

Jessie Makinson's Otherworldly Paintings Are Filled with Enigmatic Tales

Allyssia Alleyne Aug 24, 2020 5:01pm



Jessie Makinson, detail of *Giant Meddlers*, 2020. © Jessie Makinson. Photo by Charles Benton. Courtesy of the artist and Lyles & King, New York.

There's no right place to begin looking at a Jessie Makinson painting. Each hybrid figure, often embodying their own bizarre combination of woman and beast, appears as both a bit player in the production and the star of their own show.

In a single painting, multiple stories play out concurrently in Makinson's palette of shadowy greens, pinks, oranges, and blues. In *Dearest Creature* (2019), a woman arches her back and smirks as her intestines are pulled out, while a thick-thighed dog-person clutching a miniature sheep strides past. *The Chief Leaf* (2018) features a figure with bell-bottom-like plumage who wraps herself in the oversized tongue of a four-breasted imp, seemingly oblivious to the writhing body being carried off behind her. And in *Furry Darkness* (2020)—a rare painting by the artist depicting only men, included in a recent online group show at Victoria Miro—a leopard-spotted man sits boredly at a cauldron while, a few paces behind, a figure watches in horror as the head at the end of his tail coughs without covering its mouth. The piece was painted in the weeks before the U.K. went into lockdown, so you can only where Makinson got that idea.



Jessie Makinson, *Dearest creature*, 2019. © Jessie Makinson. Courtesy of the artist and Fabian Lang, Zurich.



Jessie Makinson, *The Chief Leaf*, 2018. © Jessie Makinson. Courtesy of the artist and Fabian Lang, Zurich.

Depending on your perspective, these actions can be interpreted as humorously subversive or merely strange. Expressions can be read as defiant or casual, concerned or apathetic. A curator had recently wrote to the artist describing her figures as “out for themselves” and “really aggressive,” as Makinson recalled over Zoom from her home in South London. “People see things their own way, don’t they?” the artist mused. In her eyes, the characters appear “quite calm and casual,” exuding the studied aloofness of a picture posted on social media. Indeed, for all their gruesomeness, many of her paintings seem like a series of Instagram-friendly moments collaged together, ready to be captured in close-up photos and uploaded to feeds in whatever city she’s exhibiting in.



Jessie Makinson, *Furry Darkness*, 2020. © Jessie Makinson. Courtesy of the artist and Fabian Lang, Zurich.

A graduate of London's prestigious Royal Drawing School and the Edinburgh College of Art, Makinson is evasive (her word) when it comes to ascribing meaning to her own work. She admits that, on some level, even she doesn't always know quite what to make of the mythological, historical, and personal references densely packed within her paintings. "Some people will look at it and go, 'But what's it all about?' and I find that a really difficult question," she said. "It's not world-building in the sense that there's a coded key that can unlock what I'm up to in some way."

She added, "There is always an element of taking the piss a little bit in the paintings. I mean something to an extent, but can't quite commit."



Jessie Makinson, detail of *Giant Meddlers*, 2020. © Jessie Makinson. Photo by Charles Benton. Courtesy of the artist and Lyles & King, New York.

Blame it on her approach. Rather than coming to the canvas with a clear agenda, Makinson prefers to let her intuition guide her, excavating shapes and stories as she goes along. Each painting starts with an infrastructure, painted freehand in big, broad brushstrokes. From there, potential figures and placements emerge, sometimes over the course of days, and are later overlaid with the distinct characters, colors, and patterns that give them life.

"I definitely trust myself not to plan something thematically, and I feel like, that way, you can have a few more surprises," Makinson explained. "The easiest way to describe it is like looking at clouds and making up shapes."



Jessie Makinson, *A pox on them*, 2020. © Jessie Makinson. Photo by Charles Benton. Courtesy of the artist and Lyles & King, New York.



Jessie Makinson, *Some minor magic*, 2020. © Jessie Makinson. Photo by Charles Benton. Courtesy of the artist and Lyles & King, New York.

With unending curiosity and diverse interests, ranging from 17th- and 18th-century erotic etchings and the works of Ursula K. Le Guin to the romanticization of pre-agricultural societies, Makinson has a deep well of inspiration to draw from. She finds the finished projects inevitably end up as reflections of whatever has been playing on her mind most recently, whether she's initially conscious of it or not.

“It’s all really unfashionable academically, this kind of accessing your subconscious and not necessarily believing in coincidence,” she said. “My approach allows me to work with the reality of my experiences, be they with other people or space or reading, watching, dreaming. It allows me to trust my instincts.”

Makinson traces this method back to her long-held fascination with the occult, divination, and the I Ching, an ancient Chinese text offering guidance for the future. “I’m interested in it as a level of storytelling, or another way to access information from within yourself,” she explained.



Jessie Makinson, installation view of “Tender Trick,” at Galeria OMR, Mexico City, 2019. © Jessie Makinson. Courtesy of the artist; Fabian Lang, Zurich; and Galeria OMR, Mexico City.

This interest in alternative frameworks beyond the ordinary extends into her love of fantasy and speculative fiction, where the rules of the natural world and of our social order no longer apply. Makinson's 2019 show at Mexico City's Galería OMR was inspired by the proto-sci-fi novella *The Blazing World* (1666) by Margaret Cavendish, and *Herland* (1915), a utopian novel about an all-female society by Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

"I don't think painting needs the same world-building as in writing, where things have to be laid out in a certain order to build a pace and reveal," she said. "With painting, those decisions are perhaps more up to the viewer...you can just put [your ideas] together and trust that they work. I find it best not to think about it too much. If I start to analyze it and sew it all up, it can get in the way."



Jessie Makinson, installation view of *Listen sweetie*, 2019, in "NOBODY AXED YOU TO" at Fabian Lang gallery, Zurich, 2019. © Jessie Makinson. Courtesy of the artist and Fabian Lang, Zurich.

Following her recent shows at Lyles & King in New York, Fabian Lang in Zurich, and Galería OMR, Makinson is set to participate in her first institutional show in September. She'll be exhibiting three drawings and a large painting created in lockdown in a group show at Kunstverein Dresden.

Set in a market ("a really nice Italian market, not like a market here") and inspired by narrative Chinese handscrolls, as well as urban scenes by Balthus and Edward Burra, she hints that the drawings will feature even more characters than her usual work and, with them, more scenarios and symbols for decoding. But what it all means, as ever, will remain for the viewer to decide.