

**ANAT EBGI**

# **BORDERCROSSINGS**

**Mute ability: Janet Werner changes the face of portraiture**

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Read the following interview while humming "Come to me my melancholy baby" and dedicate the song to both painted subjects and painter because mood counts for a lot in Janet Werner's work. Then, let this work curl like ocular smoke, and be open to enigma and the elusive slip of nuance.

Without overstating the obvious, ordinary people have the features they have, and, in spite of the unattainable desires created by the beauty industry, they like their faces. Leaving the less defined heads behind, Janet Werner began doing portraits, that is, paintings that she considered portraits--head, neck and shoulders--in 1997. These portraits were the faces of ordinary people. Not real people, however, neither did they accommodate themselves to even the loose components of traditional portraiture, and I asked myself, what is a portrait, even loosely defined? Well, it would be a conveyer or carrier of record, of specific information about the face of a particular individual, even one whose identity has been subsequently misplaced.

Janet Werner's early portrait faces seem troubled by deficiencies--vitamins, sunshine, anti-allergy medication, opportunity, love--and they look inward for the missing elements, contemplating their particular condition, musing and ruminating on their state of being. They're a poignant lot, these ordinary folks, because they're carrying the weight of their maker's intention, and what she's after with these mute works is difficult to name and harder to accomplish.

Still, for all their individual qualities, their distinctive palettes, their odd and unlovely haircuts, their irregular features--they share certain necessary characteristics: perseverance, a kind of integrity, and, above all, they are earnest. And that's important.

Their assignment is to present, to represent what can't be articulated and while the paintings themselves are material--canvas, pigment, image--what Janet Werner is doing is painting between the lines, painting the nuance. If intentional cognition is something that eludes language, if it's something you sense but can't necessarily say, then painting this state must parallel the intention. You can't speak/paint the unspeakable. The resulting portraits have about them, then, a quality of holding back. It's painting as intentional mimesis. Painting itself, Werner says, suits her because it's so mute--everything meant is going on in silence. Not repressed, she says, but under the surface, and I think, in looking at the work, that "subcutaneous" would aptly apply because the portraits do get under your skin.

I look at Orange boy, 1998, and the word indeterminate comes first to mind. The portrait is only a few degrees off full face but there's a sideways look to the eyes and the shadow of the nose is such that it reads as a profile and straight-on at once. The pigment that marks the mouth rides in a smear outside the suggested lip line and the lips could be parted a little in anticipation of speech, or not. The eyes are guarded and at the same time questioning, and they are reddened as though boy had been swimming or weeping. Against the orange ground, the side of the jaw that is slightly turned from the viewer is lined in a slip of a pink so the edge is indistinct. So much is left open, so much remains to be decided, filled in by the viewer whose itch of irritation grows

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commensurate with the rising suspicion that Werner is keeping things loose, hedging her bets and holding the exit in sight.

With the newest work the indeterminacy lifts, a little, since the faces in the paintings are drawn from real sources. And--further to the sense of inadvertence that Werner is so adept at maintaining--she describes the shift as "sidling." "I sidled into fashion photography just the way I sidled into portraiture," she said.

The faces, now regular-featured, even beautiful, carry the anonymity of famous people who have ceased to have private and individual selves and are somewhat non-specific in their person. Seduction is Werner's motivation for choosing to paint these beautiful and familiar figures, but in some sense using identifiable faces may close down the occasion for the viewer to inhabit the painting. What the owner of the ordinary face finds is that these beautiful portraits are not them, are less empathic, less inclusive, and subsequently represent a further distancing. But, since by her own admission, these new paintings are about desire and loss--well, now you have it, now you don't.

It's necessary to hold your hands out, palms cupped together to receive the quicksilver of Werner's offerings--small gifts which weigh big. The gifts are how something is made (process) and what is withheld (absence), and, like she says--readily apparent or not--it's all still information.

I listened to Janet Werner talk, I've looked closely at her work and here's what I think. I think she wants to be pressed, to be coaxed onto the dance floor, wants to tell her secrets--what she's been storing and assessing, measuring and taking stock of for all her life. There's a codex of emotional information in these seemingly closed paintings. The faces are waiting, lips parted, eyes ready to lock onto yours, and then a breathless rush of telling. All that's necessary is to just ask it right.

**The following interview was conducted by Robert Enright in the artist's Montreal studio on June 20, 2002.**

**BORDER CROSSINGS:** In 1987--the same year you graduated from Yale--you got a job teaching in the art department of the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon. Is that where you began the work that mixed abstraction and figuration?

**JANET WERNER:** It didn't really materialize until maybe two years after I was in Saskatoon. It took me a long time to work through that confusion about abstraction and where the surface of the painting was and when something moved from being abstract to representational. I kept getting lost in that.

**BC:** Was it a fortunate accident that you went to a city where that dialogue between abstraction and representation was ongoing?

**JW:** It was fortunate in an ironic way, because I didn't feel what I was doing was considered painting among the painters who were there when I arrived. Neither within the university nor within the art community. It was the most peculiar thing because I thought I was dealing with the formal elements of the language of painting, and here were all these formalists who were asking, what's this dreck? It wasn't understood and it was a very peculiar position to be in. I was also having to deal with being the first person hired into that department in about 20 years, and

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the only woman, and a generation younger. And art history was going through the crisis of the New Art History. It was really difficult but it was a crucible of sorts.

**BC:** Was it good for your work to find yourself in that particular context and that historical moment?

**JW:** I seem to thrive in adversity. Suffering is always good for the work.

**BC:** And you stayed in Saskatoon for 12 years and developed a real sense of the community by the time you left.

**JW:** It's my home and I miss it terribly. Yes. I made a space for myself there over time.

**BC:** So what did you learn about this relationship between abstraction and figuration, between illusion and surface--all the things at the centre of that dialogue? By the time you'd completed your first two shows, had you figured out what was going on or was it still a process and the work was about that process?

**JW:** The first show I had in Saskatoon at the AKA Gallery was just a beginner show. Nothing emerged there except it was a very important moment for me because I got to see my work in a public context. Suddenly I realized that all the thoughts that were in my head in the studio had a totally different meaning when you took them out into the world. Then I had a show in Winnipeg at the Plug In Gallery in 1989, which was probably the first show where a voice was clearly evident. Things had gotten simplified to the point where they were right on that edge between abstraction and figuration. They were very minimal abstract images and it was the titles that flipped them into representation. After that show things multiplied so there were many minimal images that came together like a language.

**BC:** Were you consciously working towards a pictorial syntax?

**JW:** No. I started out as if I were in a pre-verbal state and I was naming. It was just nouns at first. So all those images in the Winnipeg show were things--like hair, rock and tree--just like when a child starts pointing and naming things. I had it in my mind that you could somehow get back to that place. Then, after the nouns, there were verbs and what I called conditions, which were images that were multiples of the same form. It was an unsystematic, illogical system where different categories of things were introduced and could coexist. The first words I introduced were conjunctions, so they weren't over-determined in their meaning. And as soon as they did become too complicated, I realized they weren't in the same spirit. They had to be words that could function in the same way the forms did.

**BC:** Were you interested in literature? Was there a verbal language that was inspiring the pictorial language you were working out?

**JW:** I'm not a big reader but I was interested in how Gertrude Stein was using language to create an emotional meaning. That made sense to me. I wanted the paintings to have an emotional meaning.

**BC:** Stein was also trying to make a language in which all the words had equal value. She called it writing Cubist.

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**JW:** Yes, and to create that effect just by repetition or by having how you say something mean different things. That was very interesting to me.

**BC:** What did your choice of words tell you about your own psychology? There is one painting that has "Bad Girl" on it that talks about bad dreams. It's a very loaded text. Was it just an aberration?

**JW:** I think so, because it's just too directed or revealing.

**BC:** So painting for you is a process, not of revelation, but of hiding? I'm trying to get at the relationship between statement and meaning in your work.

**JW:** That's interesting because I think the earlier work did have an element of covering the face or turning away, or seeing things from the back as a silhouette--so you only had the outline to give you information--and not being able to see, not being able to speak. Those were present as content in that work. The newer work is a face being revealed, so it's like an uncovering.

**BC:** What do you think the hiding was about? I'm reminded of Emily Dickinson's aesthetic strategy of "seeing things slant." Meaning was a deflection and not a direct statement. Was that your strategy as you were thinking about this work?

**JW:** I did believe that it would somehow be legible, that it was readable. Also, how something is made and what is withheld is still information.

**BC:** In addition to being statements about your making a painting, were they statements about you?

**JW:** It's hard to get back to that old work now. But there was a condensed version of the installation work, called Scat, that was supposed to be about pleasure, actually. It was about taking pleasure in language that is not fixed to specific narrative meaning, where you can construct your own narrative by jumping from one image to the next. But there were a lot of different levels that it was functioning on. It was talking to painting, talking to formalism, talking to feminism, and miniaturizing and domesticating abstraction. So there was the level on which it was a study of language and the history of painting and I was trying to find a position within that. Maybe I mean I was trying to define a position that was in it and outside of it at the same time. Then there was a level on which it was quite purely about sensual pleasure. Although they were difficult to like; they were awkward and a bit crude and not aesthetically pleasing. If there was seduction involved, it was passive aggressive. Then there was this idea about wanting to get away from linear thought and language.

**BC:** Had you been reading Barthe's *The Pleasure of the Text*?

**JW:** I was reading about it as a way of understanding what I was doing. And there were a lot of real-life things that influenced it as well. The way I talk is not the way you're supposed to talk in the university. So there was that sense of being a misfit. How do you deal with it? Is it your fault, is it a problem, should you try to speak another way, what kind of authority does your language carry, and how can you legitimize and make a space for other ways of using language?

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**BC:** When did portraiture emerge as something that interested you more than the relationship between kinds of painting? Was there a point where you realized you were genuinely interested in the portrait as a vehicle for making art?

**JW:** It came sideways. When I was working on these little paintings, a few came out that were figurative. There were legs and there was a floating figure, and I just noticed that they were like anchors of the things that seemed to be more resonant.

**BC:** Anchors for you?

**JW:** For me. And these hooded figures as well. I went away in 1995 to the Canada Council's studio in Paris and I just drew. I went with the idea that I would play and see what kind of figures I could make from abstraction. So I did that little series of drawings that's in the Lucky catalogue. And this face emerged with these biomorphic eyes, nose and mouth. Basically, they were flat black holes; I was fixated on the fact that this face was looking at me rather than being hooded. Instead of projecting an image onto the surface, it was a mirror that was reflecting the viewer, or me. I became really interested in this face that I'd been trying not to draw, that I'd been trying to avoid. So the face didn't come out of an interest in portraiture, it came out of abstraction and this kind of philosophical confrontation. They were always confrontational. Even the abstract things were in your face.

**BC:** But the scale was never intimidating.

**JW:** That's true. I wanted them to be friendly. They weren't quite miniature but they were smaller than small. It was about a lot of different things--portability, practicality and they were girl-size.

**BC:** It wasn't big attack art.

**JW:** Right. That strategy doesn't work, by the way. Just thought I'd mention that.

**BC:** Which strategy?

**JW:** No attack. I mean, it's nice but it doesn't really grab you in the end. There is a reality about the human body and things that are bigger than you and things that are smaller than you and you feel differently about them. You can fight it if you want, but that's just reality.

**BC:** Are you saying that you wouldn't work small and fragmentary again, that it doesn't interest you because it doesn't have the impact you want?

**JW:** Right now it doesn't interest me. I'm not saying I would never do it again, but you have to have a reason.

**BC:** But what about those beautiful little drawings you did--the man and the dog confronting one another, or the dog running towards a figure?

**JW:** Actually, those little drawings are what made me want to work big. Because there's so much space in them. I saw those drawings as huge paintings with massive and infinite spaces. When I came back I tried to make big paintings that had small figures in them and I also made these small paintings with big heads. It was kind of funny but the heads won.

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**BC:** Was that piece in which the face first appeared a self-portrait, in a sense? When you said that you looked down and realized it was looking back at you, was it you looking back at you?

**JW:** Yes and no. It was a cartoon face.

**BC:** But (black head) was a cartoon face too, and that's been described as a self-portrait.

**JW:** They are all self-portraits, I can't deny that, but they are not primarily or only self-portraits. I identify with them but they're other.

**BC:** Did you realize that you were making portraits, because that carries with it a formidable history?

**JW:** What happened was this: I did this dog face and some other floating heads. Some were more or less abstract and they weren't portraits. But as soon as I put a neck and shoulders on them and took it to the bottom of the painting, suddenly it was a portrait. That's what I mean when I say I came into it sideways, because it wasn't something I was actually thinking about. But when I started trying to put more flesh on the abstract structure of the head, it turned into a portrait. I was bemused by that. It wasn't something in which I'd had a previous interest. Nor is it something I'm actually interested in now, believe it or not. But I use the word because they have a resemblance to portraits.

**BC:** They are faces that exist in a space that is basically uninflected. Why have you chosen not to add anything to the physiognomy?

**JW:** Because I don't want them to be in a specific time and place. It's to allow the viewer to project their own environment or their own imaginary construction of the character. For the viewer to struggle with placing them was always the struggle in the abstract work as well. Somehow the viewer had to supply the narrative.

**BC:** And too much detail--including clothing detail--automatically locates the painting historically and takes away that responsibility and obligation from the viewer?

**JW:** Yes. Now, because of my sources, I think they are becoming more locatable. But secondarily, I was wanting to use colour alone to create some sort of psychological meaning. I still have that belief that colour is a language that has infinite meaning.

**BC:** Does this go beyond colour theory, optics and perception? Is it about psychology?

**JW:** I flirt with that. I'm flirting with the idea that somehow each combination of colours is specific and if you can combine them in infinitely different ways and infinitely different proportions, it's going to read differently and people are going to receive and interpret it differently. In a way, it's a kind of formalist idea.

**BC:** So when you have a line of lavender under the chin of a figure, or when you put red eyes on a figure and accentuate them, are those details intuitively chosen to lead the viewer in a certain direction?

**JW:** Sometimes they're accidental, sometimes they're intentional. If I leave an accident, then that becomes intentional. But the eyes and the mouth in the earlier ones were quite deliberately

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dramatized. Those were quite often emphasized in some way, either through drawing or colour. These newer ones are more subtle. But I'm always thinking about how I can use colour or drawing to communicate something that goes beyond the appearances into the inside part.

**BC:** And the earlier portraits were also cruder. They were also much closer to the cartoon than to conventional portraiture. Was that about a failure of technique, or was that a realization of intention?

**JW:** Well, they were done from imagination. They were sort of coughed up because I had been working abstractly and hadn't worked figuratively for a long time. The crudeness was part of their expression and the cartoon quality was also a way to say something as directly as possible.

**BC:** They are also more abstract in the way the colour is applied. There are areas of colour that aren't contoured. I guess I'm saying they are more painterly and less realistic.

**JW:** Yes.

**BC:** Was that because you were trying to work a relationship between abstract and representational painting?

**JW:** The key was the emotion. So even if something wasn't accurate anatomically, if it had a certain expression that captured something I wanted to identify with, then I would stop. I might lose that if I corrected it.

**BC:** And because they were invented characters, there was no prescriptive likeness to which you had to adhere?

**JW:** That's what was interesting, because I would start with this armature of a head and shoulders and keep building, as if it were clay or something, until somebody interesting emerged. Lots of people arrived whom I didn't identify with or whom I didn't find complex enough. They had to have a certain complexity. It's hard to explain, but there was something very exciting about having people emerge who were convincing and not knowing who they were.

**BC:** Was there a story they brought with them?

**JW:** I don't have a fiction in my mind about who these people are or what they'll do, but I recognize and identify with them. I know where they've been. It's not someone who has a specific narrative attached but I hope I've invented a character. One of the things that pleased me a lot when the paintings were shown in "Trance" at the Mendel was that people felt they recognized them, that they knew people like that. Some people even recognized themselves. The other thing was that after people saw the paintings, they then saw the people. That would happen to me too after working on them for a long time. I'd go out in the world and there they would be.

**BC:** Now you're not inventing characters but you're transcribing and altering characters who already exist. Is that a big shift?

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**JW:** It was a huge shift to start using photographs. I sidled into fashion photography just the way I sidled into portraiture.

**BC:** Had you exhausted what you were able to do with the invented characters?

**JW:** Exactly. I was repeating myself and I didn't know how to go further with them. I sort of painted myself up against the wall. The same figures kept cropping up and I wanted to expand the range of expression and physiognomy. To get in more information I had to work from life, which I didn't want to do, because I'd have to deal with real people and they would be too specific. I'm finding that even though models are celebrities and a lot of people can recognize them, they're still anonymous in a sense. It's not who they really are that's important to us when we look at those pictures.

**BC:** What made you decide to paint Monica Lewinsky, then? She hardly comes without recognition and emotional baggage.

**JW:** That's good question. She was in the news all the time and she just seemed the perfect subject. But what's really interesting about her is that even though she became a celebrity, she really was a nobody. She was ordinary and all those earlier figures were ordinary. They were not very attractive, even homely. Monica wasn't homely but I thought there was something sad and pathetic about her and that was a characteristic shared by many of the figures.

**BC:** She was the perfect abject, too. The words that come up in critical writing about your early portraits are "abjection" and "loneliness" and "sadness," and a whole range of adjectives that address the condition of the depressed as opposed to the celebratory. Why did they emerge that way?

**JW:** That's really a hard question to answer. I didn't think of them so much as depressed as the sort of figures one could empathize with. It was a lot about empathy.

**BC:** Because they weren't beautiful and they weren't scintillating?

**JW:** Right. Some of them looked damaged. And they seemed to be preoccupied with something. It was easier to address the subject I wanted to address if I weren't distracted by the seduction of beauty. In all the earlier work I was trying to represent thought, which is not visible. And those paintings were also trying to represent inwardness. I'm still trying to do that but now for some reason I'm trying to make them beautiful.

**BC:** Do you know why that's happened? The shift towards beauty is another big shift.

**JW:** I do know why it's happened. I became curious to see if it was possible to make something beautiful that is also complex. The veneer of beauty is difficult to get past. So the first image I used was very bland beauty. She was one of the Michelles.

**BC:** Michelle goes through a dramatic transformation: in the three portraits she moves from a plain schoolgirl to having almost supermodel beauty.

**JW:** Yeah, it's funny.

**BC:** Do you have to visualize the transitions you take a character through?



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**JW:** I definitely do. That's why I'm doing a lot of repeaters. I painted a number of these images before but I'm still interested in them. I think I can get another version that will be different but also interesting.

**BC:** How do you invest surface beauty with character?

**JW:** Good question. I'm practicing playing with the idea that there has to be something extreme. I was reading an article about Evan Penny in The Globe and Mail and he talked about the monstrous in the normal and the everyday. I think if you can get the images to the place where they are monstrous, then they become interesting.

**BC:** Can that come in something like high cheekbones that are lacerating and almost dangerous to look at? What becomes monstrous?

**JW:** In doing them, that's what I'm interested in finding out. Sweetie has a machine-like quality that is almost not human. It's right on the edge of being a bit scary.

**BC:** It's an area that Marlene Dumas has inquired into in "Models and the Rejects." Her point is the rejects and the models--the almost criminally insane and the beautiful--have the same face. It's a face that allows you to read everything into it. It almost doesn't have character.

**JW:** Yes. That's really interesting.

**BC:** When you realize you're in the territory of portraiture of one kind or another, suddenly a whole history comes with the enterprise, a history that includes everybody from Van Dyck to John Singer Sargent and then moving through contemporary artists like Dumas and Alex Katz.

**JW:** The Lewinsky portrait reminds me of Alex Katz. I thought there was some connection there. I was probably looking at him a little bit then too. One of the things I like about his work is the simplification of the abstraction and the bravery of it. The way it's technically simplified. And he did all those Adas and the repetition factor was interesting to me. I had this one image of his around--was it Jackie or Ada, or Ada looking like Jackie, in a pillbox hat. And those small paintings are just so delicious. But what also interests me is the awkwardness of the bigger things. A lot of them are not pleasing.

**BC:** Does it matter to you whether your paintings are likeable now?

**JW:** I'm not sure how to answer that one. We all want to be loved.

**BC:** I guess it gets to the source of beauty. If I look at any of the paintings around the studio, not one of them includes anything that's off-putting for the viewer.

**JW:** Well, I'm trying to be as seductive as I can now. I'm really trying to make them seductive as paintings and as images. With the earlier work, there was a repulsion that people could feel. If viewers now were just neutral and dismissive about them I would be unhappy because then the paintings wouldn't be doing what they were supposed to be doing.

**BC:** Where does desire play into it for you?

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**JW:** Desire was how I was conceptualizing the content of the newer work when they changed. I thought they were actually about desire and loss. And that's how I thought they were going to become interesting. That's how beauty was going to get its depth. In the earlier work, desire was going outward and some of it was about a failure to go outward at all. They were images of inwardness, whereas these are more about going outward.

**BC:** Are the paintings as mute now as they were before?

**JW:** I'm not sure, actually. People have referred to them as being quite held back and I was thinking about that. I think they still are. I've come to realize something about the sometimes "expressionless" quality of the work. To express is to articulate, and if you want to express the inarticulate, then the expression can't be given a particular form, but must be held back.

**BC:** So are they still "repressed," to use a word you used before to describe your work?

**JW:** I'm not sure repressed is the right word so much as under the surface. Maybe your word mute is better. That's the thing about painting, it's tremendously mute. And that's probably why I feel it's so suited to me. Because the things it says are all going on in the silence.

**BC:** You still believe that your work is about the silences?

**JW:** It seems consistent. It's still about those things that can't be spoken, it's about trying to make visible things that are invisible.

**BC:** Do you continue to think of yourself as being conceptually based, as well?

**JW:** I hope so. Thought is what interests me. I've always wanted my work to have a conceptual edge, I've always been attracted to work that does and I've always been afraid that painting just can't have it because it's too seductive. So my big challenge with this work is trying to use this source material and trying to make beautiful images that don't lose their conceptual edge.

**BC:** I'd say in one sense your work has always been about loss.

**JW:** Yes, and also always about beauty. I always was trying to make beautiful paintings and I thought they were beautiful when they were good. Because of the way they were painted and the colour, and even if the image was difficult I was still trying to make it beautiful. Now I'm taking beautiful things and trying to make them interestingly difficult. Maybe the two are hopelessly intertwined.

The key was the emotion. So even if something wasn't accurate anatomically, if it had a certain expression that captured something I wanted to identify with, then I would stop.