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Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Beer with a Painter: Julie Heffernan

by Jennifer Samet on June 15, 2013

Julie Heffernan, "Self Portrait Dressing Wounds" (2012), oil on canvas, 67 x 70 in (all images courtesy the artist and P.P.O.W Gallery, New York)

I met Julie Heffernan this past fall at a party she hosted celebrating the wedding of another painter, and was taken by her, the community of (women) artists who were gathered, and her painting over the dining table. It was the fierceness of the vision that attracted me, and the individuality of her work, which extended into the way she spoke and lived.

In Heffernan's paintings, more is more: their complexity draws us into a convincing otherworldly world: female figures with vast skirts constructed of fruits and flowers, intricate magical landscapes interwoven with road signs, branches, foliage, and animals. She explores the macro (the lives of women, the environment) by way of the micro.

On a balmy spring evening, I sat with Heffernan on the terrace outside her studio and home in Park Slope. We talked while looking at her garden nascent with kale and greens. Soon after, I ran into a friend — the archivist Jean-Noël Herlin — and mentioned my interview. He shared a quotation by Thomas Hoving, the former Metropolitan Museum director: "Taste is the enemy of art; style is the friend of art." We discussed how Heffernan's work has a style all her own, not necessarily in line with the fashions of the time, but strong and consistent, a style one must contend with.

Heffernan exhibits with P.P.O.W. Gallery in New York and Mark Moore Gallery in Los Angeles. She received her MFA from Yale University and teaches at Montclair State University. She was the subject of an exhibition at the Oklahoma City Museum of Art in 2012.

Jennifer Samet: You were born in Illinois and raised Catholic. You have mentioned that religious images may have influenced your painting. Can you talk about this, and your early exposure to art?

Julie Heffernan: It is great for an artist to be raised Catholic, because you have no choice but be inundated with a lot of powerful images! I would stare at the statues and pictures of the saints, and try to make them move. There is a space of imagination that happens when you are bored in church. I logged in a lot of imagination hours, and it reinforced this need I have for meaningful imagery. When I was a little girl, I admired those saints that loved something so much they would die for it. It created a lot of passion in my heart and was fertile ground for me wanting to explore my own stories.

We moved from the Midwest to the Bay Area in California when I was about five: a wild jump from flat cornfields to the whole hippie movement. I was the youngest of four children in my family. It was the Baby Boom, so there were tons of kids in the neighborhood. I remember the stories we made up when we played dress-up were really intense. We'd all cram into one of our bedrooms and turn out the lights and play out these psychodramas about George Harrison breaking up with me or marrying Ricky Nelson, things like that.

JS: Did these kinds of religious or childhood stories literally infiltrate the narratives of your paintings?

JH: I don't think so. When I look back on my work, I realize I was wrestling with my own psychic and physical growth. I realize now that when I was doing the flower skirts, they were about a burgeoning sexuality. Then motherhood, with little animals and other stuff all over the ground. The chandeliers were about my brain kind of exploding and, as I am getting older, things starting to catch on fire. Now I've shifted my work entirely to the tortured landscape. I'm looking around for new metaphors for my own present day experience.

JS: So they coincide with phases of life.

JH: I didn't know it at the time, but in retrospect, yes. I remember in graduate school Mel Bochner saying to one of the

other students, “Art is not therapy.” In a sense that is true, but in a sense, it is deeply untrue. Finding form, complicated intricate form, for your own experience is essentially making the most exquisite sense of your lousy, boring life, which is the best therapy. I think that is why, as artists, we love our lives, or at least I do, even though they are really hard.

JS: When you went to Yale, were you aware that you were interested in making complex figurative paintings?

JH: I did not have a great undergraduate art education. So I knew nothing about formal, abstract issues. What was great about Yale was they taught me what a painting is. A lot of it was the other students teaching me. At first, I was still kind of putting together photographs into a representational image, because that’s how I knew how to make a picture. I went from doing that, to trying everything and failing miserably. Then, in my second semester, I buckled down and worked from life. I remember Lisa Yuskavage doing that too. She started the year after I did, and went through a similar process, of beginning flamboyantly and then knuckling down and just trying to put a picture together, or so it seemed to me from the outside. Trying to put all the key parts together and make it tight and solid.

JS: When you talk about putting photographs together, what do you mean exactly?

JH: I wasn’t collaging. I was rendering composite scenes from photographs. I would make up the scenes, and I had a little cache of photographs that I would work from, smashing them all together into a painting.

Julie Heffernan, “Self Portrait as Gatherer” (2013), oil on canvas, 68 x 66 in

JS: How do you work now? What kinds of source material do you

JH: Obviously things have changed a lot. The pivotal point in my visual life was an experience I had on my Fulbright in Berlin where I was painting for twelve hours a day. At a certain point well into the year I found myself struggling with a painting, late at night, that just wouldn’t come together. I tried and tried but just couldn’t figure it out; so, exhausted, I shut my eyes and went into a relaxed state. Suddenly I started to see pictures pouring into my head. They were like disparate images from a film. They had their own mise-en-scène, and they were all different. I was stunned and fascinated and thrilled. I found out later that it is called image streaming and it’s related to theta wave activity. That’s how my current work got its start. It was a way to bring forth images that I wasn’t forcing into being.

Jake Berthot, in graduate school, talked about not being willful with an image. What he meant by willful is that idea of forcing an image into being, as opposed to letting it happen. Those images I saw were unwilled; whereas everything I had been painting up to that point felt very willed, and in that sense, concocted.

The image-streaming experience taught me there is a source creativity that seems to flow out of us of its own accord. That is what I work for. My process now is, I will look through a bunch of images, or maybe I’ll have something in my head, but it is sketchy and spectral. That will constitute the first layer of paint. Then, it is about a lot of mark-making, much of which end up as detours, but which sets up a layer of frottage. Slowly I will see things in it. I will carve into the space to see things come forward and push other things back.

I do that all from my head, with no photographs at all. It takes a while but that’s what is so exciting: this knitting process, where you move things around, find connections and suddenly you have a shape created by foreground, middle ground, background all working in tandem. It is this creation of space that’s endlessly fascinating, like a puzzle I am putting together.

After I go as far in that stage as possible I’ll bring a friend in to pose for me. I will take some photographs, to figure out what I did wrong: is the shoulder all wrong, or what? But the basic idea is to knit all the elements together into the abstraction.

JS: Is it just for the figures that you go through the process of correction and using references?

JH: There are forms in art historical paintings that I might use. I love complexity, and intricate forms that I can knit with. I will go to Velázquez, Van Dyck, Artemisia Gentileschi. I’m looking at Baroque artists more now, because they are flamboyant with things like drapery. Then I use those drapery details to create my tents, or falling tables.

I am looking for forms that can function both symbolically and with their own personality. I remember Peter Schjeldahl

writing about the Victorian Fairy Painting exhibition at the Frick in 1999. He said the show signified to him the end of modernism, because modernism was interested in a lot of things, but it wasn't terribly interested in you and me. With those Victorian Fairy paintings, the care and concern of the artist for every little detail, all the complexities of every fairy wing and such, connects us to that creature. These particularities — like the curl of your hair — is a particularity about you, right now. It keeps you from being generic, and yet, it is also just an exquisite spiraling form, a pure Platonic form.

JS: It reminds me of how you've spoken about wanting this connection, when you see art, to the maker, and how artists can be withholding about that. Why is that empathic connection important to you?

JH: When I walk into a gallery, I am interested in whether I'm feeling the presence of a human mind in the work. I have never been crazy about Minimalism, as you can imagine, because a vast field of red, and what it does retinally, is just not compelling to me. That said, I recently went to PS1 and saw the James Turrell, and it is exquisite, optically fabulous. And the Ellsworth Kelly shape paintings up right now in Chelsea were thrilling, so go figure. But you can also sense the way those artists see the world in that work, so I feel their presence in the room with me. Certain artists take themselves out of their work more than others do.

JS: In the 1980s, when you began making your work, were you interested in any of the German Neo-Expressionists or the Italian Transavanguardia?

JH: Yes, I had discovered Cucchi and Clemente and Chia. My first semester at Yale, I had a book of Cucchi's drawings open, and Roger Tibbetts, who's a real modernist, came into my studio. He was leafing through the Cucchi book and I sensed he just didn't get it. The thing I loved about Cucchi's drawings was that with a few little strokes, he could tell a whole story. I loved those stories, and yet Tibbetts was nonplussed by them. Stories were not what he goes to art for. But it was clear to me that a distinct shift had happened, where stories were back. I did my due diligence to Greenbergian theory, and it was an exciting thing at the time, but it was so over by the late '80s.

JS: Can you discuss the artists, or even specific paintings, that make up your personal pantheon, and are leitmotifs for you?

JH: There are some touchstone paintings, like El Greco's "Fray Hortensio Felix Paravicino," that I deeply love and connect to. That particular painting is structured by binaries: with black and white, top and bottom, where the head is firmly in the top square and the body is separated from the head by his cowl. But then, and this is so exciting: the shape of the cowl, and the way his fingers curl in, is like a uterus, with fallopian tubes ending in ovaries, creating a binary—or fusion really—of male/female! I'm sure El Greco was conjuring an almost transgender figure or Jungian uniting of the male/female. I always have that painting in my mind; it has a brilliant wisdom to it.

Similarly, there is a Bonnard of a figure in an interior. Objects behind and in front of the figure create a jagged foreground and background space that presses against the middle-ground silhouette of her body. The space becomes like a wound around the figure, encompassing her. It feels like Bonnard understood the wounded nature of this woman, who seems to me to represent the repressed nature of the bourgeoisie. Then, there is Titian's "Penitent Mary Magdalene," with her red hair, like fire. I get solace from these images.

JS: How would you describe your relationship to feminism as it plays out in your work?

JH: I recently re-read Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," where she talks about the gaze. That concerned me as a young painter, when I wanted to paint the figure but did not want to objectify women. I was addressing that concern during my still life phase; taking my own body out of the painting, but calling it a self-portrait anyway, was a way of saying, "I'm not this physical body alone; I'm this cornucopia of experiences, and pictures in my head." Then I had a realization, due to an ectopic pregnancy, that my body was now something entirely different from what Laura Mulvey was writing about. It was wearing the scars of reproductive mishaps; and, due to that, really no longer the stuff of objectification or aestheticization, but the locus of scars.

However, I also have this whole love affair with the nude in art history, especially powerful nudes like Rubens's "Abduction of the Daughters of Leucippus." Those women are wildly strong and brilliant. They look like they are going to prevail over those two men trying to grab them. I refuse to think that Rubens would think any other way, because they are so gorgeous. I think of certain male artists as proto-feminists, who taught me wonderful things about the sensorial glory of the female figure. Just because it is a nude doesn't mean it is objectifying. And I am sure Laura Mulvey would say the same thing.

JS: Your paintings do seem to be positive images of women, not critical ones.

JH: I didn't plan on this. I tried depicting the figure tortured with paint like Lucian Freud, or as a screed against the corrupt world, like Otto Dix, but it never seemed right. My figures end up being engulfed in their circumstances. These days I find them engaged in building things, or cleaning up, the way I wish I could clean up our earth. I wish I could build wind energy kites. But I can imagine them and paint them.

I do love Sue Coe and the way she nails the food industry or horrible men in the rape painting that she did twenty years ago. I just am not that kind of artist. That kind of trenchant criticality is in my peripheral imagery. It would be too Pollyanna of me, and simply a lie, to only depict positive worlds. But to make social critique the main image lacks some subtlety. I don't think the kind of painting I do lends itself very well to in-your-face social critique. That is more the bailiwick of film and photography, perhaps.

Right now I'm doing a painting where a tiny figure is building a giant monstrosity made of logs. After Hurricane Sandy, I would take walks in the park with the dog and see big piles of trees, all sawed up. I didn't know I was going to make a painting inspired by that, but slowly, what started out as a small pile of logs got bigger and bigger. Suddenly, there was a woman with a chainsaw standing on one of them making a structure. That is how the image magically imagines itself into being. It was heartbreaking: those beautiful trees, which had fallen. But being able to make them into something is like wresting a bit of optimism out of the soon-to-be horrors around us.

Julie Heffernan, "Self Portrait Running Amok" (2012), oil on canvas, 68 x 42 in

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