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In the Studio with Janet Werner

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Janet Werner has spent decades exploring the form of the portrait. Culled from fashion magazines, her women peer through thick mascara, don elaborate outfits, and inhabit bodies Werner has stretched and warped in paint. Although her source materials are mostly photographic, the resulting paintings and the girls who look out at us are thoroughly original creatures. While her figures have typically included smooth transitions even with their distorted bodies, Werner's recent paintings focus on the collaged nature of her sources, and the space of the studio where snippets of magazines are taped to the walls. Referencing Exquisite Corpse, the Surrealist drawing game where a folded sheet of paper features a composite, often grotesque portrait, Werner crafts figures at once humorous, sexy and repulsive.

I spoke with Janet to find out why she works with fashion magazines and whether she considers her portraits funny.

Anna Kovler: What made you want to use fashion ads as sources for your paintings?

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Janet Werner: Fashion magazines became a source for my imaginary characters because they were adaptable to the idea of inventing characters. I liked that they weren't real people - they aren't specific - and I like this generic aspect of them. I was really fascinated with what I found in magazines. There is so much construction in terms of photography and propping and costuming, there is so much drama unfolding in these magazines. Sometimes I'm really interested in the clothing, other times it's the overall look, and sometimes it's color. I'm fascinated with the girls and their constructed fantasy. They're always manifesting some aspect of desire or anxiety.



AK: In your more recent paintings the studio becomes a focal point, can you talk about that shift?

JW: After using fashion ads for about 15 years, I started wanting to allow other kinds of images to become more central, and to step back from the portrait. So my strategy was to start showing the edges of images, because I was doing a lot of collage. I started showing the tape that holds the images together, the rips and stains, all the things that happen to the photographs as I'm using them. This led me in the direction of thinking more abstractly, thinking about space, and adding a horizon line. I think of it as a kind of empty space inhabited by images. It's a very minimal space.

AK: Colour is such a huge part of your work, how do you make your colour choices?

JW: Colour is kind of like humour for me. I'm really inspired by colour, and it can often be what attracts me to an image, making me want to use it. I find that when I'm working things out I reduce the colour intensity, and when I have a more conscious sense of what I want to do the colour becomes brighter and more intense. Some of my work is very soft and grey, but the colour in my newer works is less pastel-like. I'm focusing more on single figures and portraits again, and the colour is brighter and more intense.

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AK: Speaking of humour, I find many of your paintings funny.

JW: I'm glad that comes across! Life is so sad and tragic that humour alleviates the sadness of things. I rely on it to subvert the seriousness of art, even though I do take it very seriously - I devote myself to it - I think there has to be an element of fun in art. I don't trust things that are too seductive or perfect. I think that humour functions in a way that is so mysterious. It's complicated yet its very direct and simple. It gets you in your gut, and that's always what I want the paintings to do, to affect you in your gut.

AK: What are you working on right now?

JW: I'm working on paintings that include a lot of splits and folds so that you see very literally the division in the figures. There are three paintings where you see the figure is made from two different sources being joined like Exquisite Corpse. This helps me to get beyond the original source, and I find that I can take a really ordinary image, put it with another one, and all of the sudden it's more interesting and asks more questions. I want the paintings to ask a lot of questions.

Upcoming and current exhibitions for Janet Werner include "This Sacred Vessel" at Arsenal Contemporary Art in New York, a presentation at The Armory Show with Anat Ebgi Gallery, and a two-person show at Gallery 12.26 in Dallas, Texas. Werner is represented by Bradley Ertaskiran in Montréal and Anat Ebgi in Los Angeles.