

Moreland, Quinn, “Jenna Gribbon’s Intimate Portraits Ask Who’s Really Doing the Looking,”  
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## Jenna Gribbon’s Intimate Portraits Ask Who’s Really Doing the Looking

We visited the buzzy Brooklyn painter’s  
studio as she prepares for her first major  
museum solo exhibition

BY QUINN MORELAND PUBLISHED: AUG 19, 2026

Tucked behind a garden in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn, Jenna Gribbon’s studio emerges like a cottage out of a storybook. It’s a humble and charming space with exposed beams, whitewashed brick walls, and natural light. It’s easy to imagine how quickly cozy can become cramped when full of Gribbon’s paintings, which range from postcard to Volkswagen Beetle size. “It’s not always the perfect setup, but I’m able to make it work,” the artist, 47, says. “The fact that it’s a five-minute walk from my house is more valuable to me than more space.” Paint covers every possible surface, including her ear, where there’s a dot of blue pigment.

Other than two in-progress pieces propped up on milk crates, Gribbon’s studio has been cleared in anticipation of her first major solo museum exhibition, opening August 19 at Brandeis University’s Rose Art Museum. “**Jenna Gribbon: Entwined**” traces her artistic evolution from 2001 to 2026, and suggests that intimacy—physical or emotional, performative or earnest—is at the core of Gribbon’s artistic practice. “The importance of connection,” Gribbon says, is “what the show is about, and what my work has been about for a long time. It’s the reason I’m a figurative painter.”

Gribbon’s portraits of her loved ones, rendered in thick, impressionistic brushstrokes, challenge the implied relationship between subject, viewer, and artist. The feedback loop of the gaze—who, exactly, is doing the watching?—creates a sense of self-conscious consumption. “I have a voyeuristic streak, not in a sexual way, but I love observing,” Gribbon says. “Sometimes I forget that I can be seen looking, as if I’m somehow invisible.” One piece, from 2023, shows the artist’s partner, Mackenzie Scott, standing in front of colorful curtains. She’s topless, with fluorescent pink nipples—a Gribbon signature—and appears unposed. The back side of a dog’s head is in the foreground, intently staring at Scott. The title? *I Am the Dog*.



PHOTO BY MATT GRUBB. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND LÉVY GORVY DAYAN. © JENNA GRIBBON.

*I Am the Dog (2023)*

Though Gribbon's work often explores her own discomfort with being regarded, she's proud to show her artistic journey thus far at the Rose Museum. "I'm at a point in my life where I feel I can embrace every era of who I've been as a person and an artist," she says. "It's almost like I'm re-meeting former versions of myself."

Gribbon spent most of her youth in Knoxville, Tennessee, with a brief stint in Georgia during elementary school. She jokes that she was born a portrait-maker. While other kids doodled horses and superheroes, she drew faces. "I was the kid with a staring problem," Gribbon says with a laugh. "I was fascinated with the nuance of facial expressions and how the tiniest adjustment changes everything about the energy of the person."

Gribbon's access to contemporary art was limited, but the occasional glimpse of an Impressionist reproduction left her mesmerized. "Painting opened up the world for me," she says. "It gave me a very strong feeling that important things exist in life, things that

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I don't know about." Ever since, Gribbon says, her life has been driven by one question: "What choices do I have to make so that the only thing I have to do is paint?"

After college at the University of Georgia, Gribbon stuck around Athens for a year, dabbling in filmmaking, until she saved up enough money to move to New York in January of 2003. One of her first jobs was assisting Jeff Koons, "painting the paintings," as she puts it. Through that gig, Gribbon got connected with the figurative painter John Currin, who was looking for an artist to paint 18th-century portraits for Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette*. Gribbon fit the bill, and scenes were re-shot to include her rococo renditions of Kirsten Dunst.



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Jenna Gribbon in her studio

Process-based abstraction was the painting movement du jour in New York's aughts art scene. "Figuration was not cool at all," Gribbon says. "So I just made my weird paintings, and struggled to have them shown." There were some shows along the way, but she calls "the years of having to keep going without very many people showing any interest" the hardest of her career. At the same time, "There's something great about working when no one's paying attention, even if it's resentful at the time," Gribbon says. "There's not this fear of upsetting the apple cart; you can make whatever you want."

In 2011, Gribbon and her then-partner opened the Oracle Club, a members-only literary salon and workspace in Long Island City. The endeavor offered a sense of community and convenience: The couple and their son lived upstairs while Gribbon had a studio in the basement. The Oracle Club closed in 2016 due to rising rent, and the following year, Gribbon enrolled at Hunter College to get her MFA.

Around the same time, Gribbon met Mackenzie Scott, who makes indie rock as Torres, at an East Village bar. Married in 2022, they have a dynamic as performer and voyeur that has shaped both women's artwork since the early days of their romance. After a period of evading representational work, Gribbon returned to figuration with Scott as a primary subject and a renewed sense of joy. "I sometimes refer to us as having a reciprocal musedom," Gribbon says. "I don't love the word, but it has a different ring to it when it's working in both directions."

The language of art history is imperfect, and portraiture in particular is built on a history of exploitation, exclusion, and heteronormativity. When asked about how she wrestles with the canon in her paintings, Gribbon begins to choke up and blinks back tears. "I have such reverence for it that I would never want to be disparaging," she says, "but it's hard to look back with a critical eye as a woman or as a person born into a certain class situation and not be critical of who was allowed to contribute to art history."



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND FREDERICKS & FREISER, NEW YORK. © JENNA GRIBBON.

*Tenderness and Trust* (2019)

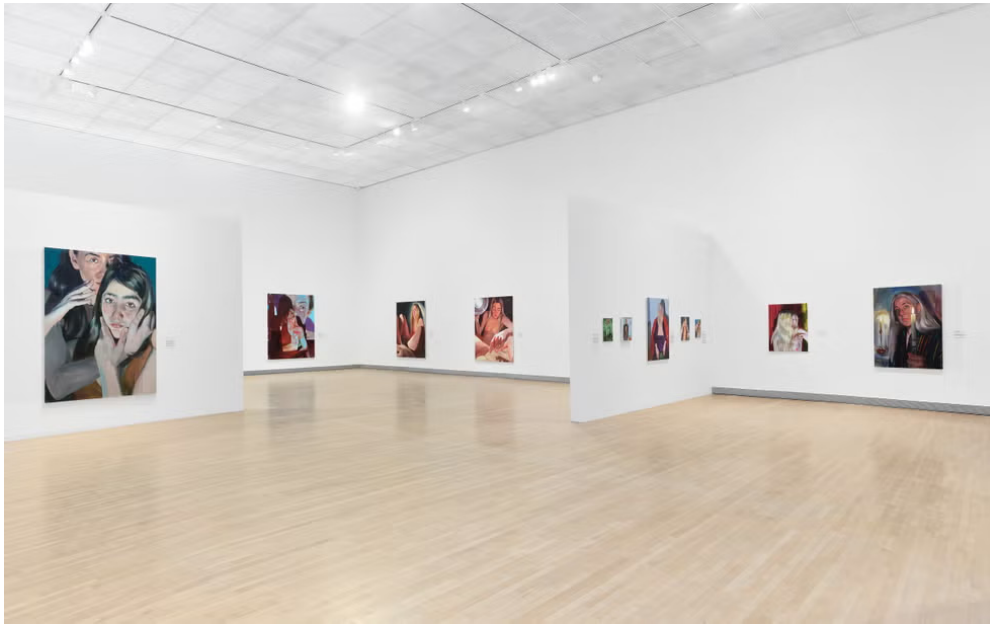
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Gribbon's reaction seems consistent with her empathetic approach to portraiture. The gendered gaze can be cliché, she says, but still offers a working definition of the female one: "It's representing your subject in a way that reflects knowing what it feels like to be on the other side, to know what it feels like to be regarded and to have a sensitivity around that."

The agency of her subjects is essential to Gribbon's practice. Her son, now a teenager, has been painted throughout his life, most prominently in the 2024 show "Like Looking in a Mirror." That series explored the sameness between parents and child and includes the piece that gives the Rose Museum exhibition its name, in which the artist cradles the face of her doppelganger. "Even though it was uncanny how he looked so much like me, it was about trying to see my son for who he is," Gribbon says. If he ever changed his mind about being featured in her artwork, she would stop painting him.

Meanwhile, Gribbon's ongoing project of painting Scott has a cumulative effect: Scott becomes actualized through repetition, familiar and recognizable, even off the canvas. "People will come up to her on the street and be like, 'I recognize you, you're the girl from the paintings,'" Gribbon says, adding that Scott has been mistaken for the artist. "That happens a lot, which is funny because if you think they're all self-portraits, it's a very different project."

When Gribbon does make the occasional appearance in her work, she's fragmented, mirrored, projected, overlaid, a shadow. "I'm painting about the way that the myselfness gets in the way of seeing the other," she says. "I think what I have been trying to do all this time is just paint by looking. I'm always trying to share what I see because it's so wondrous."



JULIA FEATHERINGILL PHOTOGRAPHY. COURTESY ROSE ART MUSEUM.

Installation view of Jenna Gribbon's *Entwined* at the Rose Art Museum

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