." A reflexive pause. "I would like to



Musician MacKenzie Scott and artist Jenna Gribbon pose in the latter's Brooklyn studio surrounded by new paintings of Scott.

think the tail is not wagging the dog. The relationship is what informs our art. There's probably crosspollution but that's the most fun thing about the relationship and the work."

"Uscapes," Gribbon's fall 2021 exhibition at Fredericks & Freiser in New York, was composed of a suite of small nudes, mostly of Scott's ass, paintings which you had to almost get inside of to see clearly. In these works, Gribbon's culpability is acutely framed, sometimes as a camerawoman taking quiet advantageous footage, sometimes as an outright villain pushing the limits of consent. Scott is rarely pictured smiling but rather betrayed in various shades of discomfort, from suspicion to contempt. The lovers' rapport isn't idealized by Gribbon's brushstrokes, but rather worked through in the medium's crude terms, arms and thighs carved out with the same winding licks. Big patches of careful color are devoted to knees, which rise like mountains to screen Scott's expressions. We are as close as we can get but her calves are still in the way. The canvas creates our frame, and then Scott's legs cut it into unequal halves— channeling our sight lines. These are the joint decisions that make them co-conspirators. With her posture, Scott demands a break—a cigarette off-screen. A painting of Scott captured through a slit in the bathroom doorway titled *Small Crack* (2021), shows her form bent over examining her chin (zits, perhaps?) in a mirror. Her body is not composed for us but instead doubled over in earnest examination. It's the opposite of Balthus's *Nude Before a Mirror* (1955). We are still the voyeur but here Scott, like us, is an accomplice in judgement—picking at her body in the same way the viewer inspects the paintings. I feel a blush of shame for us all.

In writing about Gribbon's work, I set out to avoid the generally mawkish conversation around figuration in contemporary paintings— the ones that dawdle on the erotic (which Gribbon seems to initiate in most paintings depicting Scott nude, but ultimately dodges by giving her neon pink nipples), the ones that gawk at frenzied markets and auction highs,



Painter Jenna Gribbon.

the ones that overuse the word “intimacy” while flattening love and painting into LGBTQ thought. I wanted to explore inclusion and agency within the context of romance and art, which use public and private platforms to survive—just like the market and pornography and politics.

Gribbon’s film-world hero, Agnès Varda (to whom she dedicated an entire exhibition in 2021), offered a way in. The last beat of Varda’s cinematic love letter to Los Angeles, *Lions Love (...and Lies)* (1969), is given to Warhol Factory darling Viva (aka actor Janet Susan Mary Hoffmann). Viva’s wish is to spend her time silently looking into the camera: “I’m so sick of doing monologues, I would like to just breathe for one minute,” she announces. Rather than ignore the victims of her sharp autofictions, Varda provided an avenue for friends, peers and strangers to air out their grievances. Viva is permitted to be tired of the camera and Varda’s direction.

The French director’s diary mingled so frequently with her plotlines that the collateral emotional damage became a structural concern of the work, just as it is in Gribbon’s. Varda’s solution was to implicate herself in the hardships of being candid—by placing herself never too far from the frame even when she was technically invisible. Gribbon’s images of her lover and other select subjects function in the same charmingly self-sabotaging way, aligning the artist with memoirists like Varda but also Chris Kraus, Hannah Wilke, Nan Goldin, Diamond Stingily, Alice Neel.

I’m mad at Neel lately. (I carry my admiration for historic figures out like little affairs.) Neel’s recent Metropolitan Museum of Art retrospective, ironically titled “People Come First,” made the painter’s resentfulness of others so unbearably two-dimensional that I haven’t been able to enjoy the paintings ever since. What I like about Gribbon’s work, which



Gribbon's *Lavender scarescape*.

deals in the same familiarity, is how it spreads any loathing, self- or otherwise, equally over viewer, maker and subject. I am at once curious and guilty. Try not feeling like a perv observing one of her canvases too close in a public space.

But what exactly is the comeuppance for turning your relationships into art? Gribbon says she finds herself needing to set internal reminders to turn off painter's brain and "live in the moment" and that the trepidation in Scott's painted eyes is real. She also acknowledges that her son, who occasionally appears in the work, flinches whenever the iPhone, her preferred camera, comes out. The caveat is that he enjoys seeing himself once the paint dries. I suggest that perhaps this is because he can sense the love demonstrated in the labor, the same labor photography obscures in its haste. Gribbon nods, but then tempers it with her motivations. She says painting is precisely the space to engage our impulse to resist and that in some way it is the reflexive recoil that she feels compelled to document. "We assume people want to be seen but is that true?" Gribbon asks. "We've only been documenting, composing ourselves in obsessive ways for less than a century. I'm interested in investigating that assumption and what the costs are for those who are represented."

A surprising upshot of their relationship's entanglement with Gribbon's work is that the paintings occasionally provide a counterintuitive privacy. Scott is such an idiosyncratic

fixture of the work that the art world sometimes addresses her in the shorthand of pluses. "Some people don't even know I'm a musician. I'm just Jenna's girlfriend," Scott laughs. "Jenna is a star and I love that it gives me this place to burrow and get to watch for once. I'm such an exhibitionist because of what I do but with Jenna, she's on display just as much as her subjects are because she has such a strong point of view." Gribbon's take is so invested in how all readings and facets of a figure could potentially occupy the same canvas that every new perspective it touches is subsumed into its own logic. Your world becomes a part of hers but it's an exchange of information, not a surrender. "Painting is a way of understanding an image down to its minutiae," Gribbon says. "It's a way to have a relationship to every inch."

OCULA



Advisory Perspective

In the Studio with Jenna Gribbon

By Will Hine | London, 20 January 2022

Jenna 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.

I think it's both. I obviously have had a lifelong romance with painting, and par-

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, *S 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.

A VERY PARTICULAR TYPE OF ATTENTION

*Jenna Gribbon in conversation
with Alison M. Gingeras*

Alison Gingeras In the second half of the twentieth century, until maybe early years of the 2000s, figurative painting has been held in suspicion. All kinds of negative or uncritical connotations were attributed to it. When I was first engaged with figuration in the 1990s, I was interested in tracing a genealogy from late Picabia to sketch out an agency for figuration that was knowingly antagonistic ... and I was so happy to read your MFA thesis where you cited Picabia as an important figure for you. The struggle for figuration to be considered a valid practice has ...

Jenna Gribbon ... disappeared!

AG ... Yes, probably, in large measure because of the art market. Yet, I still have this desire to attribute some sort of critical function to figurative painting. Your work has come to a fore in my thinking about figurative painting as a vehicle for exploring complex identities ...

JG My perspective is slightly different than a lot of my peers who are figurative painters right now because I'm a little bit older than a lot of them. I was an undergrad in the late 90s. Even though I was in Georgia, where it was a little provincial and there wasn't a lot of hard-nosed criticism or theory, even there, even then, there was a sense that figuration was a little bit relegated to a certain type of gallery or that you couldn't really be an important artist and pursue figuration unironically. You couldn't just be a figurative painter because that's what you want to do and enjoy, there had to be a self-critical concep-

tual angle. Then when I got to New York in 2003 Zombie formalism had fully taken root and my work looked really out of place for a long time.

AG Well enjoyment and pleasure are taboo. In your thesis, you were writing about how pleasure is a bugbear for contemporary artists as well as the historical avant-garde art. You locate your practice in that space, which I find super interesting and important. There is a politics of pleasure! I like how you sketched out an interesting paradigm – between the theoretical goal posts with Laura Mulvey (where you essentially say "I love you" but then just destroy her) ... And, on the other side, you hold up Susan Sontag.

JG I should go back and read my own thesis (laughs)!

AG I guess my interest in how you took up those two writers drives at the burden we've inherited from second wave feminism – that artists have an imperative to deconstruct or critique, or oppose monumental phenomena like the male gaze, or pleasure, or even beauty. Interrogating those received ideas is very implicit in your work.

JG (Laughs) Yes, thankfully I've finally gotten there. I think refusing to take on that inherited burden rubs a lot of people the wrong way. My younger self wanted to make paintings like this for a long time. I had all those critical voices really strongly in my head and I thought, "I can't make those paintings." I knew that the paintings might come across as anti-feminist.

Yet, I consider myself very much a feminist. It was a struggle to look at pleasure and be able to embrace it, but it was necessary for me. Pleasure and also beauty – maybe we don't have to frame those things in relation to the male gaze or be saddled with the weight of that baggage associated with it.

AG There's another side to your work, where I think you are probing beauty and pleasure while simultaneously investing in the emotional power of paint. Sorry to lean into your thesis writing so much, but I was very much struck by how you described this "magic" that paint has when you take an image – whether it's from imagination or after a photograph – and translate it into paint. There is some of kind of alchemical reaction. In lieu of a theoretical construct or critical stance, your work operates from a more direct authentic, lived experience that you're translating into paint. To me, it's very legible in the work. The politics of pleasure comes through in the desire that's expressed in the work; there are not a lot of queer women represented in the history of art, and your work also touches upon less-mainstream feminisms, sex positive feminism pioneered by a handful of women artists, such as Joan Semmel who you've cited as an important figure.

JG Even seeing the Alice Neel show at the Met the other day, I was struck by how she was considered a kind of "black sheep" of 1970s feminism! I hadn't realized that, but it makes sense. Her work just didn't look like other feminist art of the time. Joan Semmel is another figurative outlier. She was making these paintings that were so brave in their tenderness and eroticism in a time when it seemed you needed to have this intellectual mediation to insure that your work was received as appropriately avant-garde and feminist. Her paintings were and still are so unmediated and direct.

AG Not unlike Neel, you have a bit of a "diaristic" side to your practice. Your canvases feel like a record of your life or at least a conflation of real events and an imaginary ideal. There is a complex politics that I'm very interested in in your work.

JG Making a painting is making a physical record of a very particular kind of attention. Things do come out in the painting that are kind of wordless. It's a shame to dismiss the possibility of paint and what paint can do. And to, to have it only, um, its only reputable value to be what it does kind of conceptually. And it's not that I don't like conceptual painting. Going back to Picabia, one of my favorite ideas he pursued was making those Impressionist paintings from postcards instead of observation of light, effectually trolling the romanticism of those painters. That's really my kind of humor. But there has to be room for both strategies, ideal paintings, and paintings that have a more felt relationship to the material. There is a physical, even alchemical kind of thing that happens when a painting is made. And, of course, I do think about the political implications of what the painting means. In fact, I spend a lot of time thinking about those politics, the layers of meaning. But a lot of times in the early stages of figuring out a painting, I just sort of feel my way to an image. And I'll latch onto a certain image, and I don't even necessarily know why until I give it the attention of painting it.

AG Do you start with a photograph? How do they start?

JG Yeah, I think of taking photos as "sketches" in a way. And so, I keep folders of images. I go around taking images from daily life all the time. Sometimes, an image or an idea will just stick in my mind, and I'll realize that that's what needs to be painted. I think a lot about the effect of all of these accumulated photos that we carry around with us, that we keep our memory in our pockets in a way, now. I'm really inter-

ted in the way that the photos that we keep or record for ourselves influence our memory and influence the way we construct our own narrative. The images we return to mentally tend to morph and shift in the mind, and I like to make the paintings a little wonky to reflect that. The way you remember the image is never exactly the way the image really is – things are warped by time and other experiences. And when your memory is based on a photograph, the actual photograph becomes such an integral part of the memory.

AG The photographic image shapes the memory more than the experience itself?

JG Yeah. It's one of the reasons that embrace photographic imagery, and because photos make it easier to catch fleeting moments which is where most of my interest lies. I'm not really the person who wants to paint just the person sitting in a chair, posing.

AG I was trying to identify the genre that your work occupies because you seem to portray these vignettes of life and how your composition is so tied to the camera. I was thinking back to the Impressionists whose compositional strategies were really shaped by photographic vision. Yet, your snapshots are very much the snapshots of a painter. The way you construct the relationship between your muse Mackenzie and yourself. You are able to create these very complex narratives with very simple, still images. You have a unique talent of a person who knows how to tell a story visually.

JG I'm glad that it comes across that way for you. I see whole worlds within images and, and so, complexity. I'm always just hoping that it, that it comes through, that people are reading the layers.

AG I'd like to talk about the trope of the hand in your work. How sometimes you use it to create explicit, more overtly sexual imagery. And at other times, the hand operates as a trope of more subtle eroticism. The hand also seems to be a very specific gaze that you're trying to construct.

JG Hands are really telling and interesting and expressive. And I also enjoy painting them. Hands are such an intimate point of contact for queer women, they're very sexy. (Laughs) I like to make jokes with my girlfriend, "Put that thing away!". It's basically the apparatus for fucking. When you look at a woman's hands, as a woman who has sex with women, it's a very different thing. It's not just neutral. Hands are a very loaded body part. And this is interesting in a painting, because this perspective on hands is not something you see expressed in art history.

AG This conversation about the specificity of lesbian experience indirectly conjures the preponderance of gay male iconography in the history of painting and, of course, the male gaze more particularly, a male-on-male gaze, the picturing of gay male desire. I am driving at a conundrum that can exist with explicit lesbian iconography because a queer woman's desire might also appeal to a hetero-normative, straight male viewer. In this way, the question of the hand becomes a more coded signifier that is only to queer women who understand it and have shared that experience.

JG Yes, hands are one of the only workarounds, in terms of avoiding the male gaze, or avoiding mimicking the male gaze. In my mind, I'm not mimicking it. I'm making paintings from my own perspective about my own desire, and my partner happens to be this blond, blue-eyed woman whose body fits a certain euro-centric capitalist ideal. That's an interesting thing for me to navigate, but it's just my reality. I some-

times question, "Do I, have some kind of responsibility to not idealize this particular kind of beauty?" I just put my focus on the looking at the looking. What we're all doing, is just painting about ourselves. I'm painting the way that I'm looking at her.

AG One of the ways you get around the intersection of this erotic common ground between heterosexual male desire and your own sexuality comes through by how you are figured in the painting as well as how you often situate your muse Mackenzie in this community of women. Somehow those narratives diffuse old paradigms.

JG I really try, in some way, to always paint myself into the painting. Either it's just implied, through the title like in the painting "Watching Me Swim," where you don't see me, but you see that Mackenzie's watching me. It's me looking at her outside of the painting's frame, and she's watching me. And that's the erotic part – being watched. In the composition, you see my bathing suit on the chair, so the other erotic implication is that I am naked. She's topless, but I have no bathing suit on, even though you can't see me. In other compositions, I have actual parts of my body in the painting. I do like to have the viewer always aware that I am in the painting with her, somewhere.

AG This is very legible! All of these erotically charged, aquatic scenes and bathing suits got me thinking about you in relationship to David Hockney.

JG I love Hockney. There's so much pleasure in that work, you know? It's not unusual for men to embrace pleasure in painting, especially gay men. But it's been so much harder for women to find a way to explore that same pleasure in a way that doesn't cause further harm. I think we should have pleasure, too. (Laughs) You know?

AG Again, we are going back to a gender politics. Why do we have to foreclose that possibility of erotic pleasure? Or the power of sexuality in women artists' work – an issue that has also been further complicated by the #MeToo movement. In some circles, #MeToo shut down the sexual agency and sexual power of women as such, full stop. Yet, your work is so much about that agency.

JG Definitely. There is a temptation to slam the door on that sexual power, as if there is an objectification trip wire, or something that makes it slam shut. But my attitude is, "What if you just step right over that trip wire and walk right through the door?" In stepping over the wire, you reach a lot of rich territory to explore. If we're speaking about figuration, it's such an oversimplification to only see the objectification when we depict an erotic image, and we are doing a disservice to the subject. To me, that's a very, um, un-feminist perspective, to reduce this subject matter to objectification. What about everything else that's going on in these paintings: the setting, or body language, or relationship to the viewer, relationship to the artist? I feel like audiences are sophisticated enough and understand the idea of objectification enough to bring a little bit more nuance into the conversation.

AG Not to mention that your work specifically is built on a trusting, consensual relationship. You're in a public relationship, and you are making your paintings playing with an ancient construct of the artist and the muse. Yet, it is unprecedented in art history that this relationship is between two women. Perhaps you circumnavigate some of these issues or possible objections to the eroticism because you're creating a unique agency here.

JG It sounds kind of corny, but the work is also partly about visibility. Because I did have the experience of literally not knowing things ab-

out myself because I didn't see queer women outside of myself, for most of my life. I didn't see some version of myself that I could aspire to as a young person. I couldn't identify an image and say "Oh, that's my sexuality." Those images did not exist in the world. Visibility is important because there's still such a void there.

AG Your work joins a few contemporary artists who are creating iconography that did not previously exist. LGBTQ love and desire may be represented in literature or popular culture, but less so in art history. Painters like Salman Toor, or Louis Fratino are making these complex, compelling scenes of contemporary queer life. And it is important to see those scenes portrayed on canvas, elevated in a high cultural context.

JG And not just an image you'd only find in a queer bookstore.

AG Or read about these lives documented in a book, like Justin Spring's *Secret Historian*. You've opened up a whole world in your paintings and it becomes accessible to whomever sees your canvases.

JG Actually, I think queer women are so invisible that even in my work some people still don't register what I'm depicting. Even as explicit as my paintings are, I've had people say, "Oh, God, I didn't realize you were queer." Or, "I thought that Mackenzie was just your really good friend." (Laughs) I get that comment sometimes, and I'm just baffled by it. People are so unaccustomed to seeing romantic relationships between women that it doesn't register.

AG Along the lines of Victorian images of "two friends" – a very coded homoerotic trope that could pass in polite society.

JG We're in this moment though where we are starting to see more pop culture acknowledgement of those relationships ... it's a great thing.

AG What about your recent series of portraits of other artists. Can you talk about them? How did you set about doing them ... I was thinking that you were queering your subjects?

JG The idea for this series came from being asked a lot for a photo of myself in the studio, for galleries, publications, press things. It's such a weird, voyeuristic kind of fetish on the part of the art consuming public. Do people realize that this is a strange thing that we expect artists to show themselves in their natural habitats? So, when I started this series, I was coming to it from a place that was critical and questioning, and slightly annoyed. I kind of wanted to make this campy, over-the-top version of that, at the same time acknowledging that I do enjoy these images of artists in their studios, like everyone else.

AG They're almost pornographic, no?

JG Yeah. I just wanted people to be a little bit more critical of this paradigm of depiction and display of the artist. But the paintings were so seductive that I think I just made the problem worse! I just played into it more. (Laughing) People saw my paintings and said things like, "Oh, I, I just love it when artists are sexy in their studios," I think that those paintings are funny.

AG Did you paint them from life?

JG It was Covid, so, for a couple of them, I took the photos myself. But some of them, I just had people send me selfies. Some artists were understandably not comfortable with other people being in their stu-

dio space during lockdown, and I liked the notion of "Send me a sexy selfie of you in your studio."

AG It's also funny that so many artists, both male and female, took their tops off. The topless men, I find particularly hysterical.

JG I know. And I love that Anthony went fully nude, with his coy body language, sitting on that stool. I loved getting the photos and seeing people's different interpretations of what an erotic presentation of themselves even was.

AG I also like how many of your portraits look like the artist's own work. Particularly, the Salman Toor painting seems almost like he painted it. The palette and the facial expression. It's uncanny.

JG I think, a lot of times, people paint figures subconsciously like the way that they kind of are. It was a fun project. I walked a thin line in terms of good taste, and I think that's just an interesting place to be. I would rather be there than in a place that comes across as preachy.

AG For me, one of the biggest tools contemporary figurative painters have is a deliberate type "wrongness," a knowing wrongness. It can be in the aesthetic, in the line, in the composition, where do you locate wrongness in your works? Is it in the chromatic aspects?

JG I love that figuration is more difficult to reckon with in terms of taste. It doesn't just sit benignly on some rich person's wall, looking tasteful. The previous decade of abstraction in the aughts just looked too good on rich people's walls!

AG Yeah, the "zombie formalism" didn't resist in any way, right?

JG If you put this weird figurative painting on your wall, you have to really love the painting to want to live with it because it's not going to just blend in and be another nice texture to go with your Moroccan rug. It's going to jump off the wall.

AG Figuration takes up space.

JG And a certain kind of attention. Most figuration is an affront to good taste. Taste is a funny thing that I like to think about and question. In some of the Artist Eroticized paintings, the colors are particularly garish, and the poses are reminiscent of online dating profile photos.

AG There's also a signature thing you do with the "magenta nipple" in a lot of your paintings (Laughs) that is a garish way of delivering the punctum of the painting.

JG That's also a device to entrap the eye. It's this body part that we've been trained to skim over with your eyes. It's not polite to linger there. The hot pink forces the eye to look. I like putting the viewer in that uncomfortable position of feeling like they are doing something wrong, but also it goes back to the unmediated relationship to paint and color. Nipples are such sensitive body parts. In my color-oriented painting brain it just makes sense that they would be most accurately depicted in heightened chroma.

AG And the nipple is a trigger, especially in this era of social media which is verboten/

JG Exactly. It's something of a middle finger to social media guidelines. Since they're paintings, supposedly social media censors aren't

supposed to block the image, but they don't always keep their promise with that.

AG I can see that happening in a work like "Self Portrait as Voyeur." I thought it was a joke about Feminist art and Women's House in the 70s with its propensity to favor tampon art! We are not supposed to look at the tampon string hanging out of a girl's bikini bottom, but that kind of political art was so much about putting tampons in our face!

JG I think a lot of my paintings are funny. But I don't know how often the humor really comes across. The same thing happened with the portraits that I made of my friends as like historical characters. They're all head and shoulders portraits friends as fictional characters that I really latched onto as a child or an adolescent. They're about fantasy and projection, and also, this very common practice among queer women of eroticizing things that weren't necessarily intended to be erotic. Because there was no romantic character for a queer girl to fixate on. They have titles like "Carolyn as Diana, Anne's bosom friend." (Laughter)

AG This reminds me of the work of gay male artists in the 40s or 50s who made work that could "pass" in straight society but if you know the codes and the humor you could be let into this very homosexual communities, like with Jared French and George Tooker.

JG Yeah. Not everyone is in on the joke. But I'm trying to let them in! Another way I think I let people into the work is through the role of light – it's kind of a kitsch, populist idea to indulge in painting light. I always joke that I want to take over Thomas Kinkadee's title as "Painter of Light." (Laughs) My first show at my New York gallery Fredericks & Freiser in 2019 was called "When I looked at you, the light changed." Light has a big impact on our perception of an experience or a memory. You could paint some same scene or person and if the light changes it completely transforms the emotional content. Really beautiful light can be so hokey. Oftentimes I think, "I'm just going to paint someone in this beautiful light. I'm going to paint these women in this desirous way and I'm just going to see what happens."

AG When I listen to you describe the importance of light in your work and how it operates, I am immediately thinking about how the light also projects this utopic spin to all of these personal vignettes that you let us see. The light has an emotive quality that magnifies what's happening in the paintings. Beautiful or idealizing light conjures the notion of an endless summer, or at least this community of gorgeous women that are frolicking in nature, and we get a chance to glimpse these Edens you paint.

JG Definitely. There is a utopic intention. The idea is, in a perfect world, where things are beautiful and the light is always nice, we don't have to make apologies for whatever "incorrect" things are in the work. The fruit of knowledge of the male gaze was never eaten. It never happened. All the baggage associated with that doesn't exist.

AG In this garden, Adam was over swimming in Hockney's pool and us women, we just ignored the tree.

JG Yeah, exactly! We never had to stop making beautiful paintings and seeing the sexual power and beauty of women. We could celebrate it. We didn't have to hit the "pause" button on that pleasure because there wasn't any danger to it.

SEEING THE SEEING

*The paintings of Jenna Gribbon
by Jennifer Higgie*

I visit Jenna Gribbon via zoom; I'm at home in London, she's in her Brooklyn studio. It's been snowing and she opens the front door to show me her garden. Amid a grim February, it looks like something from a fairy tale; branches heavy with snow, everything hushed, bright, shining. Its unreality adds to the dislocation of these strange plague days.

Distance doesn't distort some things, though. Even at their most ambiguous, Jenna's figurative paintings are quietly joyful homages to the domestic life she shares with her young son Silas and her girlfriend, the musician Mackenzie Scott. Her work emanates a subtle gratitude for the delicate skin of a beloved, the soft glance of a child, the feverish pink lights in a nightclub, friends on a summer's day. With her long blonde hair and quizzical face, Jenna portrays Mackenzie during casual, intimate moments: she's naked, in cowboy boots, pulling her shorts on, dancing in the kitchen, her hair flying up like flames; she's outside in the sun, her arms raised high as she skitters on the edge of a phallic shadow. She plays the guitar, looks directly at us in blue lipstick, squints into space, a book and a glass of whisky in hand. She contemplates Jenna, who paints her; we see the musician filtered through the gaze of her lover. Jenna tells me that her work 'is concerned with what happens when we encounter an image of a person ... How we consume imagery of other bodies.'¹ She stresses: 'I am always drawing attention to looking, the regarding of each other and the deep looking that happens when a painting is made.' For the artist, the gaze – and the myriad responses it might elicit – can be an act of gratification, of reciprocity, of wordless transmission.

Many of the works' titles are like haikus; tiny, diaristic stories: *My girlfriend in a short skirt, a row of men between us* (all paintings 2020 unless otherwise stated). *Regarding Me Regarding My Child. Watching her give/gives me pleasure. Regarding Me Regarding Latonya*. A series of empathic portraits titled 'The artist eroticized' reiterates like a mantra that looking and being looked is a complex exchange; at best, a sensual and self-conscious act of communication: *The artist eroticized (Chloe). The artist eroticized (Doron). The artist eroticized (Dominique). The artist eroticized (Robin). The artist eroticized (Devan). The artist eroticized (Angela). The artist eroticized (Haley). The artist eroticized (Alina). The artist eroticized (Salman). The artist eroticized (Anthony)*. In each portrait, Jenna pictures a painter whose work she admires in their studio; they pause amid their creativity to look out at us in various states of undress and vulnerability, their expressions ranging from the raunchy to the coy to the shy. Traditional power relationships are toppled: the artist paints the artist, the creator becomes the subject and object.

As many of her paintings portray her friends, I asked Jenna how important it is for the viewer to know what her relationship to her sitters is. She replied: 'I just want people to get a sense of a through-line of sensibilities more than anything specific. I'm OK if the paintings are taken out of context and given new interpretations.' Youth is ever present, but the artist told me that this is simply the demographic of her community. She said: 'I look forward to my girlfriend and I getting older. I'm not trying to fetishize youth and I'm looking forward to exploring ageing.'

Jenna occasionally inserts herself into her compositions. In *Me, a lurker*, a blonde woman takes a photograph of two naked young women lying on a blanket, a white parasol nearby. Sheltered by dark trees, their bodies glow softly in golden light. A monolithic shadow – the artist, presumably photographing the scene – dominates the foreground. In *Regarding Me Regarding You and Me* the viewpoint is intensely claustrophobic: Mackenzie's bare legs press up against Jenna's; her hand holds her knee. Mackenzie gazes at the painter; the women's bodies form something of a barricade against the abrasive worlds beyond. I think of the British artist Ithell Colquhoun's visceral surrealism, her thighs like cliffs, emerging from the sea in her 1938 painting, *Scylla*. But in Jenna's work, the body is less symbolic of other realms than a site of love and erotic power. In *Wholesome Sunday Fuck* Mackenzie leans over and into the artist, her pink nipples as vivid as exclamation marks, her belly a soft lilac. The paint is tender, swift, economical. The palette is fleshy, dramatic, animated with flashes of blue; shadows, conversely, let the light in.

In the physically small, but monumental painting *Luncheon on the grass, a recurring dream*, Jenna nods to Manet's *Dejeuner sur l'herbe* (c.1862). But whereas Manet set up a gender division between clothed men and naked or semi-naked women, in Jenna's gloriously lively study of five friends picnicking, it's clear that time travel has allowed for more equitable relationships. A central figure, their face averted and held rapt by a gesticulating woman – who in turn, exchanges a look with a young blonde in a sun hat – has a crop of red hair that simultaneously animates and

unifies the composition. Although these friends are obviously talking to each other, they're also self-absorbed. The perspective is up-close, both literally and metaphorically; we could be sharing the rug or their thoughts. While the oil paint is loose, tonal, atmospheric, details linger: the languor and heat, the raw texture of a straw hat, an observant expression and cool, draped clothes; a hand illuminated with sunshine.

Jenna has long been in thrall to cinema and at times her paintings evoke a film still: a fragment in time, part of a larger story that is tantalisingly just out of reach. A recent series of paintings was inspired by the films of Agnès Varda, who Jenna describes as 'one of her heroes', an artist who 'had so much joy around light and colour'. While some of the paintings respond to cinematic vignettes, the artist's focus is less on evoking the film's plot than on hers, and her friends', encounter with what they are watching – how, say, a girl crosses her legs, leans forward or plays with her hair, absorbed by Varda's tales. Like a hall of mirrors, a cyclical rhythm is set up between the actors looking at each other and the viewer observing them. In the announcement for her exhibition 'Agnès V. par Jenna G.' at Sim Smith in May 2021, the artist wrote:

... there's an emphasis on seeing the seeing in both of our approaches to our subjects that I'm focused on [...] The inclusion of documentary moments in her fictional films lets us know that she and they are conscious of every aspect of the alchemy of their dynamic. And when there are moments of reverie in her documentaries, we are reminded that it's not reality we are being shown, it's a world only visible through her lens.

Despite being a painter – one of the oldest art forms there is – Jenna is comfortable with new technologies. She uses her cell-phone camera as a sketchbook, taking, she told me, 'thousands of photos' in order to 'capture ideas'. After deciding on an image and then drawing a simple outline, she goes 'straight in with great juicy paint' – oil paint thinned with walnut oil on primed linen. This results in a high-gloss surface – not unlike a camera screen or the sheen of celluloid. Not averse to what happens when her pictures are reproduced in a format that drastically reduces their scale, she occasionally posts works-in-progress on Instagram. One of the positive aspects of this, she tells me, is that viewers will get to see the title of the work alongside the image, something which is often overlooked in a gallery setting.

I ask Jenna about her influences. She tells me she 'thinks about painting as a language that some people speak really well.' While the focus of her inspiration changes constantly, for now, these people include Mary Cassatt, Eric Fischl, Karen Kilimnik, Édouard Manet, Joan Semmel and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. Jenna told me that, in terms of her subjects, she 'wants to call bullshit on the idea of hierarchies of value'; she's also clearly invested in disrupting the patriarchal and heterosexual assumptions that are so deeply embedded in the history of art. Thinking about what links the work of these artists, it occurs to me they're all acutely aware that a glimpse,

a touch, a gesture can communicate a universe of meaning; that grand narratives reside in seemingly inconsequential moments. In this sense, Cassatt's affectionate portrayals of motherhood, in particular, are a significant reference for Jenna. She tells me that having children 'is a territory that so many women artists have shied away' and that when she was pregnant 'people assumed I wouldn't make work anymore and that I would no longer be an artist'. For her, it's vital that being a mother is acknowledged in art – in life – as an important part of human experience.

On Instagram, Jenna's musings on life commingle with her artworks. She recently posted an image of two versions of an information pamphlet that she and her son made a few years ago. His spiky, childish writing asked: 'Mothers can be artists obviously?' In response, she wrote in the caption: 'I've always felt motherhood is stigmatized in the art world, though I think that's slowly changing. Shout out to all the artists who identify as mothers out there managing things during this pandemic! More art from moms!' Her account is labelled: 'Paintings from inside the scopophilic feedback loop'. I look up the definition of 'scopophilia': the love of looking. Apt.

7 April 2021

1. All quotes are from a conversation between Jennifer Higgle and Jenna Gribbon, 2 February 2021.

PAINTINGS FROM INSIDE THE SCOPOPHILIC FEEDBACK LOOP

*Jenna Gribbon's
Regarding Me Regarding You (2020)
by Brenda Hollweg*

If there is such a place, an echo of a primordial world it is art that brings us as close as possible to it, not by the image it presents but by the absence it brings close to your seizure. Even in the tableau, the eye cannot fully meet the gaze.¹

Thus, if the artist sets you an ambush, it is as if while saying 'you don't see me from where I look at you' the artist yet offers an image by which you may get closer to what aches you at your own blind spot.²

In September 2020, shortly before SARS-Cov2 was on the rise again across Europe, GNYP Gallery Berlin opened its doors to an exhibition that quickly became one of the most talked-about art shows in town: *Regarding Me Regarding You* by Jenna Gribbon (1978–). The show assembled twenty-one of the artist's most recent oil paintings, scenic works such as *Lunch on the Grass*, *a Recurring Dream*, in which five of her friends can be seen socializing in a park, as well as smaller pieces such as *Night Vigil* or *So Much Trust*, two affectionate portraits the artist made of her nine-year-old son. In another portrait, which faintly recalls the homely atmosphere of Mary Stevenson Cassatt's *Young Girl in a Blue Armchair* (1878), her friend Latonya is shown with a black-and-white cat in her lap. A whole series of paintings, including *Hey! Up Here!*, *Unfaltering* and *Yard Squint*, picture her partner Mackenzie Scott, the inde-

pendent American songwriter and musician, at home or in other places of familiarity, leisure and comfort. As intimate portraits of other people, these paintings share a particular form of privileged knowledge, of 'closeness' and being 'special' to another person; a situation that is often also 'associated with high levels of trust.'³ Two self-portraits in the show, *Regarding Me Regarding You and Me* and *Watching Her Give/Gives Me Pleasure*, even allow us to witness a moment of sexual intimacy. What makes us look at such paintings of strangers being intimate with each other? What do these paintings want or solicit from us, particularly at a time when matters of a personal kind are increasingly relegated to the digital world: to video-chatting via Google Hangout or image-sharing practices on Instagram or Snapchat?

Regarding Me Regarding You, as I want to argue here, performs the creative body of the artist as an aggregate of cognized and non-cognized partial subjectivities by means of intertextual references, suggestive gestures, iconographic allusions, or correlations. As the title of the exhibition suggests, her works relate us in twisted ways to viewing positions and the logics of the gaze that make us more self-conscious of our own habits and rituals of 'looking and being looked at'.⁴ These dynamics, as we shall see, are often called up, however, to be resisted or subverted at the same time. As aesthetic works, her paintings share in more oblique and non-conscious ways a human capacity for compassion, which due to its link to the feminine corpo-real is also an ethical disposition that has the potential to shift and transform the current phallocratic order.

For this latter argument, I draw on the model of the Matrix or Matrixial borderspace, developed by painter and psychoanalyst Bracha L. Ettinger, with which

*she seeks to describe certain aspects of human symbolic experience to relativize the prevailing status of the concept of the Phallus in Lacan's (and Freud's) psychoanalytic theories. The Matrix is modelled upon certain dimensions of the prenatal state that are culturally foreclosed, occluded, or repressed. It corresponds to a feminine dimension of the Symbolic order dealing with asymmetrical, plural, and fragmented subjects composed of the known as well as the not-rejected and not-assimilated unknown, and to unconscious processes of change and transgression in borderlines, limits, and thresholds.*⁵

In the Matrixial borderspace, which is a psychic-symbolic space, 'co-emerging I(s) and non-I(s) co-exist in difference; partial subjects discern one another as uncognized non-I(s) without absorbing mergence to abolish differences, and without attacking expulsion', as Ettinger argues. 'My hypothesis is', as she writes,

that such relations occur between internal psychic partial subjects and part-objects, and also between the subject, other subjects and external objects: in parallel to phallic relations, on an alternative track. In the very late pre-natal phase such relations occur on the level of the real between part-objects and partial becoming-subjects in

*the psychic-bodily feminine/infant borderspace. They are accompanied by some kind of minimal awareness, refining traces which will be later brocaded into the tissue of subjectivity.*⁶

As a non-conscious potential for creative-ness and com-passion towards an-other, the Matrixial dimension exists with-in each of us, *irrespective of sex and gender*, because at some point we have all been carried and been part of this distinct stratum of feminine or, as she at times writes, humane subjectivization. Ettinger thinks 'of the "complete" or "whole" subject as emerging after and from an already distinct and highly structured stratum rather than from one that is undifferentiated.'⁷ Art allows us, as the epigraph to this essay suggests, to access partial elements of this early form of subjectivization through affective traces that are mobilized in the encounter with the aesthetic work:

*During the 'paintorial' act, we can discern a minimal and diffused pleasure/ dis-pleasure affect which I call the matrixial affect shared between the artist and viewers – even if at different moments in time – through evocations like silent alertness, amazement and wonder, empathetic curiosity, compassion, awe, and uncanniness.*⁸

When such affect enters visibility in the work as non-ocular Matrixial gaze, it disturbs

*and changes the tableau, because it penetrates and alters the scopic field, which by definition is im-pure – inseparable from other unconscious dimensions of the psyche (oral, anal), informed by different sources of sensibilities (like changes in pressure, movement, touch etc.) and also connected to the unconscious of others in inter-subjective and trans-subjective spheres.*⁹

I am interested here in the intricate ways Gribbon's work – with its different invocations of social and sexual intimacy – not only might enlarge our thinking about subjectivity, but also, to speak with Griselda Pollok, 'our understanding of human ethical capacities, and hence even politics', 'through this expanded proposition about a sexual difference *of/from* the Matrixial feminine.'¹⁰

A Picnic in the Park; or, From-with-in-towards the Feminine

One of the paintings that most forcefully captured my gaze was *Lunch on the Grass, a Recurring Dream*. It is a work of loose brushwork and vibrant colour that shows us five women socializing in a park. With its lush and abundant vegetation, this green space could be anywhere in the South of the United States, possibly even near Knoxville, Tennessee, where the artist was born. The day seems to be warm and sunny; the women are all lightly dressed. Some of them lie prone on picnic blankets, others can be seen sitting on chairs. The atmosphere is relaxed and intimate:

one woman is talking, others are listening. Only one woman appears to be not sharing in the conversation. Lying on a white spread, slightly distanced from her friends, she is either looking elsewhere or inward. Her eyes are partly hidden behind the tassels of her large-brimmed hat, which makes it more difficult to tell whether she is listening, daydreaming or just plain bored.

Through its spatial organization, choice of motif, figurations and title, the painting strangely recalls Édouard Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (*Luncheon on the Grass*, 1862-63). Manet's painting is set in a densely wooded park, possibly situated in the northern suburb of Saint-Ouen, near the painter's family property in Gennevilliers; it also entails mythical elements that might be borrowed from one of the old masters, say a Titian or Giorgione. The painting pictures a female nude – thought to be the artist's favourite model Victorine Meurent – and a scantily dressed female bather on a picnic with two fully dressed men in a conversation. The male figure on the right is a combination of Manet's two brothers, Eugène and Gustave Manet, while the other man is thought to be based on his brother-in-law, Dutch sculptor Ferdinand Leenhoff.¹¹ Due to its enigmatic character and scandalous treatment of nudity, *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* was not received well; in fact, it was rejected at the 1863 Paris Salon and also met with laughter and sarcasm in other places.¹²

Manet was part of a group of impressionist painters who called themselves the Indépendents. In their works these painters, including also Gustave Courbet, Claude Monet, and Gustave Caillebotte, reinvented Paris as a new space 'of recreation, leisure and pleasure, of nature to be enjoyed at weekends in suburbia, of the prostitute taking over and of fluidity of class in the popular spaces of entertainment'.¹³ This new Paris stretched 'from the new boulevards via Gare St Lazare out on the suburban train to Bougival or Argenteuil'¹⁴ where Manet and his impressionist friends lived, worked and pictured themselves. In 1865, for instance, Monet paints his own version of *Luncheon on the Grass*, set again in a wooded park: his two female figures are dressed but through their decorative garments and gestures suggest that their male companions may have nibbled on more than just fruit. These spaces, which have been 'revealed as indexical of modernity' are, as Pollock argues, in fact 'marginal or interstitial spaces where the fields of the masculine and the feminine intersect and structure sexuality within a classed order'.¹⁵ *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* can be read as the staging of such an interstitial space, openly addressing through its marked polarities these gendered perceptions of sexuality and cross-class practice of intimacy in late nineteenth-century Parisian culture.

Gribbon's *Lunch on the Grass, a Recurring Dream* gestures to this art historical tradition but reinvents it in diverse ways. Like later versions of the scene, such as Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (*Olympia*; orig. *Le Bordel d'Alger*) from 1907, her work moves painting into abstraction; it does so, however, for widely different purposes than the Picasso. His scene features five female figures situated in Barcelona's notorious red-light district. While these ethnically invested cubist figures evoke the subject of prostitution, Gribbon's gathering in the park sug-

gests a meeting of mind and soul. Identified as 'a recurrent dream', her scene also becomes 'a place of residues, fragments and memories, of unconscious thought',¹⁶ a phantasy of feminine *jouissance* and, as I want to suggest here, non-conscious Matrixial affect. Crucial to this phantasy is – in the first instance – the way the artist channels our attention to two female figures: to the one, placed just off centre, who is evoking through her orange-coloured bob of hair, blue nail polish and ring on her index finger, an image of queerness; and to the black female figure on the right side, who is wearing a Japanese kimono, a garment that is catching the light in pronounced ways. This latter African American figure becomes the focal point in the picture, not only through the decorative detail of her garment, but also through the energised mode with which she appears to be moving her arms and hands in support of her speech. In Manet's painting *Olympia* (1863), to which Gribbon's work here ironically nods, the black maid with her elaborate bouquet of flowers somehow retreats into the background; in *Lunch on the Grass, a Recurring Dream*, the African American woman – one of Gribbon's close friends – is shown to become the driving force behind the conversation: three of the other women have their heads turned towards her or slightly tilted in her direction (without having their gaze fixed on her) as if reflecting about what she just said. Through the choice of soft colours and the subtle way the sides of her arms and wrists are highlighted, she is provided both with an intellectual flair and a mythic, even mystic, aura.

In her collection of essays and speeches, *Sister Outsider* (1984), Audre Lorde speaks of the powers of the Erotic. She identifies the Erotic as a 'resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feelings'.¹⁷ Gribbon's African American figure appears to embody this erotic energy, not only drawing her friends' attention, but also ours. Evoked is a moment of in-spirited exchange between a group of diverse women who are meeting one another with curiosity, in an open and respectful, albeit asymmetrical, manner. Fleshed out is Lorde's political vision for women, particularly black women: to live a life in which they have, as she writes in *Sister Outsider*, every responsibility and right 'to recognize each other' in their diversity 'without fear and to love where [...] they choose'¹⁸ across race, gender and class differences. As the scene only features a small group of friends, it also reminds me of the feminist politics of *affidamento*, of entrustment. Developed in the 1980s, by members of the Milan Women's Bookshop collective, these politics emphasise one-on-one relations between women, which are seen to be more important in terms of the potential they offer for honouring the disparities between them, rather than their collective identity, as a basis for trust.

Furthermore, *Lunch on the Grass, a Recurring Dream* moves painting outside an optical logic. Over large parts, the painting is marked by dispersion: blurred borderlines, diffused zones of darkness and light, a rough, in places almost rushed brushwork hinging on the abstract. In these parts, aesthetics can bring to the fore an ethical disposition, a capacity for response or response-ability, to speak with Ettinger, that

might also be a part of Lorde's intersubjective relations of responsibility. While in the modernist paintings by men, as Pollock argues, the move to abstraction is done to keep out 'a range of issues, practices and concerns that are relevant to women: imagination, stories, uncanny sensations, traces of the body',¹⁹ in Gribbon's scenic group portrait a virtual image is conjured up that relates us to the Matrixial border-space and – with it – to a source of psychic libidinal flows, sensations and energies or a minimal awareness of dis/pleasure. For Ettinger, this prenatal psychic border-space provides us with a 'dimension of plurality and difference of the several in joint subjectivity in [what she calls] metramorphosis.'²⁰ The latter, which artworks can bring to the fore, are uncognized sense-making formations; they are to the model of the Matrix what the poetics of metaphor and metonymy are to the phallogocentric system of language and representation.

The dynamic white patch of paint, which is cut through with different shades of grey, blue or pink and looks as if it could be a picnic blanket, is significant in this context. Echoing Monet's white picnic blanket from his nineteenth-century staging of this scene, it also becomes a gesture (not a symbol) of hospitality. Unlike any other previous remake of this scene, *Lunch on the Grass, a Recurring Dream* positions the spectator on eye-level with the picnicking party, pretty much on the ground, to join in the encounter. In doing so, the patch of white paint, one might argue with Gilles Deleuze, operates like 'signalectic material'.²¹ This is a phrase Deleuze developed in the context of the time-image to argue for cinema's capacity to allow abstract concepts, such as love or friendship, to become alive. In *Lunch on the Grass, a Recurring Dream* the white empty space on the blanket seems to invite viewers to join the group and participate in this moment of feminine *jouissance*; it 'does' hospitality in a way that allows intimacy, love, mutual exchange, a desire for connectivity to become palpably tangible.

On a subliminal level, the drawn-out formation of the patch of whiteness also registers the wide-angled perspective and different temporality of another medium: that of the phone camera with which Gribbon habitually documents scenes from her life. Her digital snapshots often form the starting point for further creative re-inventions in paint; they also no longer require the painter to make use of the more conventional technique of sketching a scene out in preliminary drawings. It might be worth mentioning in this context that Gribbon – like many of us – has her own Instagram feed with pictures of herself and her family, her private and professional life, various social groups and followers, as well as some of her paintings.²² In *Lunch on the Grass, a Recurring Dream* the white patch forms a node of cross-media inscriptions that point us in diffracted and transcribed ways to the social reality of the image-maker herself, marked by the familiarity with different analogue and digital media. Before she distanced herself from the group to take the picture, the artist might or might not have occupied the empty space in the foreground. More important, however, is the awareness we gain of an embodied situatedness of this scene in the real.

In a conversation with Taylor Dafoe in August 2020, Gribbon is quoted to have said: 'I have always made the paintings that I wanted to see, but then it became

evident that there were paintings that people needed to see."²³ Her words here seem to be inflected by the 2016 election and the changes in the cultural climate as a result of it, affecting women, queer, black and other minority communities in the United States. In this light, her image of homosocial intimacy indeed appears like a dream, diverging from reality. At the same time, the work's aesthetics also give us the artist's own vision: one that recurs, i.e. comes and goes but also persists, in working with 'a matrixial cluster of desire *meeting with* reality and trauma *meeting with* phantasm'.²⁴ As an image of feminine *jouissance*, *Lunch on the Grass, a Recurring Dream* speaks to a future-site that belongs 'to the female both in the corpo-real dimension and as potentiality'.²⁵ Furthermore, looking at the painted scene in times of a global pandemic, its vibrant vacillation between figurative and abstract elements prompts me to revalue what feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero – with an implicit reference to Emmanuel Levinas – calls 'the elemental reality of the face-to-face';²⁶ a reality that speaks to my current desire for more (outdoor) communal activities whilst digital technologies of remote nearness, lockdowns and travel restrictions enforce isolation and separation from family and friends.

Queer Portraits, Ciphers of Love

In 2014, on the occasion of her show *Conversations*, Gribbon disclosed how she feels compelled in her practice 'to always return to painting people'. For her, 'there's nothing more interesting than the people of a given time, their presence, and their relationship to their world. It's fascinating how a good portrait can approximate something of that presence and materialize it into something permanent'.²⁷ *Regarding Me Regarding You* certainly allows their different personalities acquire borderline visibility. Assembling a series of suggestive portraits of her family and friends, the painter also aspires to tell a story or stories of 'something shared, a story about both oneself and others'.²⁸ This is the promise any good portrait makes: that we find in the intimate disclosure of an-other something important about ourselves. Gribbon's aesthetic work, as I want to argue here, prepares us for the hidden relational dynamics of human subject formation. As Cavarero argues, we become manifest and recognizable to ourselves through the gaze and the stories we long to hear from (an) other(s).²⁹ Such relational dynamics are already alluded to in the title of the exhibition. The shifting meanings of 'regarding' indicate a complex play with the gaze, although the twisted logic of the title makes it difficult to know who is 'looking or being looked at', who is holding the other 'in regard': the painter, her 'sitters', the viewer? Gribbon's portraits become carriers of entangled relations that form interstitial spaces of private and personal as much as public and universal significance.

Portrait painting has always strongly relied on the relation that exists between painter and model. Obviously, none of Gribbon's several others did ever purposely sit for her as a model. The phone pics, on which many of her paintings are based, are often taken intuitively or in a snapshot manner to capture and preserve a particular

moment or personal observation. During a longer creative process of re-imagination and memorisation, the initial scene is then changed, reinvented, partly made up, to become the painting. Repeatedly, Gribbon's own invisible presence is inscribed in the title of her paintings, as in *Regarding Me Regarding My Child*, *Regarding Me Regarding Latonya* and *Me, a Lurker*, or foregrounded by including her shadow in the scene. *Night Vigil* is another affectionate portrait the artist made of her nine-year old son. We see him lying on his back, sound asleep, with his face turned to the spectator. His rosy cheeks and pouting lips recall the enchanted beauty of a Pre-Raphaelite painting,³⁰ while a pronounced use of the colour red accentuates his age-related androgyny. The sweet young face and the tender flesh of his skin inspire caress, but a mysterious shroud can also be seen to creep in from the left. Its khaki striations and gauze-like texture conjure up associations with a bad dream that might be disturbing this sleeper's slumber, as in Henry Fuseli's *The Nightmare* (1781). The poetic title of Gribbon's painting, however, also invokes the invisible presence of the artist as mother or, in a more general sense, as a safe-guarding spirit that keeps her child safe at night. The shroud here suggests maternal inclination and care for the vulnerable; her love seems to embalm the tender flesh of his body like a vaporous armour. In this latter sense *Night Vigil* also recalls Fuseli's *Danae and Perseus on Seriphos* (1790), an ambivalent image of maternal caress that negotiates love, fear for the other and a melancholic outlook into the future via central figures of Greek mythology. In *Regarding Me Regarding My Child* the invisible presence of the artist even acquires religious connotations. The iconographic shape and seemingly wood-carved texture of the shadow in this painting evoke the Virgin Mary and suggest a virtual composition of 'Madonna with child'.

In both portraits of her son, maternal inclination towards the defenceless and vulnerable other is carried, on a non-conscious level, by an attentive and compassionate Matrixial gaze: a life-enhancing ethical disposition that, at times, ever so slightly shores up against other, perhaps more death-dealing affectivities. Beyond the marks the painter makes with her brushstroke, beyond the shadows that line the curve of his shoulder, a primordial connectivity is struggling 'not exactly into representation, but into the field of recognition that is the momentary holding, at the very limits of conscious/ unconscious, of an awareness of what is already there'.³¹ Both paintings share with us a form of 'beauty' that is not beauty in the conventional sense of Kantian aesthetics but a shared access to Matrixial Eros, i.e. a non-conscious desire for connectivity, as it travels with-in slippery, non-ocular circuits of love and anguish between partial subjectivities in co-poiesis.

Several works in the show are portraits the artist made of Mackenzie Scott, her live-in partner. These paintings not only intimate Scott's uniqueness, but also make us aware of the socially critical potential of intimacy. In *Yard Squint*, we catch Scott relaxing in the patio, with a book and a drink in her hand. Gribbon's portrait here nods to an iconographic gallery of similar scenes produced in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. In these works, young women of good standing are seated in the living room

or on the balcony, in a chair or at a table, reading. Well-dressed, with made-up hair and often self-absorbed in their reading, these young ladies represent educated white femininity. In *Yard Squint*, the woman at the wooden table is dressed in shorts and a sleeveless top; she wears blue socks spotted with cat faces and a pair of black Doc Martens. With her left leg spread out on the table, she is not even reading, only holding the book, and one of her big black boots is provocatively pointing at us. Her unkempt blond hair and flushed cheeks, probably from the day's heat, and the slightly awkward way in which she is holding both the drink and the book in her left hand, work against art historical conventions. Although *Yard Squint* generally gestures to the critical value attached to the reading woman, it seems to be aiming for something else.

On the table, in Scott's reach, a pair of sunglasses can be seen, which I associate with her. Although she could have worn these glasses to shield her eyes against the sun, she obviously did not bother to put them on. Instead, she is caught squinting at us, defying the glaring sun. Matched with her butch-like attitude (legs on the table) and choice of fashion (Doc Martens), this squint conjures up an image of queer defiance that jars in frivolous ways with her otherwise more compliant 'feminine' appearance. The 'queer' in 'queer defiance' here not only designates 'the opposite of straight', but also connotes something that is 'twisted' or 'bent', as in the old etymological sense of the Latin *torquere*, and 'oblique', 'diagonal' or 'transverse', as its roots in the German *quer* suggest.³² *Yard Squint*, in other words, does not only tell us something about Scott's sexual orientation, but also shares with us a cultural and potentially political position, pointing us to ideas of non-conformity, transgression and subversion. In this context it might also be worth recalling Susan Sontag's argument from her much-quoted 'Notes on "Camp"' (1964),

*that the most refined form of sexual attractiveness (as well as the most refined form of sexual pleasure) consists in going against the grain of one's sex. What is most beautiful in virile men is something feminine; what is most beautiful in feminine women is something masculine [...] Allied to the Camp taste for the androgynous is something that seems quite different but isn't: a relish for the exaggeration of sexual characteristics and personality mannerisms.*³³

A touch of Camp seems to mark almost all of Gribbon's portraits: it is inscribed in the stark blue lipstick that Scott wears in *Unfaltering* or in the bright orange or pink with which the painter highlights the diverse highly sensitive erogenous zones of her partner, her son and her close friends. In *Hot Pink Showdown*, the pink sky against which Scott's tiny figure in brown boots is pitched, engenders the self-conscious play with artifice and exaggeration of which Sontag speaks in her essay. In a Camp-y act of rebellion, Scott is seen to brave the elements like a Hollywood cowboy facing his opponent in the final showdown.

Portraits have also often been carriers of secrecy and undeclared love. Sometimes the model is no longer known, as this is the case with the young woman in

Johannes Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (c. 1665). At other times, the model's identity is so deeply hidden beneath symbols and conceits that her identity can only be established after decades of research. This is the case in Hans Holbein's miniature *Portrait of a Lady, perhaps Catherine Howard* (c. 1540). Only this year, art historians seem to have discovered the 'true' identity of the woman in the portrait, which is now given as Anne of Cleves, Henry VIII's fourth wife, after new clues emerged from the painting itself.³⁴ A clue also plays a crucial part in my speculative reading of Gribbon's *Hey! Up Here!*, another scenic portrait of Scott. Once more, she is seen wearing cowboy boots – this time, of a bright yellow colour. These boots point us to the hidden relation of love that exists between the painter and her 'sitter'. In the picture, Scott is placed on a boulder near a shallow riverbed, evoking John Sargent Singer's *Mountain Stream* (1912–14). Topless, only wearing a pair of rolled-up shorts and her yellow boots, she looks strangely out of place against the textured surface of green ferns and bluish-beige and brown pebble stones. At first glance, the flashy yet distinctly western style of her sturdy footwear seems to relate her to the vast image archive of women in cowboy outfits, as represented in glamorous online magazines such as *Cowgirl* or on social media platforms such as Instagram or Pinterest. Here self-styled twenty-first-century cowgirl-fashionistas promote themselves in upcycled booties as independent and self-reliant natural beauties. But, on second thought, Scott's facial expression is too unpretentious, her body seems too vulnerable, and she is placed too far in the distance to be a match for these self-confident poster-(cow)girls.

Scott's western-style boots also engender associations with US-American rodeo culture and the cinematic genre of the Hollywood western. The yellow colour of her boots made me think of Joseph Kane's *The Yellow Rose of Texas* (1944), a film most notably remembered for its title song. 'The Yellow Rose of Texas' was an old folk song, popular during the Civil War, especially among cavalrymen. The cover version from the 1940s, which made Kane's film famous, even today counts over ten million hits on YouTube. Its catchy refrain reads like this: 'Her eyes are bright as diamonds, they sparkle like the dew/ You may talk about your Clementine/ And sing of Rosalee/ But the Yellow Rose of Texas/ Is the only gal for me'. A young man proudly sings of his physical attraction to a young 'gal', whom he prefers over any other woman. Elvis Presley performed a cover version of this romantic song in the 1960s, albeit with different lyrics. The King of Rock and Roll, famous for his 'Lonesome Cowboy' tunes, is known for wearing glitzy western-style boots on stage. Due to his flamboyant outfit and soft feminine features, Elvis has also been claimed by parts of the LGBTQI+ community as a bisexual icon. In *Vested Interests*, her study on cross-dressing and cultural anxiety (1997), Marjorie Garber explores his feminine impersonations and androgynous sexual mystique.³⁵

In *Hey! Up Here!*, Scott's yellow cowboy boots not only make us look, but also form the connective fabric from which multiply diffracted and transcribed threads can unwind. The heteronormative romance from the old folk song is thereby 'cross-woven' (or queered) in an attempt to direct us beyond the picture frame and to dis-

close the love that binds the painter to her 'sitter'. This playful, self-referential inscription reminds me of Céline Sciamma's queer film drama *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (*Portrait of a Young Lady on Fire*, 2019). In the closing scene, Marianne, the French painter and one of the two protagonists, is visiting a public art fair. Amongst the exhibited works she also discovers a portrait of Héloïse, the young French aristocrat she herself, at some point in the past, was commissioned to paint and fell in love with. As the camera zooms in, attention is drawn to the turned-over ear of a book page, disclosing the number 28. Encrypted in this pictogram is the memory of a love and a night spent in sexual rapture. In corresponding ways, Scott's yellow cowboy boots in *Hey! Up Here!* become a cipher for the absent-presence of queer love and desire. They are not given in the picture but in-form and create the virtual depth-space of the painting – for us to encounter, or not.

Compassion, Awe and the Matrixial Gaze

Several of Gribbon's portraits of Scott draw particular attention to technologies of 'looking and being looked at'. In *Funny How They Call It Shooting*, Scott is placed in a kitchen-like space. Dressed in a black stage outfit with a cowboy hat on, she is doing professional work, waiting for the recording of her music video shoot, *Dressing America* (2019), to begin. Her eye-line and focused facial expression suggest that she is being addressed from beyond the frame by the (mostly) invisible camera woman operating the large static film camera. Only her right lower arm can be seen in the picture. The interview situation relates us to the 'male gaze', as conceptualized by Laura Mulvey in 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975), her feminist critique of the gaze, developed in the context of classic Hollywood cinema. Pleasure in looking, as Mulvey argues, in patriarchal societies 'has been split between active/male and passive/female'.³⁶ The spectator is thought to draw pleasure from the identification with these positions, enabled by the film camera as ideological apparatus.

In *Funny How They Call It Shooting* this pleasure is slightly more complicated. Scott, in front of the camera, assumes the position of 'woman as passive image' or 'spectacle' in relation to 'the controlling male gaze' but this position is taken up by another woman, operating the film camera from an invisible place. She becomes the 'active bearer' of the 'look', hence queering the gaze. The spectator is also not positioned behind the camera but, at a slightly low angle, as a witness of the video shoot, separated from the camera woman by a wall or doorframe. This position allows viewers to pay more attention to Scott and her potentially anxious anticipation of the interview, evoking a sense of with-ness, alongside-ness and compassion, rather than objectification. In oblique ways, the aesthetic work is here able, to speak with Pollock,

to stage at one and the same time both a passage to the encounter with its traces and a passage away from it – precisely when, through the processes it offers to the viewer to experience and the gazing it invites, the artwork disrupts the hunger for mastery

(epistemophilia) and sadism or voyeurism (scopophilia) and the viewer becomes a partner-in-difference (Ettinger).³⁷

Not visible in the picture but inscribed in the scene, pre-empting the future, is the fact that the finished video, *Dressing America*, will later also include the painter herself. Visible to the spectator, but supposedly not framed by the film camera in the picture, is the pair of striped sports socks that Scott is wearing. The odd detail, jarring with the more official context of the video shoot, humanises the scenario and provides it both with a sense of humour and an aura of queer informality. Evoked is a public performance, but one that is happening in a private, domestic environment. Such a scene is suggestive of the work-related meetings on Zoom or Teams which many of us are currently conducting from home, due to the global pandemic and its enforced conditions of isolation.

In *My Girlfriend in a Short Skirt, a Row of Men Between Us* another scenario involving the gaze is staged to eventually complicate and partially transform this gaze. Scott is here captured playing the guitar during a live performance at *Yes* in Manchester. She is shown in a posture of self-absorption; she is not making eye-contact with her audience, not even with her male fans in the front row. Once more, she becomes a 'spectacle' in Mulvey's sense, an object of desire for their unhampered male gaze. Positioned near the stage, in the audience but somewhere behind these men, is the painter herself; at least, this is what the title suggests, as her figure is absent and can only be imagined. In the interstitial space of image and text a play between different temporalities is engendered. Presumably, as this title makes us ponder, Gribbon's view was partly blocked by their tall male physiques and baseball caps when she watched her girlfriend perform on stage. Her presence at the concert, however, is inscribed in the way the spectator is positioned slightly higher than the imagined Gribbon but still amongst the crowd, affording a good view onto the stage, the front singer and parts of the audience. This 'third' position was enabled, most likely, by the 'eye' of the phone camera, held up by Gribbon at some point during the performance.

My Girlfriend in a Short Skirt, a Row of Men Between Us here refracts an anachronistic and self-reflective play with different (possible) viewing positions and temporalities; in fact, like all other works in the show, this painting could be called an 'after painting', in its concern with an image that belongs 'to a moment "before"'.³⁸ This initiated play, however, also makes us become aware of the different habits and rituals of 'looking and being looked at'. Obviously, the visual pleasure derived from looking at this scene and the singer's figure, her slim body, long legs and shiny, cascading blond hair in particular, is not only of a voyeuristic, but also of a fetishizing nature, even when the gaze is queered. Scott here, to a certain extent, becomes the Phallus; this is different from her role in *Sound Check (No Audience)*, in which she is also seen on stage but before the actual performance. Both paintings are infiltrated by Matrixial affect, which supplements and disorders the gaze through a com-pas-

sionate, non-ocular Matrixial gaze. "The screen of this gaze is a Matrixial screen of phantasy", as Ettinger argues: 'As an image it penetrates the gestures of co-eventing and co-emergence in the Real – in the Real of Encounter-event.'³⁹ Stark colours, compressed space and a range of different viewing positions open up space for an affective encounter that disperses with Oedipal phallic difference and allows for the sharing of 'fascinace' (Ettinger) through evocations of silent alertness, empathetic curiosity, wonder, awe, amazement, compassion as well as uncanniness.⁴⁰ Such a virtual depth-space may also connect us, as Ettinger writes, with what 'aches' us at our 'own blind spot'.⁴¹

I opened my journey with an exploration of *Lunch on the Grass, a Recurring Dream*, a scenic group portrait that celebrates a mode of intimacy and affiliation between women, which – although often at risk – is socially accepted in most cultures. I want to conclude it with a closer look at *Watching You Give/ Gives Me Pleasure*, a small-formatted piece that could be read as an intimate self-portrait of the painter and her partner in bed. More important about this work, however, is that it negotiates a mode of lesbian intimacy that in patriarchal societies is both as layered with male fantasy as it is socially policed. Suggested in the painting is an act of *cunnilingus* practiced between two women. Only twenty-three by thirty-one centimetres, the piece is about the same size as that of an iPad or tablet – gadgets by which sexually explicit material is often mediated these days. Exhibited in the gallery, the small-formatted work encourages visitors to move closer to see what is actually intimated here. Physical proximity is solicited beyond the picture frame, enforcing a shift in posture that recalls Cavarero's philosophical exploration of inclination as a critique of phallocratic rectitude. In *Inclinations* (2016) she argues for an

*imaginary of maternity [that] permits a shift of attention from a subject modelled on the idea of autonomy to a subjectivity structurally characterized by dependence and exposure, from the assertions of a self-consistent and partitioned subjectivity to a subjectivity that is open and relational.*⁴²

The enforced posture of inclination seems to prime us here for the intimate exchange and relational mode of subjectivity that we are about to encounter in/ through the painting. Its small format also gestures to more historical media forms of sharing sexually explicit material, including the colour postcard. Even before the invention of photography in the nineteenth century, illustrated postcards of naked or half-dressed women in insinuating postures circulated as part of a larger trade in so-called obscene ephemera. Unlike these erotic collectibles, *Watching You Give/ Gives Me Pleasure*, however, works with the non-ocular Matrixial gaze; and in sharp contrast to works of sexual pornography, the piece requires imagination and phantasy.

On the right, the figurative outlines of a disproportionately big crest of blond hair can be spotted. On the left, the inner side of a leg frames the picture, channelling the spectator's perspective. The sizes, shapes and textures of head, hair and leg sug-

gest two female figures. Viewers familiar with Scott's appearance may quickly associate the blond-haired figure with her, assuming that the slender limb on the left is the painter's own leg; but we cannot be sure. From the hip-high angle at which the spectator is positioned, the right shoulder of the blond-haired woman as well as larger parts of her back and behind jar with the tiny size of her pair of crossed-over bare feet, framed by the arch of a door in the background. These spatial incongruities appear to correspond, once more, to the wide-angle lenses of the phone camera, through which this picture was probably captured in the first place. Its inscribed presence in this picture also tells us, in a somehow self-ironic way, not only something about the omni-presence of this gadget in the painter's life, but also about the performative quality of intimacy itself. Assuming the person behind the camera is a woman, the gaze inscribed in this portrait is once again queered. In the reduction to figures of basic shape, Scott's multi-coloured strands of hair or her shining back and limbs are amplified and the visceral character of this intimate moment of queer carnal desire is highlighted.

Accommodating, as I argue here, affected traces of Matrixial Eros, *Watching Me Give/Gives Me Pleasure* also points us beyond sexual desire. This is made possible through the dance of light and shadow, the vivid use of colour (orange and various other flesh tonalities) or the thick application of paint in combination with the drawn-out brushstrokes. Distinct forms of line-marking are abandoned and subtly shaded areas that connect certain body parts form a porous Matrixial borderspace, intimating a sense of jointness-in-difference. This is also suggested through the twisted logic of the painting's title: with its use of the slash and the differencing reiteration of the same verb ('give/ gives'), readers are referred to the existence of partial yet related subjectivities, produced 'conjointly but differently'.⁴³ Where an image of queer carnal desire is infused with Matrixial desire for borderlinking, an ethical disposition of shared, albeit asymmetrical, reciprocity can acquire borderline visibility. If one compares *Watching Me Give/ Gives Me Pleasure*, for instance, with *L'Origine du Monde* (1844), Manet's contested image of female sexuality, the life-affirming potential of such disposition becomes palpably tangible.⁴⁴ Gribbon's aesthetic practice here prepares us for an ethics of 'permanent beside-awareness of a *co-existence with a stranger* which is neither the same nor the opposite'.⁴⁵ It remains to be seen whether such ethical disposition can ever be powerful enough to reach beyond aesthetics (and the gallery space) to gain political significance within a larger social context.

Concluding remarks

In 2014, in a comment Gribbon made on occasion of her show *Conversations* at the Oracle Club in Brooklyn, she described herself as a 'medium' and her creative practice as 'a kind of channelling of other artists that I like'.⁴⁶ I have sought to foreground such 'channelling' by drawing attention to the ways her paintings gesture to a range of different genres, art historical conventions, periods and practices of the

gaze, thereby aiming to make her audience critically aware of their own habits and rituals of 'looking and being looked at'. At the same time, the phallocratic order on which such viewing practices are based is partially infiltrated and shifted by queer or transversal, ironic and anachronistic modes of cognition and self-recognition, which are further supplemented by affected traces of a Matrixial borderspace of relations-without-relating that are, in Ettinger's own words, no longer 'about perspective but about the multilayered subreality and the psyche, and the passage of the spirit of the other and of the cosmos with-in our souls.'⁴⁷ Such notion of a psychic limitrophe depth-space that supplements the gaze chimes with Gribbon's self-identification as 'medium'.

Oscillating between the quotidian and the abstract, different temporalities, reality and myth, the personal and the universal, sexual desire and Matrixial desire for connectivity, her aesthetic works also address the relational and affective conditions of human subject formation. They further allow more abstract concepts such as 'friendship' or 'love' become visceral, palpably tangible. The side-by-side-ness of 'old' and 'new' media, hence different temporalities, makes us aware of intimacy as a cultural practice that 'is and always has been mediated.'⁴⁸ Intimacy can here become, as Lauren Berlant argues, a normative and regulatory narrative, travelling 'from "public" institutions, ideologies and regulations to "private" fantasies, desires and life goals, and vice versa.'⁴⁹ It is therefore important what is being mobilized in intimate ways, and how specific desires and phantasies are being motivated. The Matrixial depth-space in-forming Gribbon's aesthetic work thereby offers possibilities for a more humane future. Her 'paintings from inside the scopophilic feedback loop'⁵⁰ can be 'entered', like the infinite Möbius strip, at any point by the viewer. Unlike the quick 'phone pic' with its surface efficacy and desire for hyper-connectivity, these works allow for a durational encounter 'from within' the phallocratic system. The image they produce is one of reflective-creative thought and a capacity for an ethical disposition towards the other. Identified here as works that mobilize Matrixial Eros, Gribbon's paintings can relate us to the wonder, amazement or awe of any particular moment, but also its potential sorrow, uncanniness or trauma. An ethics of primordial share-ability – in the Matrixial there is *no* possibility to *not* share – does not *always* leave us in a better place; but 'it calls for our attention to our entanglement and offers the possibility of alliance with others, animate and inanimate, intimate and anonymous, based on a proto-ethical aesthetic insight.'⁵¹

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- 42 Adriana Cavarero, *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), p. 122.
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- 45 Ettinger, 'Metamorphic Borderlinks', p. 130.
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F L A U N T

DECEMBER 15, 2021

**MOTHER AND CHILD |
BECAUSE THE UMBILICAL
CORD IS NOT ONLY
DELICIOUS IT'S NUTRITIOUS**

BY NATE RYNASKI

**SAVORING THE GIFT OF LIFE WITH NEW GROUP EXHIBITION,
*MOTHER AND CHILD***

A gift is often thought to be a tangible thing. Perhaps a plaid tie for Christmas. A quinceañera Corvette. An apricot-hued bottle of skin contact for your Echo Park housewarming. All delightful gifts. Yet it could be said the greatest gift we receive is the unmistakably unique journey otherwise known as life. Working back from here, we see Mom, Mother, Mamma. There she is, glorious, hard-bitten, vanished, immaculate, rugged, fair, pious, lost... whatever our connection to maternity, its universality supercedes.

And so, the uncanny experience of birth-giving radiates through new group exhibition, *Mother and Child*, at Friends Indeed Gallery in San Francisco, CA, now showing through December 17. Featuring a handful of artists, including Catherine Opie, Deana Lawson, Sasha Gordon, and more, the exhibition enlists its artists to explore and depict an interpretation of mother-making, of gift-giving and taking away. Herein, artists Jesse Mockrin, Jenna Gribbon, and Omari Douglin interpret this bond and consider this gift of which we've all been humbly bestowed.



Jenna Gribbon. "Pose of an artist's child" (2021). 20" x 16". Courtesy of the artist and Friends Indeed Gallery.

JENNA GRIBBON

BY BREE CASTILLO

Jenna Gribbon approaches the canvas with unwavering sincerity as she captures intimate encounters in her life, displaying how the everyday is merely a medium. The Brooklyn-based artist received her MFA in New York at Hunter College and has been featured in galleries in Berlin and London, as well as Los Angeles and New York. Known for blurring lines, the figurative painter explores point of view as she balances between both intrinsic intimacy and the questionable impertinence of voyeurism.

Gribbon's barely clothed subjects clip their toenails and share subtle touches, as viewed through a slightly ajar bathroom door. The artist's textured bodices renounce objectification and what is known about women through traditional Western art, with female subjects that hold agency both daring and vulnerable. These scenes propose that it may not be about *what* we are perceiving, but *how* we per-

ceive. Here, Gribbon shares on motherly perspective, the art of motherhood, and the tension between pleasure and discomfort.

"Pose of an artist's child," which features in *Mother and Child*, appears to be from the mother's perspective. What made you decide to not depict the mother with the child in this work?

My presence is almost always implied in my work, but often without being physically represented. In this painting, I wanted my gaze—as an artist and a mother—to be the subject, and I thought the most direct way of doing that would be to show you what I see, and show how my child reacts/performs under that gaze.

What is motherhood to you?

Well, I think there are infinite ways to perform motherhood. The maternal impulse is probably in everyone to some extent.

What is the greatest gift a mother can give her child?

What I try to give my child first and foremost is space to grow naturally into himself. In some ways, kids are like plants, and if you provide them with light and nourishment and shield them from the harshest conditions, all the information that's contained in the seed will be able to present itself in the strongest, healthiest way. They're designed to flourish. I also think it's important to live life in a way that models going through the world fully engaged and open—but also, and maybe most importantly—resiliency.

What was creating this work of your son like for you?

My paintings tend to follow my attention, so painting my child is a very natural occurrence.

A lot of your recent works have limbs and appendages taking up large portions of your works, obscuring parts of the body. Is this intentional, and what is the aim in doing this?

Those paintings are of my partner and me. I use my own body to drag the viewer into the frame, and into an entanglement of desire and pleasure. Paint, bodies, and intimacy are all an entanglement of pleasure, desire, and discomfort. My paintings invite the viewer into a place to own their pleasure and sit with their unease.

W



Toyin Ojih Odutola with 'New Found Land; A Vow,' 2020, at Jack Shainman Gallery. Photographed by Tommy Kha.

FROM THE MAGAZINE

Changing the Perspective

As queer art becomes more mainstream, a group of young talents finds itself at the center of a larger cultural conversation.

by **Arthur Lubow**

11.30.21

A sideways glance, the locking of eyes, a wink. Historically, that was the queer gaze: furtive, coded, clandestine.

And now? In shows that sell out before they open, paintings by a group of emerging artists in New York have pulled back the curtain to let the public stare openly at queer car-

nality and domesticity. Same-sex intimacy no longer feels transgressive; it's at the center of art world conversations. "The question is, will I sell the big landscape I made?" said Doron Langberg, 36, who is known for scrutinizing the male body as sensuously as Delacroix or Courbet depicted the female nude. "Because there is a movement in the art world to support queer content, something like a landscape might not sell."

At various Chelsea galleries last fall, Jenna Gribbon, 42, exhibited canvases nearly seven feet high of her nude blonde partner, as seen through the artist's parted naked legs. Justin Liam O'Brien, 30, depicted his husband eyeing a man being orally and anally penetrated at a sex party. Anthony Cudahy, 32, showed scenes of gay men, including his husband, relaxing in cozy familiarity and casual states of undress. This loosely connected group of artists attend one another's openings and discuss their work on studio visits. Some go out dancing together and meet up on Fire Island. "It's amazing to feel that I'm part of a community," Gribbon said, noting that she has met many of her cohorts via a DM on Instagram. "Finding friends has been easier in this age of social media."



Doron Langberg in his Queens studio. Photographed by Tommy Kha.

In parallel with their success in commercial venues, these painters are being heralded by museums. Salman Toor, 38, who had a solo show at the Whitney Museum of American Art last year, is preparing for exhibitions at M Woods, in Beijing, in April, and at the Baltimore Museum of Art, in May. In a show of eight young figurative artists that opens at the end of March, the Institute of Contemporary Art Boston will feature three queer New York painters: Ambera Wellmann, Louis Fratino, and Langberg. And, most remarkably, the Frick Collection is elevating young queer artists to celestial heights in a yearlong proj-



Langberg's *In My Lap*, 2021.
© Doron Langberg, courtesy of the artist and Victoria Miro.

ect, "Living Histories: Queer Views and Old Masters," in which Gribbon, Toor, Langberg, and Toyin Ojih Odutola each present a painting made in response to a masterpiece by Vermeer, Rembrandt, or Holbein.

As appreciative as they are to be making a living from their art, many of these politically progressive talents view their collective conquest warily. If your shows sell out, does that make you a sellout? "Pleasure and the depiction of pleasure is necessary," said Michael Stamm, 38, who had his own solo exhibition this year at Shulamit Nazarian in Los Angeles. "I just worry that the cultural freedoms that we are enjoying are the Trojan horse for the proliferation of capitalism—that queer intimacy is becoming more of a commodity." In one painting in the L.A. show, he portrayed a pair of postcoital lovers reading Walt Whitman (cultural privilege), with a bottle of poppers (sexual license) and a potted orchid (bourgeois luxury) on a table, oblivious to a tragedy that is occurring outside their window: the self-immolation of David Buckel, a prominent gay-rights lawyer and environmental activist who killed himself in Brooklyn's Prospect Park, in 2018, as a protest against fossil fuel consumption. "I'm selling all my paintings," Stamm said, "but I'm trying to make them a little less digestible to justify it to myself."

One of the strengths of this flowering of queer art is its variety. Unlike some of his peers, Stamm shies away from explicit evocations of sex. He paints sharp-edged, stylized, and exaggerated figures in smooth acrylics, often adding a layer of laser-cut wood veneer over the surface. Kyle Dunn, 31, also depicts figures (sometimes in bas-relief) that aren't life-like but seem, instead, with their articulated and simplified bodies, to emerge from the digitally rendered realm of animation, video games, or fantasy. And while his men might be naked, they are not engaged in sex. "I'm certainly not a prude, but I like the titillation maybe more than the dick and ass," Dunn said. "Courtship is as erotic as actual sex. For my own work, painting is where you can explore fantasy and desire, and things that aren't there to look at."

On the other hand, Langberg luxuriates in thick, voluptuous brushwork in oil paintings that often graphically depict gay sex, including acts that some viewers might find



Salman Toor in his Brooklyn studio.
Photographed by Jack Pierson.

eye-opening. "I love painting rimming scenes, because there is still something subversive about it," he said. "But I don't make my explicit work to be shocking. This is how I experience sexuality; it's not aimed at the pearl-clutchers." He also likes to portray undressed men from their waist to their upper thighs, in what he calls "dick portraits." However loaded the subject matter, he succeeds at generating his charge not through X-rated content, but by his handling of the paint. "They're all made from observation," Langberg said of the dick portraits. "I try to be led by my own desire, and I want that process to be evident on the surface—some areas fast, some slow, some with more information. That level of specificity directs the viewer in a way that recognizes this desire."

When they were coming out, some members of this group found it easier to reveal their sexual orientation in a painting than with words. O'Brien was in the closet until he graduated from Pratt, at 24. "Those first paintings were a way of explaining to people that I was gay," he recalled. "To come out isn't just to say, 'I'm gay'; it's a process that takes years." Unlike O'Brien, Cudahy was out at Pratt. "But I was more out in my art," he said. "In real life, I was quiet and shy. In art, I felt a freedom. It's a proxy object that can do the talking for you." And it is an arena that welcomes risk-taking. "Painting was a space where I started to test the waters and experiment before I was ready to come out," said Wellmann, 39. "Being able to visualize something and realize it is a way of moving toward it."

Gibbon had been living in Long Island City with her male partner and their child, working in a basement studio on what she describes as "cerebral diagram paintings with symbols." Although their open relationship meant she could date women, she felt alienated,



Ambera Wellmann, *Yurning*, 2019.
Courtesy of the artist, Company Gallery, New York, and
K-T-Z, Berlin.



Wellmann in her Brooklyn studio.
Photographed by Tommy Kha.



Michael Stamm in his Brooklyn studio.
Photographed by Jack Pierson.



Kyle Dunn in his Brooklyn studio.
Photographed by Jack Pierson.



Dunn's *Into the Crevasse*, 2019.
Courtesy of Kyle Dunn, Galerie Maria Bernheim, Zurich, and PPOW, New York.

and that feeling surfaced in her work. "Everything tended to be kind of obscured, the way I was obscured," she said. "The figures were fragmented or superimposed into spaces where they didn't belong. I was living this life that didn't feel like it was my life, or like the life I was supposed to be living. When things clicked into place and I started living with

a woman exclusively, the painting was so much less of a struggle. Things were less fragmented and collage-y."

Similarly, Wellmann had been in a 10-year relationship with a man in her native Canada. "I was so committed to this idea of hetero life," she said. "It was so boring." Even after leaving her partner, she said, she "embedded what I really wanted to talk about. I cloaked it." She painted porcelain figures of women "as a way of talking about the representation of women's bodies, a way to think about women's sexuality without representing it directly." When she looks at those works now, she said, "I see an intense desire to control experience." After winning a major Canadian art prize, she moved to Berlin and embraced her anonymity there. "My paintings changed completely, almost overnight," she said. As in a tale by Ovid, the porcelain bodies metamorphosed into complete, erotically limned women. In a 30-foot-long tour de force that is currently on view in the New Museum Triennial, Wellmann depicted a porcelain drain at the center of a dramatically lit beach populated by swirling, ambiguously defined female forms, alluding to the exit path she had followed.

Langberg, for his part, was painting bottles and landscapes until, as a junior at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, he made graphite drawings based on a sex video he had recorded of himself and a friend in Israel, where he grew up. "My work that I recognize as my own really started with the sexual subject matter," he said. "The more I allowed myself to paint in accordance with my desires, the better I think my work became, and the better the response was."



Anthony Cudahy in his studio in Manhattan.
Photographed by Jack Pierson.

For Nash Glynn, who is trans, the breakthrough was even more dramatic. Despite having painted self-portraits since childhood, Glynn, 29, abandoned the medium as a student at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts University, working instead in video and performance. Things changed after graduation. "I started transitioning, and it was very intuitive to pick up a brush," she said. "When you grow up without a reflection, sometimes you just need to make your own." Glynn paints herself in the nude, exposing her breasts and penis. "I'm definitely my own muse," she said. "Vulnerability is not a weakness; it's a strength. I also don't know any other way." She is intentionally laying claim to a tradition, saying, "I needed to see myself in the history of female nudes in this Western white male tradition, as the creator with a semblance of control."

Many of these artists have been obsessed with finding a footing in the Western canon. Toor, who was raised in Lahore, Pakistan, studiously copied paintings in museums when he arrived in the U.S., 20 years ago. Enamored of such rococo painters as Pietro Longhi and Antoine Watteau, he adapted their compositions with a more gestural and brushy style, to depict his fellow South Asians. Three or four years ago, he broke away from the constraints of the past by making what he calls "dumb paintings that were not very deep," representing his gay friends in domestic settings. "Once I became fluent, they just poured out of me," he said. Those "dumb" works led to his exhibition at the Whitney.



Jenna Gribbon at Fredericks & Freiser gallery, with recent works.
Photographed by Tommy Kha.

Housebound during the pandemic, O'Brien stocked up on art books. His latest show featured riffs on the Italian Renaissance masters Michelangelo and Piero della Francesca. "I was very much interested in how we can show gay affection or desire in an art-historical context," he said. In one painting, he altered Piero's *The Nativity* by substituting his

husband for the Virgin Mary worshipping the Christ child. "Piero was setting the Bible in his own world," O'Brien said. "I wanted to be in Brooklyn painting like Piero in Tuscany." He made another painting from a detail of two hands raised above the water in *The Battle of Cascina*, one of the few non-homoerotic bits in that unrealized work by Michelangelo of soldiers bathing in a river. But O'Brien isn't sure he is done with *The Battle of Cascina*. "I want to do a bathhouse like Spa Castle with this arrangement," he said.

Ojih Odutola, 36, has invented her own mythology. Born in Nigeria, she immigrated as a child with her family to Alabama. At the Frick, she is preparing a seven-foot-tall portrait of a Nigerian woman to be in dialogue with a Rembrandt self-portrait. It is in the same style as the 40 drawings in her just-opened show at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, in Washington, D.C., in which she imagines a society where only same-sex relationships are permitted. In subject matter, the Frick drawing is subtler about its queerness. Ojih Odutola said the woman radiates both strength and attentive receptiveness. "She is not fem or masc, but both, in presentation," she said of her subject. "I feel that way. It's a queer view."



Sasha Gordon in her Brooklyn studio.
Photographed by Tommy Kha.

The secret history of gay picture-making appeals powerfully to young queer painters. "The Young and Evil," a show at David Zwirner curated by Jarrett Earnest in 2019, displayed the work of a coterie of interconnected gay New York artists from the 1930s, '40s, and '50s: Paul Cadmus, Pavel Tchelitchew, George Platt Lynes, Jared French, and George Tooker chief among them. Much of the work was sexually explicit and could not be ex-

hibited publicly during the artists' lifetimes. "That show blew my mind," O'Brien said. Toor concurred: "'The Young and Evil' was such an important show for all of us," he said. Finding predecessors can be as confidence boosting as connecting with contemporaries. "There's nothing new about queer painting," Glynn said. "What's new is that we're capitalizing."

But sexuality is only part of anyone's identity. For people of color, ethnicity can be as significant as queerness, and the task is to tie the two together. "Through the paintings and my relationships, I am trying to draw a line between growing up in a conservative Islamic country and being an authentic inheritor of the liberation movements of gay men that happened in the 1970s and '80s here," said Toor, who travels from his East Village apartment to visit his family and friends in Lahore every year. "That's the line I hope to draw that encompasses both of those things: to make them coexist in the world of pictures. The only way they can coexist is in fantasy and allegory."



Justin Liam O'Brien, *Each Man Kills the Thing He Loves*, 2021.
Courtesy of the artist and Monya Rowe Gallery, New York.

For Sasha Gordon, 23, sexual orientation is the least obvious component of her self-presentation. "I'm Asian and queer, and also in a bigger body," she said. "It was hard for me to accept that, so I put these three functions together under one umbrella." Her clearest prototype is the contemporary Chinese artist Yue Minjun, who makes brightly colored pictures peopled by caricatured self-portraits. Gordon does something similar, reimagining scenes from her childhood and inhabiting them with empowered versions (frequently nude) of her current self. "As a minority, you feel wrong to take up space," she said.



O'Brien in his Brooklyn studio.
Photographed by Tommy Kha.

"That's why my paintings are loud, crazy figures that are really chaotic and bizarre. White artists don't get why seeing this nude body is so important. They felt it was for shock value."

Ojih Odutola believes the concept of queerness transcends sexuality and challenges the prevailing power dynamic. "I hope my pictures can express the erotic without being explicit, and the pride of the Black body that doesn't seem like a reaction to its treatment," she said. "Queerness permeates every picture I make." She pointed to the skewed perspectives and the patterned mark-making in her recent drawings, and to her use of white and gray chalks and pastels on a black background. "I think it's a very powerful way of starting," she said. "How does white operate as a material in that? That's what I interpret as queering the image."

A queer vantage point is a matter of *how* you see, not *what* you see. If these artists make work that challenges assumptions about sex and domesticity, leading in turn to questions about other conventional beliefs, they will be gratified. "When I think about queerness, it's indefinite," Ojih Odutola said. "'Queer' is so open-ended now. You don't have to identify as LGBTQ to be queer. I think queerness expands our definitions, and makes them more fluid and less striated. There is space for all of us here."



Nash Glynn in her Brooklyn studio.
Photographed by Jack Pierson.

FRIEZE

Five Up-and-Coming Painters to Keep a Close Eye On

Our critics drum up an international list of their favourite promising artists



Jenna Gribbon

An encounter with the loose, sensual canvases of New York-based painter Jenna Gribbon feels like venturing into heady memory. We glimpse intimate moments – hands clutching fleshy thighs, a sleeping boy with his thumb pressed between his lips – and our eyes act as surrogates for the artist's own. But, as Gribbon beckons us in, she also pushes us away: the truncated compositions, the titles (*Wholesome Sunday Fuck*, 2020) and the fervent gaze of her subjects define us as mere intruders.

Gribbon's spontaneous licks of paint recall masters such as Édouard Manet. Her brush lingers on areas of acute observation before collapsing into eddying, gestural impressionism. This diversity in mark echoes the selective nature of memory, which crystallizes certain moments to allow others to dissolve. Gribbon's vision teeters on the edge of fantasy: whilst her attention to tone and light lends her world a gravity, her perspective buckles and wobbles, and her palette can leap from muted and earthy to rousingly vivid. Brilliant pink nipples decorate her figures' naked chests – a device employed to jolt the viewer and emphasize our voyeurism.

Ideas of looking and being looked at pervade Gribbon's work. In *Mackenzie's Lack of Interest in Gallery 827* (2019), the artist's girlfriend glances at weighty oil paintings, while in *Midday Watch* (2020), her son lies spell-bound and bare-bottomed before a scene from the US cartoon *Family Guy* (1999–ongoing). The series 'Agnès V. par Jenna G' (2020) depicts close female friends watching the work of new wave filmmaker Agnès Varda, her subjects both spectator and spectacle. Gribbon's paintings allow for the multiplicity of the female experience: in her world, the women are at once queer, friends, lovers, voyeurs, mothers. She picks up where Varda left off: contemplating the objectification of women through a contemporary lens, reminding us that this conversation is far from over. – *Sophie Ruigrok*

ARTnews

New Talent: 6 Queer Figurative Painters Reimagining Intimacy

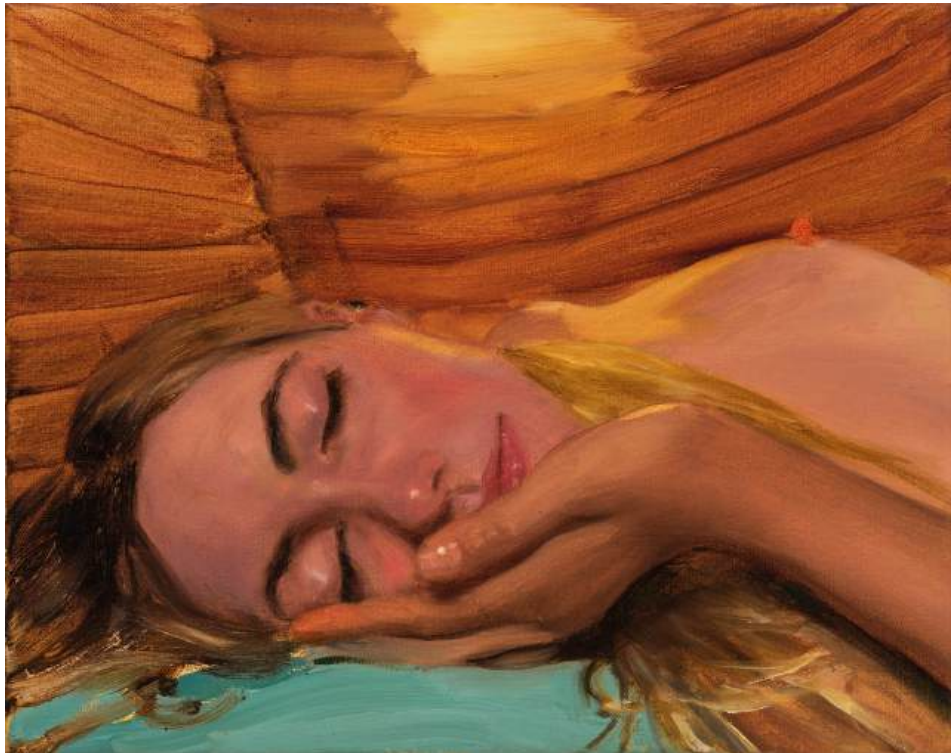
BY **EMILY WATLINGTON**

July 13, 2021

Whether painting figures beyond the confines of the gender binary with blurry ambiguity or memorializing formative moments of sexual exploration in exquisite detail, a growing group of painters is developing a new visual vocabulary for depicting queer intimacy. Melding ambitions at one personal, political, and painterly, this cohort celebrates queer intimacy—emphatically and at times with trepidation, delicately refuting the oppressive gazes that sometimes accompany visibility. Their works range from sexy to sad, rowdy to raw, and hot to heavy, all the while doing the important work of expanding our repertoire of intimate imagery.

Take a look below at some of the most exciting queer figurative painters working today.

Jenna Gribbon



Jenna Gribbon, *Tenderness and Trust*, 2019, 8 by 10 inches, oil on Linen.

Jenna Gribbon, who was born in Tennessee and lives in Brooklyn, has made dozens of paintings of her fiancée, the indie musician Torres. In her paintings, the artist seeks a mingling of "motherhood, sexuality, humor, and the everyday, since we often act as if we have to relegate separate parts of ourselves to these things, which is a bit absurd," as she told *Art in America* in 2019. Her subjects have neon nipples that are impossible to miss. The move to highlight that part of her figures' bodies is a playful effort to make viewers self-conscious about their gazes.

Photo : Courtesy the artist and Fredericks & Freiser, New York.

JUXTAPOZ

Art & Culture



Jenna Gribbon

The Pleasure of Looking

Interview by Shaquille Heath // Portrait by Bryan Derballa

For the past year, with interactions among each other relegated to the digital realm, what we see is exactly as dictated. Even if there were 80 selfies taken wearing a torn T-shirt in front of apartment houseplants, the “authentic” becomes artificial when it’s pared down to a single IG story. The notion of how we present ourselves, in knowing that what we share will be seen, becomes loaded. What are we participating in? What is real? And who is looking?

Lucky for us, Jenna Gribbon is a painter whose work aims to reckon with the peculiarity of this indulgence. Her obsession with scopophilia creates contemporary daydreams that reveal our remarkable ability to devour with devotion, yet consume with indifference. Confronting our proclivity for voyeurism is the stallion inside the Trojan horse. The intimate visions may beckon, but that’s only one part of the story. Gribbon told me to relax and take pleasure anyway.



Shaquille Heath: How are you doing and where are you finding your joy right now?

Jenna Gribbon: I am... I'm feeling well, actually. I've strangely—I feel a little bit out of sync with everyone else in the way that I've just been really working a lot in the last year. I feel really lucky about that. But also, sometimes it makes me feel like there's a little bit of a disconnect with the experience that other people are having, because sometimes it feels like I'm the only person who is constantly sort of on deadlines. But I feel really lucky, because I've been able to have a few shows. I had a show last September in Berlin, and it just happened to be at this moment when Berlin was a bit open for a little while and everyone was going around and seeing shows. It was in between shutdowns, so I got really lucky in that little window. And then I've been working on another show that's going to open in May in London, and it feels like that timing is going to be okay too. Like things are gonna be open again by then. So... I don't know. It's weird. I think that if it were a different time, I would be feeling really sad about how much I was missing out on being with friends and things. I can just be in the studio and not feel like I'm missing anything, which is actually kind of nice. So, I don't know, I don't really want to be like, I love covid because I'm selfish.

No! I mean, I totally hear what you're saying. And for me personally, putting covid aside... like just putting life aside, I feel like I've been able to connect more with my work. If I was still living the life where everything was open, and everything was normal, I would be continuing to try to keep up with regular life.

Yeah, exactly. It's really hard... I don't know, especially in a city, where there's always something kind of pulling at you, you know. Something trying to get you to like, leave

your space and engage with the outside world. I'm kind of an introvert. So I find a lot of enjoyment in the quiet alone time. Time for thinking, introspection. I don't mind it.

I hear you. I'm not necessarily an introvert, but I'm a homebody. So when this first started, I was like, "I'm not mad about not having to stay home. This is exactly where I want to be."

Same!



I'm glad you brought up your show in Berlin. When I was speaking with an artist for our last issue, Shannon T. Lewis, she mentioned that she was living in Berlin, and one of the last things she was able to do before the second shutdown was to see your show.

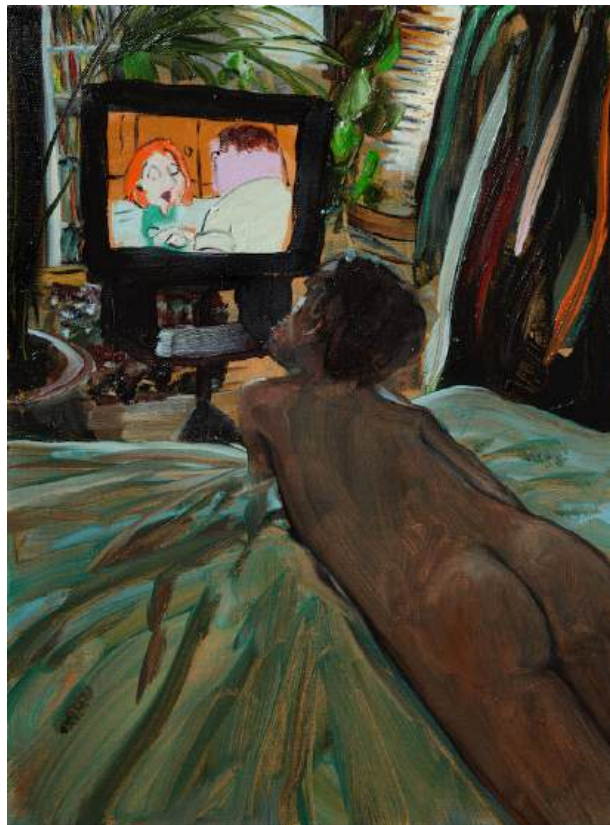
That's great. It's always nice to hear of people who actually got to see it in person. I love that people sometimes meet my paintings for the first time online, that's cool. And I love that there's so much more access to art now than ever before. But I also feel like there's this whole other layer that is just so different in person with painting in general. I really... I work very hard on my paintings to make the surfaces really beautiful. And to make that experience worthwhile.

People now, because you can see everything online... sometimes become a little bit lazy. And they're like, "Oh, I don't have to go see art in person, because I've already seen it," or whatever. But then I think of the people who do go to see it, and it's almost like a pilgrimage or something, you know? And you want it to pay off for the people who make the pilgrimage to see the work.

Totally. I'm in San Francisco where museums just got the green light to reopen, so I've been able to see art in person this week. And it's just so different... you need that interaction in person. I've needed that. I want to talk about some of the shows that you had last year. I especially want to talk to you about "The Artist, Eroticized," series, these gorgeously seductive portraits. And I'm wondering, what sparked the series?

I was asked to do a show at The Journal Gallery—and I love those kinds of opportunities. It's a pretty small space, so just a different kind of thing, you know, not my usual New York gallery, very much an opportunity to do something that might be slightly different than what I'm otherwise working on. And I just had this idea kind of rolling around in the back of my mind for a while, a little bit because I think it's really funny how artists are always expected to provide photos of themselves in the studio. I just think it's such a strange, kind of voyeuristic expectation that we have to be able to, like, see the artists in their natural habitat.

Also, you know, the artists' studio photos are often just really sexy. Like, everyone tries to look really good. And I don't know, I just think it's such a strange practice that doesn't really get scrutinized at all. Part of it is that, I get it, because I love those images, too. You know, I love seeing an artist's studio and what the artist looks like. But I think it's weird that there's such an expectation, also that there's this anticipation that artists somehow be like, physically presentable, you know. So, we do eroticize artists in this way, which I think of as being kind of simultaneously loving and critical. Like, these are artists I love, that I also think are really beautiful subjects to paint. But I'm also thinking how ridiculous that we do this, you know?



That was actually one of the questions that I had! Because I feel like an artist's studio is such an intimate and personal space. You know, it's just this very sacred space for an artist. And I found it so interesting that you positioned them there. I mean, it goes with a lot of your work, in that, as viewers, we often get to peek into places where, typically, our gaze is not usually granted. I love that you bring this up, because you're right. It's funny that it's always, like, "artist with paintbrush in hand" [laughs]. Or even, on that Instagram promo that you did with The Journal where you're posing with the apron.

Yeah! Totally! It's like, so fake. Either they're wearing clothes that are way nicer than they would normally wear in the studio. Or they're wearing their painting clothes, but you know that they're not really there to be painting. They're just there to have their photo taken. So, either way, it's like, weird and fake. And I don't know, staged and just funny. It's just a funny practice. So I thought I wanted to give the artists themselves a chance to kind of troll the viewer a little bit, you know? To just show some sort of self awareness. We know what we're giving you when we take these photos and present them to the public.

It's very tongue in cheek! How did you create these paintings? Were they made throughout the past year in quarantine? How did you formulate the imagery?

Yeah most of them, because it was covid times, were made in quarantine. The artists would send me photos.

That's exactly what I felt when looking at them... OK, so, you know those days when you're just really feeling yourself? You're like, "Damn, I look good today!" And so you take some sexy selfies? They're not for anybody or anything—they're just for yourself. That's what those paintings felt like... except when you decide to send the photo off to your best friend instead.

Exactly. I did enjoy that aspect of it. Because, yeah, there's something to that vibe, right? It does make it feel very of-this-moment. Like, recognizing that way of positioning yourself. It's intimate, but also you can feel that that's the way the artist wants to be seen, and for sure, it's hard to describe, but I think you're exactly right.

Your works have so much to do with this personal narrative. I love how you've really jumped onto this idea of how we present ourselves online, and I feel that, over this past year, the essence of our interactions with others has become completely dependent upon what we decide to share online. Have you thought about that?

Yeah, I've always been interested in this thing of "seeing people being seen." Like, watching people present themselves to be seen and how it's a little bit different than seeing someone who is not expecting to be seen. I mean, I like looking at both, as in having something to compare it to. I am kind of on the cusp of Gen X and so I remember a time before people first started taking selfies. I remember it being really shocking, and being like, "I can't believe people are doing this!" It just was so strange and kind of antithetical to a Gen X sensibility, you know? I just found it really fascinating that it was such a phenomenon, and now it's, like, completely accepted—I accept it and I love it. I love that this

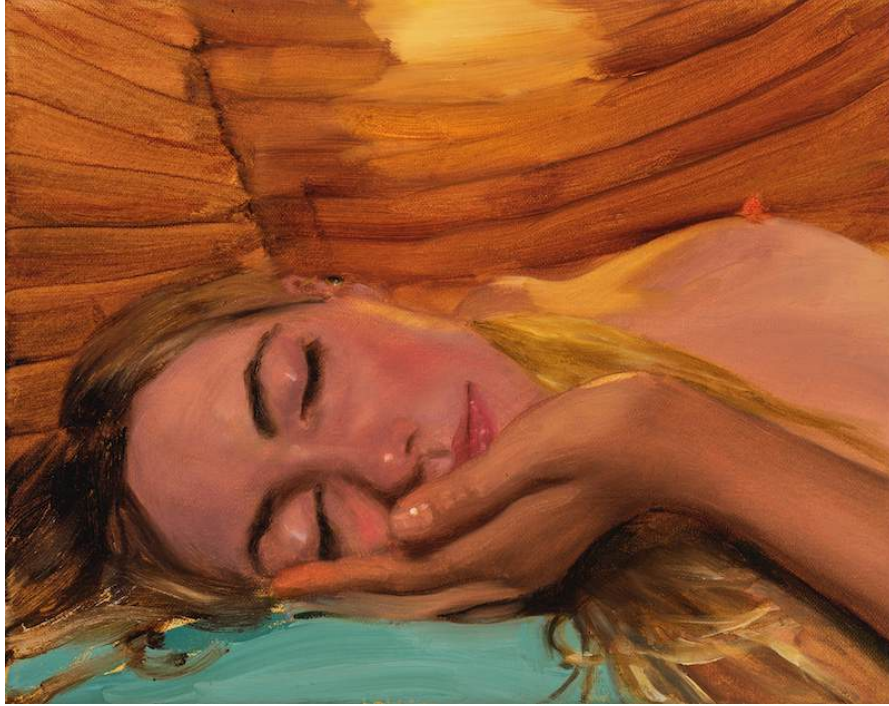


is something that people do now and that they've embraced. People are just owning their individual presentation of their own image, doing what they want with it, and really, with so little self consciousness. I don't know, it was an interesting shift for me. You know I think it's partly coming from a place where it was really kind of alien to me or something. Obviously now people are even more choosing to live in that digital space.

I mean, in general, don't you think this is the most voyeuristic time that's ever been? You know, all sort of peeking into each other's intimate lives, the intimate details of each other's lives. But I think people get it wrong when they make it all about voyeurism because that's only one aspect. Really, I'd say it's more the pleasure of looking—scopophilia. It's an interest and a curiosity about investigating that, but not in a way that's damning.

Which is what I have really enjoyed when spending this intimate time with your work. So, yes, there is this voyeurism, but at the same time, there's also power that we have in ownership. I don't know, I've also felt, for lack of better words, that the joke was on the viewer. That we think that we're peering in, but really, these figures are holding that power and we're seeing exactly what they want us to see.

There's also my desire to make people a little bit more self-conscious of consuming an image of a body or an intimate moment or whatever. Because I think that painting is so old that people forget that it's a depiction of a person that they are consuming, that they are in a voyeuristic position. Which is kind of why I started using the fluorescent pink nipples. It was a way to make the viewer like, a little uncomfortable, a little self-conscious. Also it's just this funny thing where you can't not look at them. Even though we're trained all our lives to skim over that part of the body—it's not polite to stare—but yeah, you're forced to, you know, kind of reckon with the discomfort of looking.



What questions do you hope people might ask, or might think about when put into that position?

I guess I want people to kind of own their pleasure in looking. And you know, question it, but also recognize that it's not benign. Looking at a body depicted on a canvas... you are participating in something. And what are you participating in? You are receiving pleasure in that act.

Maybe the question is, what do you find pleasurable? I'm not making a judgement about that, I need to point it out. I don't think people realize that it's sometimes a bodily experience when they're looking at paintings. It's like, you think you're having an intellectual experience, but you're also having a bodily experience, as well as a relationship to a physical object that holds the physicality of paint. But then also, when you're looking at figurative painting, you're responding to a depiction of a physical human being. And, you know, there is absolutely a physical response. I think it's just interesting to remind people of that.

So tell me, what have you been working on?

I'm working on this show with Sim Smith that opens in London in May. And it's a two-person show with the estate of Agnès Varda. I'm a huge fan of her work—she's been an influence on me for many years. Like always, I'm really focusing on the looking that happens, and I think that she also actually focuses on that in her work. So, in that way, I'm kind of looking for the common thread.

One way I was doing that was in trying to capture these moments where her subject looks directly at the camera, which obviously is more rare in film. It's a lot about how important a real experience with an image can be. The importance of encountering her imagery, the importance of that to me in my work, and really focusing on that in a nuanced kind of way.

I could have made 50 of these. There's so many beautiful moments. I think there's a nice parallel with painting. The work ends up being... it's not specifically about the work of Agnès Varda, but about my relationship to the work, which has been really fun to investigate.

From there, Jenna shuffled her phone around her studio to give me a virtual tour of the new work. Spoiler... gorgeous.

Jenna Gribbon

b. 1978, Knoxville, TN
lives and works in Brooklyn, NY

Education

2019 MFA, Hunter College, New York, NY
2008 BFA, University of Georgia, Athens, GA

Selected Solo / Two-Person Exhibitions

(* Indicates a publication)

2024 *Like Looking in a Mirror*, David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

2023 **The Honeymoon Show!*, Lévy Gorvy Dayan, New York, NY
A Domestic Cast, Massimo De Carlo, Hong Kong

2022 **Mirages*, Collezione Maramotti, Reggio Emilia, Italy
Light Holding, Massimo De Carlo, London, UK

2021 *Uscapes*, Fredericks & Freiser, New York, NY
Agnes V. par Jenna G., Sim Smith, London, UK

2020 *The Artist Eroticized*, Tennis Elbow, The Journal Gallery, New York, NY
Regarding Me Regarding You, GNYP Gallery, Berlin, Germany
GAY, GAY, GAY!, Howard's Gallery, Athens, GA

2019 *When I Looked at You the Light Changed*, Fredericks & Freiser, New York, NY

2017 *I promise I won't paint you while you're sleeping*, Modern Love Club, New York, NY

2010 *re: The Mirrored Veil*, Priska C. Juschka Fine Art, New York, NY

2008 Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica, CA
Visions of an Insomniac Soothsayer, Priska C. Juschka Fine Art, New York, NY

2007 Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica, CA

2006 *Empty Paintings and Imaginary Sculptures*, Sarah Bowen Gallery, Brooklyn, NY

Selected Group Exhibitions

(* Indicates a publication)

- 2025 **Making Their Mark*, Kemper Art Museum, St. Louis, MO
- 2024 **Licked by the Waves | New Bathers in Art*, Museum MORE (Museum voor Modern Realisme), Gorssel, Netherlands
A New Subjectivity 1974/2024, Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, NY
Day for Night: New American Realism, Palazzo Barberini, organized by the Aishti Foundation, Rome, Italy
**Making Their Mark*, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, CA
- 2023 *The Emotional Show*, Marjorie Barrick Museum of Art, Las Vegas, NV
**Making Their Mark*, Shah Garg Foundation, New York, NY
**Framing the Female Gaze: Woman Artists and the New Historicism*, Lehman College Art Gallery, Bronx, NY
Friends & Lovers, FLAG Art Foundation, New York, NY
Dreaming of Home, Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art, New York, NY
Brigid Berlin: The Heaviest, curated by Alison M. Gingeras, Vito Schnabel Gallery, New York, NY
**20*, David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
Dreaming of Eden, Timothy Taylor, New York, NY
Rear View, LGDR, New York, NY
In New York, Thinking of You, FLAG Art Foundation, New York, NY
- 2022 *Painters, Painting, Painters*, Green Family Art Foundation, Dallas, TX
**Living Histories: Queer Views and Old Masters*, The Frick Collection, New York, NY
Women Painting Women, curated by Andrea Karnes, Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Fort Worth, TX
I do my own stunts, curated by Jack Siebert and Caio Twombly, Spazio Amanita, Los Angeles, CA
Pictus Porrectus, Art & Newport Foundation in conjunction with Newport Preservation Society, Newport, RI
Taxonomies of Imagination, curated by Andrew Sandor, Make Room, Los Angeles, CA
Queering the Narrative, NAK Neuer Aachener Kunstverein, Aachen, Germany
Empowerment, Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, Germany
Pupils, Casa Masaccio, San Giovanni Valdarno, Italy
- 2021 *Frauenkörper Der Blick auf das Weibliche von Albrecht Dürer bis Maria Abramović*, Kurpfälzisches Museum Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany
Mother and Child, curated by Micki Meng, Friends Indeed Gallery, San Francisco, CA
Towards a More Beautiful Oblivion, Fredericks & Freiser, New York, NY
Portraiture One Century Apart, Massimo de Carlo, London, England
Portraiture One Century Apart, Massimo de Carlo Pièce Unique, Paris, France
Women in Paris, curated by Henry Relph, William Leung, and Michael Dupouy, Hussenot Gallery, Paris, France
Equal Affections, curated by Edwin Oostmeijer, Grimm Gallery, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
I Care Because You Do, curated by Matt Black, The Mass, Toyko, Japan
and I will wear you in my heart of heart, Flag Art Foundation, New York, NY
San Damiano Sessions, Carl Koystál, Milan, Italy
Contemporary Domesticity, Taymour Grahne Projects, London, England
- 2020 *Folie à Deux*, curated by Piotr Uklanski, Massimo De Carlo VSpace, London, England (online)
Romancing the mirror, curated by Yiva Rouse, MoCA, Jacksonville, FL
Sound and Color, crated by Brian Alfred, Miles McEnery Gallery, New York, NY

Intimate Companions, Mary Heaton Vorse House, Provincetown, MA
REFLECTIONS: OPEN ENDED, Gana Art Hannam, Seoul, Korea
I Want to Feel Alive Again, Lyles & King, New York, NY
Sit Still, curated by Deborah Brown and Patty Horing, Anna Zorina Gallery, New York, NY
Solitude, 56 Henry Gallery, New York, NY
If On a Winters Night a Traveler, Mamoth, London, England
To Paint is to Love Again, Nino Mier Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

- 2019 *Nostos*, Matthew Brown Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
 Meet me in the Bathroom: The Art Show, curated by Hala Matar and Lizzy Goodman, The Hole, New York, NY
 THEM, curated by Donald Ryan, Galerie Perrotin, New York, NY
 They Catch Feelings, I Catch Bodies, Sim Smith Gallery, London, England
 Paint, Also Known as Blood: Women, Affect, and Design in Contemporary Painting, Warsaw Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw, Poland
 Damn! The Defiant, curated by Damon Brandt and Andrew Freiser, Fredericks & Freiser, New York, NY
- 2018 *Sweet Cheeks*, Big Pictures Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
 Skins, Greenpoint Terminal Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
 Another History, Thierry Goldberg Gallery, New York, NY
 Summer of Love, Freight + Volume Gallery, New York, NY
 4 Artists, Fredericks & Freiser, New York, NY
 A Rose is a Rose is a Rose, Jack Ganley Gallery, New York, NY
 The Therapist's Office, 1969 Gallery, New York, NY
- 2017 *Dogs!*, curated by Austin Lee and Oliver Clegg, Raymond Duck, Brooklyn, NY
 Body-ody-ody, 205 Project Space, New York, NY
 Implied, curated by Marine Cornuet, Here Performing Arts Center, New York, NY
 Anger Management, curated by Marilyn Minter and Adrianna Campbell, Brooklyn Museum Shop, Brooklyn, NY
- 2016 *Olympia's Eyes*, Zevitas Marcus Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
 Power Flower, Magic Beans Gallery, Berlin, Germany
- 2014 *Sargent's Daughters* Gallery, New York, NY
- 2013 *Typhoon Haiyan Benefit Auction*, The Lodge Gallery, New York, NY
- 2012 *Secret*, The Secret Space, Brooklyn, NY
- 2010 *Cleopatra's Presents*, Leo Koenig Inc. Projekte, New York, NY
 Autosuggestion, curated by Caris Reid, hosted by Dossier Magazine, 267 Elizabeth Street, New York, NY
 America Exhibition, coordinated by Elina Tukhanen and Cathrine Dahl, Babel Kunst, Trondheim, Norway
 7:10, curated by Michael Martin, National Arts Club, New York, NY
 Realism – The Adventure of Reality, Kunsthalle der Hypo-Kulturstiftung, Munich, Germany; Kunsthalle Emden, Emden, Germany
- 2009 *Everybody*, Envoy Gallery, New York, NY
 My Strawberry Roan – New Art From America, Finnish Academy of Fine Arts, Helsinki, Finland
- 2007 *With Teeth*, Priska C. Juschka Fine Art, New York, NY
 The Magical Mundane, Bucket Rider Gallery, Chicago, IL

Selections from the 60 Second Southern Video Festival, Ausstellungsraum Klingental, Basel, Switzerland; Fugitive Projects, Nashville, TN
INADMISSABLE!, HP Garcia Gallery, New York, NY
MoCA Salutes the Young Movers and Shakers, Georgia Museum of Contemporary Art, Atlanta, GA

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