

ART MAZE Mag

Subverting Patriarchal Myths: The Willfully Feminist Work of Jessie Makinson
By Maria Zemtsova



In Jessie Makinson's surreal paintings, female figures emerge and dissolve from the landscape in the same instance. Like reflections on the surface of a rippled pool, what is above and what is beneath become blurred and indistinguishable. The women in Jessie's paintings, part nature nymph, part futuristic android, part girl-next-door, are each defiantly feminine. They glance back at the viewer, unfazed and unaffected by being looked at, and melt into their surrounding before they can be fully recognised and objectified. In Jessie's paintings, neither the landscape nor the female form will hold still for the gaze, crystallised or be tamed, instead existing in a defiant state of flux, becoming and unbecoming.

Jessie begins each new painting with a quick rough sketch directly onto the canvas and then begins applying layers of colour to build up the ground. The bruised, miasmatic underpainting

seeps into the precisely articulated surface detail, creating a captivating dialogue between surface and depth; the figures and the landscape. The woman are part of the landscape, physically imbued with its brooding, implacable presence. The visual language in Jessie's work is steeped in feminist symbolism. She is deeply interested in the work of feminist speculative fiction and sci-fi writers, as well as the female subject in art history. With the capricious, nonchalant female figures, narratives emerge that hint of desire, mischief, pleasure and play.

Jessie lives and works in London. She is a graduate of the Edinburgh College of Art and the Royal Drawing School, and was selected to take part in the London-based Turps Banana Studio Programme from 2014-16. She has exhibited throughout the UK, and was the recipient of the Sir Denis Mohan Award for 2014-15, and in 2016 was the winner of the prestigious Marmite Prize for Painting. We caught up with Jessie to find out more about her work and being a feminist today.

AMM: Hi Jessie! How did you find yourself in the world of contemporary art? Can you share some of the highlights and milestones of your artistic career so far?

JM: Attending the Turps Banana painting programme was hugely helpful and important for me in terms of developing my practice and meeting other painters. I didn't know so many at the time and our year had a fantastic energy with loads of great artists on it. The ethos there was something I really came to believe in. That it's ok to make bad paintings in order to make good paintings later. That for your whole life as an artist you will have these ups and downs and moments of bad painting and change and that it's a huge cycle, that it's not about finding something and sticking with it forever. The lack of emphasis on the end of year show is also really refreshing as well as being in South London on the Aylsebury Estate and taught by fantastic painters.

Winning the Marmite Prize meant a lot to me, it's quite a niche prize but well known among painters, and you can feel the energy that Marcus Cope puts into the prize, which makes it very special for everyone in the show.

I've just opened my first solo show with galeria OMR in Mexico City. It's the first time I've made something as sculptural as the painted house in the show. I'm pretty excited about its potential as it feels like the beginning of a new way of working. Something about the imagery and the sculptural aspect of the work make it time based in a different way to the paintings.

AMM: Have you always been a contemporary feminist? What does this term mean to you?

JM: I've always been a feminist. I would hope that that was a given for everyone but sadly its not.

AMM: Whilst creating many feminine figurative narratives in your work, how has your understanding of the female body changed?

JM: My understanding of the female body is informed mainly by my own and my own experience. Quite often now my figures are anthropomorphic and not necessarily female. My time at the Royal Drawing School on the post graduate programme really instilled in me an understanding of the figure. Of proportion, gravity and weight. You don't get taught how to draw there. It is not academic in that sense. You learn through doing, and in that way you learn to see and draw in an entirely personal way. To take from the world and distort it into something that belongs solely to you.

AMM: Through painting you raise an important dialogue about the representation of female appearance since historic dates up until now using humour and juxtaposition in usually coarse narratives. How do you begin to address these themes when planning new work? Simply saying, how do you go about creating such complex compositions?

JM: The paintings are made by making a completely random drawing on the canvas with dry pigment mixed with an acrylic dispersant. This drawing forms a dense pattern like surface, which I then knock back with a thin wash of diluted primer. This pushes the colour back so that it is not so invasive when it comes to painting. Although the colour starts to shine through later, it is mainly a kind of compositional strategy. This embeds the drawing into the surface of the canvas. By not scaling up a planned drawing it means that the composition fits perfectly to the proportions of the canvas. I will then stand back from the canvas and look for a place to start. For the painting to speak to me. 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. I will find the narrative and art historical references in the act of making the painting. Figures will go in and be rubbed out until I agree. 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 to an occult knowledge that the painting and the surface hold the answers.

The underpainting provides a chaotic pattern that acts as a structure for all things in the world of my paintings. Everything is made up of the same substance, there is no hierarchy. Initially a viewer can be drawn to the faces as they are most highly rendered. But they are a sort of red herring as they are quickly forgotten about as one travels through the shapes and colours of the surface. And then back again. The underpainting can look like bruised or rotting compost seeping through to the surface of pastels and deep shadows. The chaos of the underpainting and the stillness of the figures create a frantic energy that pulls you around the painting.

AMM: Your art has a very powerful and rich figurative quality, it references many prominent art movements, but which one do you think your current work resonates with the most today and why?

JM: I suppose I'm mainly interested in artists like the female surrealists; Remedios Varo, Leonor Fini, Leonora Carrington and Dorothea Tanning. It's exciting to find artists you've somehow

missed like Mira Schor, Frank Bowling, Denzil Forrester. In terms of early influence I would say that I was into early Renaissance painters, Turkish miniatures, early Paula Rego, RB Kitaj, Paul Nash, Edward Burra, Balthus, Stanley Spencer, Henry Darger and Niki de Saint Phalle.

AMM: Evidently pop culture has a profound impact on your work apart from historical references. How do you make your research, or is it simply the influence of inevitable everyday encounters through your surroundings?

JM: My research is prompted by the paintings themselves. If I notice something in the work I will be looking out for books and films that relate to it. My paintings have always had art historical references, but there was also something futuristic. This led to reading a lot more speculative fiction, something I have always done, but now I read mainly works by women such as Ursula K Le Guin, Octavia Butler and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. I am very interested in science fiction's ability to tell untold or marginalized stories.

In terms of pop culture, I am very interested in the ways in which women present and represent themselves online. Often my figures are displayed face on, almost posing. Depending on who's looking, I think the figures' attitudes are read differently. I see them as quite disinterested, taking up their own space, aware of being looked at but finding it irrelevant.



Installation views: Tender Trick, courtesy of the artist and Galeria OMR, Mexico City Photo © Enrique Macías
AMM: What are the main concepts and ideas you are focusing on right now?

JM: My recent body of work has been for my solo show 'Tender Trick' at OMR in Mexico City. It juggles several themes; from the history of the forest (particularly the Elizabethan forest) to sci fi, costume, folklore, mythology and fakes.

In the show, anthropomorphic or vampiric women confuse the divisions between human and animal, desire and fear, becoming autonomous and unknowable. These lunar figures subvert and wilfully misunderstand the patriarchal myths of the apocalyptic feminine.

Drawing inspiration from the 17th Century travel fiction 'The Blazing World and Other Writings' by Margaret Cavendish, I see the show and its parts as an adventure, a romance and fanciful autobiography with an unreliable narrator. A courtly utopia within which, unlike 'The Blazing World', there are no hierarchies.

The use of feathered hats, gloves, heeled shoes, tails and wings are all elements of power play, ways in which the figures can take up space. In saga or myth, the way villains are dressed is very particular; in 'Tender Trick' gloves melt into flesh, dandiacal hats reference highwaymen and boots point and stamp. Historically costume has always been a means of subversion, festival and carnival means to disrupt the rules and values of society. The intricately coiffured hair and high heeled boots suggest these figures are not wholly wild, flirting with the boundaries of the forest on the brink of ecological disaster. I am interested in the reciprocal nature of space. The swamp-like water, sparse plants and hybrid creatures are all made up of the same substance, all drawn from the chaotic underpainting, which seeps and drips through like rotten flesh or bruised fruit.

AMM: Would you say the narratives in your work hold many allegorical and metaphorical suggestions?

JM: They are probably allegorical, but not by design on my part. All painting should be a truth of a person's experience.

AMM: Is there any visual or conceptual correlation between your current ceramic work and ancient Greek pottery?

JM: Yes in some senses I was interested in making fake Greek vases, but the idea also grew out of some wax reliefs I was making at the time. This has now developed further to the little house I made for OMR. The negative is painted in black, in response to the grain of the wood. I am interested now in how I paint on objects, reflecting both the surface and the shape.

AMM: When you attended The City and Guilds of London Art School residency, in your interview with Tom Groves, Head of Art Histories, you spoke about the opportunity to try many new mediums, and as I understand this was the time you started working on your delicate ceramic pieces. Can you tell us more about this explorative process and its challenges?

JM: The City and Guilds residency is an amazing opportunity for any artist to have access to workshops and technicians who are very highly skilled. I had been trying to make ceramics for a while, but hadn't found a way in which to make them that felt right. The residency gave me the freedom to do that.

I was also able to make a screen printed wall paper in the print rooms. I suppose the whole point of the residency is that these things are less challenging than on your own.

She-Dandies, oil on canvas, 70x50cm

AMM: Tell us about your studio space and how your usual working day is arranged, considering that you work in both mediums – sculpture/ceramics and painting.

JM: I work a quite regular day from 10am-7pm, Sunday – Friday in Catford, south east London. I tend to mainly be painting and only make ceramics specifically for shows.

AMM: You've exhibited work in South Korea, Russia, Mexico, USA and of course UK and Europe – what are the main challenges for you in showing work to such diverse international audiences?

JM: I don't really change or edit my work for different audiences. I have obviously learnt that imagery and titles have different reference points in different countries. For example a title of mine like 'Magma rising' has very different connotations to people who live with volcanoes to people who live in London. Also painting is so popular in London right now, which is not always the same elsewhere. But generally we all want to see work from other parts of the world so it's always a positive and welcoming experience.

AMM: How important is it in your vision for artists to make a cultural commentary through their work these days? Do you believe this may be the vital tool in contemporary art in bringing change?

JM: I think it's important for everyone, artist or not, to do what they can to oppose fascism, austerity, war and the abuse of power, within the framework of a green future. Artists are a vital tool because everyone is a vital tool.

AMM: If you can give any advice to emerging figurative feminist artists—what would you say to them that once helped you in advancing your own practice?

JM: I'm not sure if I have advice for specifically feminist figurative artists. The only advice I have is to keep making, that our practice is the only thing we have that truly belongs to us and we can always rely on that. That our work is allowed to be contradictory and inexplicable. And we must always remember to support one another.

AMM: What are you currently reading or listening to right now?

JM: I'm just about to read: Ecology without Nature by Timothy Morton; Play It as It Lays by Joan Didion, and The Female Man by Joanna Russ.

I would highly recommend: The Patterning Instinct by Jeremy Lent; Herland by Charlotte Perkins Gilman; The Left Hand of Darkness by Ursula K Le Guin, and Autobiography of Red by Anne Carson.

But most of all I would recommend 'weird studies' an unbelievable podcast that discusses the weird in gambling, Duchamp, object oriented ontology, Aleister Crowley, dungeons and dragons, boxing and sleep paralysis to just begin.

AMM: Can you share some insight regarding your upcoming projects?

JM: When I get back from Mexico City I'll start work on my next solo show in Zurich with Fabian Lang gallery in February next year followed by a solo show with Lyles and King in NYC in May.

Find out more about the artist: www.jessiemakinson.co.uk

Interview by Maria Zemtsova, text by Layla Leiman for ArtMaze Magazine.