

It's Nice That

Jessie Makinson on the intuitive process behind her fantastical paintings

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Featuring dandy hats and highwaymen, alien-like creatures and forests on the brink of ecological disaster, the ideas for Jessie's paintings appear from the random shapes she daubs on her canvas.



Densely packed with strange animals, folklorish humans and a wild colour palette, the paintings of Jessie Makinson feel like entering a particularly creative dream. Speaking to Jessie about her process, the reason behind this becomes clear. The London-based artist composes her paintings by drawing shapes at random on a canvas with dry pigment mixed with an acrylic dispersant, which she then covers with a thin wash of diluted primer so the colour is not so obvious when she comes to paint over it. This unorthodox way of working means that the composition fits perfectly to the proportions of the canvas but also works as a method of generating ideas.

“I will then stand back from the canvas and look for a place to start – for the painting to speak to me,” Jessie tells It’s Nice That. “The pattern will suggest a small animal, or a woman perhaps. From there the painting grows outwards. With each shape, form, colour, figure placed, the narrative will shift.”

Jessie’s paintings are filled with references to historical figures and characters from folklore, that mingle in her brain following extensive research and reading and then make themselves apparent when she creates the initial shapes. “The underpainting provides a chaotic pattern that acts as a structure for all things in the world of my paintings,” she explains. “Everything is made up of the same substance, there is no hierarchy. I find stories, characters and creepy encounters. I find old friends, memories, misunderstandings and mischief. I don’t worry about the symbolism or the consequences of the imagery. I trust an occult knowledge that the painting and the surface hold the answers.”

When the painting has been completed the underpainting is still partially visible, something Jessie likens to a “bruised or rotting compost seeping through to the surface of pastels and deep shadows”. She says, “The chaos of the underpainting and the stillness of the figures creates a frantic energy that pulls you around the painting. Initially, the viewer can be drawn to the faces as they are most highly rendered. But in fact, they are a sort of red herring as they are quickly forgotten about as one travels through the shapes and colours of the surface.”

For a recent exhibition with Fabian Lang Gallery in Zurich, Jessie created a body of work inspired by speculation fiction, especially the radical feminist 1970s sci-fi book *The Female Man* by Joanna Russ. “This new body of work nods to science fiction, folklore, art history, 19th Century erotica and the relationship between humans, animals and nature,” Jessie tells us. “I am interested in the experience of the body as a means to understand, communicate and create. And the potential of an occult knowledge that hides in our physicality.”

Many of the stories embedded in her paintings are gruesome and intriguing. For example, in the painting *Dearest creature*, the entrails of a reclining figure hang down around her legs while she poses with her arm behind her head – a nod to esoteric Elizabethan forests and hunting rituals. “King James would ask his servants to lower his bare feet into the carcass of his latest kill in order to draw power from the warm blood of his victim,” Jessie explains of the visceral inspiration.

Featuring dandy hats and highwaymen, alien-like creatures and forests on the brink of ecological disaster, there’s an unnerving collision between past and future in Jessie’s paintings. The political arc of Jessie’s work often shows the underdog triumphing, or the social norms being disrupted by nature. She adds, “I willfully misunderstand history and its tales of heroism and domination and try to subvert the root metaphors of our culture that equate women, animals and nature as something to be conquered and used – a subject that I find ever more important in this time of extinction and climate crisis.”