

METAL

JESSIE MAKINSON: FAKES AND LIES



British artist Jessie Makinson usurps science fiction from the world of print to the realm of paint in her work, while also redefining the ancient tradition of mythological painting in art from archaic and patriarchal to modern and feminist. She rejects the notion of artistic hierarchy, stating that this is a result of a lack of curiosity – curiosity being at the heart of her work.

Her current exhibition *Tender Trick* at the Galería OMR in Mexico City, on view until August 17, is exemplary of this. Her work evokes a strong sense of narrative due to dynamic use of colours and figures that serve to ignite the audience's imagination. Despite this impressive sense of storytelling in her paintings, in our discussion Makinson discloses that during her creative process, she too is inquisitive as to what the story will hold for her paintings, as it reveals itself organically due to her avoidance of planning.

It has been said that your recent collection *Tender Trick* is inspired by the 17th-century proto-science fiction novel *The Blazing World* by Margaret Cavendish. What an obscure influence! What compelled you to read Cavendish? Do you often glean inspiration from texts?

Yeah, it is quite obscure! I have an interest in feminist science fiction and speculative fiction, so I began to look for early examples. Another text I was looking at whilst working on the show was *Herland* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, which tells of a land of only women, stumbled upon

by three men. Likely a precursor to the classic *The Female Man* by Joanna Russ. Often, I find texts when making the paintings that seem to have an affinity with what I am making, that somehow explain something I already knew. I rarely find a text and make work from it.



So how or why did you start reading *The Blazing World*?

With *The Blazing World*, I was already interested in the enlightenment period and the sense of adventure it evoked in the bizarre travel fiction. An example being Diderot's *Les Bijoux Indiscrets*, where a sultan has a magic ring that when pointed at a vagina, causes it to reveal its past. Obviously, the enlightenment was a time when parts of the world were unknown to each other. It is this sense of adventure that I am drawn to with science fiction. It has this ability to tell untold stories and shine a light on the hypocrisies of our time.

There is a fantastic essay by Ursula Le Guin called *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* in which she says: "Science fiction properly conceived, like all serious fiction, however funny, is a way of trying to describe what is in fact going on, what people actually do and feel, how people relate to everything else in this vast sack, this belly of the universe, this womb of things to be and tomb of things that were, this unending story."

Your paintings have a well-articulated sense of narrative that is simultaneously chaotic (wonderfully so). Can you explain your creative process? Do you have a plan before you sit down to paint or does inspiration occur more spontaneously?

Lyles & King

The paintings are made by creating a completely random drawing on the canvas with dry pigment mixed with an acrylic dispersant. This drawing forms a dense pattern like a 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'm satisfied. In it, 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. 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.

Once put together, one can definitely see the parallels between mythology and science fiction. The similarities are all the more poignant when realising that one represents ideas of the past and the other of the future. What first inspired you to combine the two?

I think it was more a case of realising that my paintings were doing it themselves. The references to art history were already there, but there was also a futuristic feel – a kind of end of the world or after the apocalypse mood. Folklore, mythology and science fiction are all means of telling stories indirectly. They are all revealing in one way or another. All talk of the relationship between animals, humans and the other. All can be enjoyed as they are or be taken to have meaning beyond the narrative.

I'm also interested in pre-agricultural societies with different worldviews, particularly non-patriarchal societies and their possibilities. With *The Blazing World*, I was interested in the lack of men and the courtly setting, something that my paintings quite naturally have, albeit with a lack of hierarchy.



In both the *Tender Trick* exhibition and previous ones – your *Something Else* collection in Moscow’s Triumph Gallery, for example –, you have displayed both oil paintings and ceramics. Is this a device to hark back to art history and the famed ceramic tradition of ancient Greece?

Initially, I had the idea to make fake Greek vases as I’ve always been interested in fakes and lies. With *Tender Trick*, I wanted to show the paintings, ceramics and casita together as they encourage a different way of viewing that adds to the whole. The pace of looking at the paintings requires time, a time that is different from wandering around and in the house, and different again from the ceramics that appear precious and clumsy simultaneously. The imagery on the ceramics is often more tender, creepy, surreal, sinister or humorous than the paintings, as if it is more concentrated. It’s possible because of the smaller scale, to be more extreme in a quiet, personal way.



You often use art historical references and yet depict your figures in a very graphic way. How do you feel about the position of the graphic arts in the artistic hierarchy today?

I would say that these things are quite cyclical. Lots of imagery from before the Renaissance, all over the world, was more graphic in style. It has an immediacy that allows a certain liberty. You only have to look at the Chinese scroll paintings before and after Western perspective got to China to see the possibilities of both ways of seeing. The pre-perspective scrolls of the emperor’s journey down river were able to tell countless stories. You could see inside a house, behind it, on

the roof; it told the stories of everyday people. The scrolls made with Western perspective – a lie in itself – became almost landscape paintings. I'm not really interested in the hierarchies some place on arts, it is just a lack of curiosity.

Despite drawing from multiple sources for inspiration, your images remain fresh and original. How do you preserve this sense of originality?

Because I don't plan my paintings and find the narrative in the under-drawing, avoiding certain clichés. At all times, I am trying to generate scenarios in which to not paint consciously to find the image in the act of painting. Through this, I allow for and trust my imagination to find connections and true emotion, which would not be possible through planning. When planning, I am predictable, I never surprise myself, so why would I surprise anyone else? I know that there is something very familiar about the paintings, but there is also something slightly off, which is what I think keeps them fresh. They are also quite evasive in their nature, which I think keeps the viewer jumping around.



I love how the women in your paintings appear to have so much more power than those depicted say by Titian, who's mythical goddesses cater so much to the male gaze that their power is subsequently undermined. Was this a conscious decision on your part?

Well, the whole of Greek mythology is a justification for the patriarchy. I couldn't count the rapes in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the number of times a woman is blamed for being raped. The term 'Kalon Kakon' (meaning 'a beautiful evil') was used by Hesiod to describe Pandora – the first woman to be mentioned in Greek myth. It is this concept of woman as beautiful, dangerous and deceitful that was the framework for Eve and the foundations of how women are still perceived today.



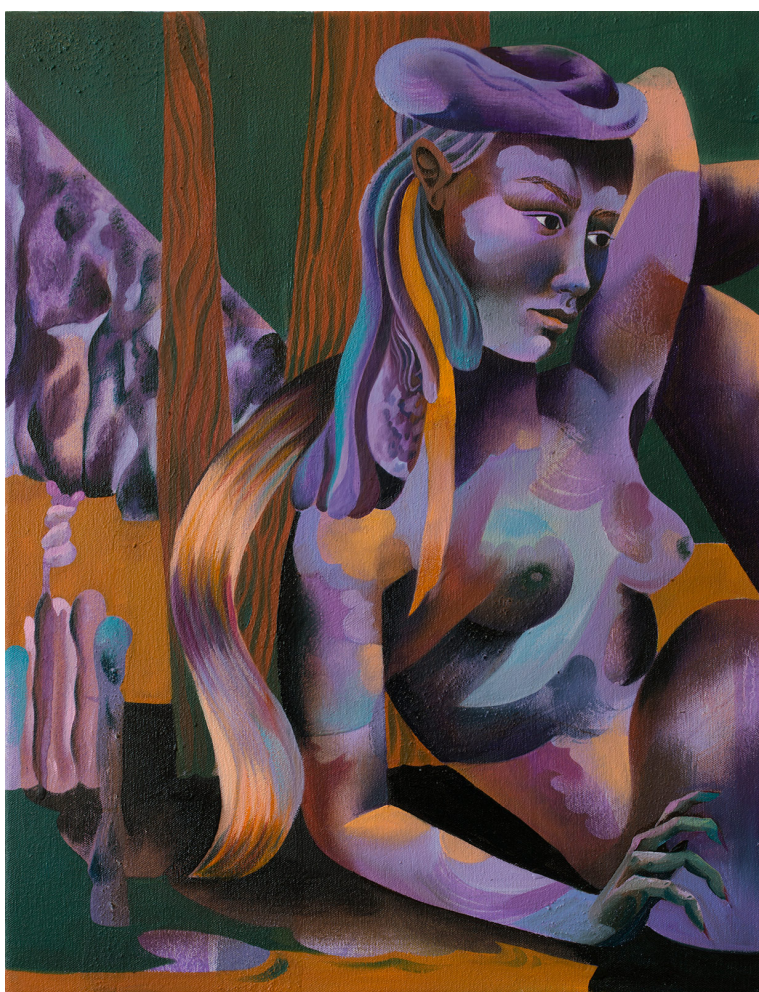
I didn't consciously plan to disrupt this when I started painting women. But my gaze is my own, and that is reflected in my paintings. The women are often strong, taking up space, but they can also be contradictory; curled up, shifty, proud, resistant, soft and disinterested. The biggest problem with the male gaze is the one-dimensionality of it; the woman is a prop as much as anything else.

In your work, you use colour in a way that would surely make Henri Matisse proud. How significant is colour to the overall meaning of each of your pieces?

Thank you! I'm not sure how well I use colour, but it's definitely something I can't avoid. I think there is some narrative quality to the way I use colour; I don't use it the way I'm supposed to – I put warm colours in the shadows and all sorts. It is hugely important, in a way, that I haven't quite understood colour. There is a personal logic to it which perhaps is best left unquestioned, otherwise it might lose its confidence.

Up until now, your work has mostly been featured in group exhibitions. After your first major solo exhibition at Galería OMR, what are your hopes for the future?

Now I am working towards a solo show with Fabian Lang Gallery in Zurich in the new year, followed by a solo show with Lyles and King in New York. I'm hoping to develop the sculptural aspect of my installations further, whilst pushing the paintings in new directions.



Words: Lara Delmage

Portrait: David Díaz

Installation view: Courtesy of the Artist and Galería OMR, Mexico City. Photo © Jacob Flood