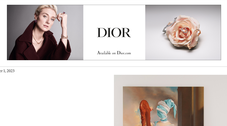


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# REANIMATING HISTORY

## EWA JUSZKIEWICZ AND JENNIFER HOUGE IN CONVERSATION

Writer and art historian Jennifer Hoge met with Ewa Juszkiewicz to learn more about the painter's process, her varied inspirations, and her views on the social and emotional roles of art.

**Ewa Juszkiewicz in her studio. Photo: Ewa Juszkiewicz. Courtesy the artist**

**JENNIFER HOGE** *I thought we could start at the beginning. What was your first experience of art?*

**EWA JUSZKIEWICZ** I remember when I was a teenager, I was fascinated by Early Renaissance Italian painting, and later, in my 20s, I was drawn to the Dutch Mannerists Bosch, Dare paintings captivated me with their incredible technique and precision. In the National Museum in Gdansk, my hometown, I was also fascinated by the paintings by Lucas Lindemann, Hendrick Goltzius and Cornelis van Haarlem. I was with this triptych, its extraordinary richness and brilliance of colors.

**JH** Was anyone in your family artists?

**EJ** No, but we had a lot of books at home, which shaped my taste and sensitivity to art. The first artist who made a strong impression on me when I was a few years old was Picasso. I remember being enchanted by his Minotaur series. My father was a very intellectual person, and I recall that it was Picasso's work that initiated my fascination with painting.

**JH** And of course Picasso often referenced masks.

**EJ** Yes, I'm sure it's all connected.

**JH** Where did you spend your childhood?

**EJ** In Gdansk, in northern Poland. It's a city with a thousand-year history, so on a daily basis I was surrounded by old architecture, monuments, and paintings. It's a very beautiful city, but it's also very sad. My childhood was all in the past too much, closer to me than contemporary art.

**JH** When did you know you wanted to be an artist?

**EJ** I don't even know to be a painter, but I knew clearly from the age of eight.

**JH** How did your artistic language evolve while at art school?

**EJ** At that time my artistic language was still in formation. My tools back then were very limited, and I was interested in everything. I read Polish classic works and techniques. But from my perspective today, I think my style developed mainly by studying old paintings—through visiting museums and reading books.

**JH** At what point did you become interested in a more feminist reading of pre-Modern paintings?

**EJ** It was around 2000, when I was researching eighteenth- and nineteenth-century paintings. While I was fascinated by the amazing artistry of painters such as Ingres, I was also very critical of the representations of women. I realized that most of them tended to represent women in a very stereotypical, highly idealized way, according to a male ideal of beauty. Their poses and gestures were very artificial, and I felt that I could reanimate them, that I could use them to engage in a dialogue with it. By changing historical paradigms of women, I want to break the field of traditional ways of seeing and give these women a new life and a new reality. My goal is to unleash existing aesthetic conventions and show what is hidden behind them: individuality, expression, vitality.

**Ewa Juszkiewicz, *The Healing Lotus*, Marie-Antoine Wilmart, Gagosian Paris, 2015. Oil on canvas, 157 x 114 cm (61 3/4 x 44 7/8 in)**

**JH** When did you first become aware of artists such as the French eighteenth-century portrait painter Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun?

**EJ** I think I first saw her work in the Louvre, several years ago.

**JH** What about it attracts you?

**EJ** It's a mix of the brilliance of her paintings and her extraordinary life. She made her way in a male-dominated art world, became Marie Antoinette's favorite painter, and had a child at a very young age. She survived throughout the day and had great career success, even though she had to flee the French Revolution. Love the quality of her brushstrokes and her deep sensitivity to color.

**JH** The women she depicted were very fashionable, obviously, but she also captured their inner lives.

**EJ** Yes, some seem strong and confident, others fragile and delicate. She also brilliant at painting very intimate scenes. She sell portraits with her daughter, for example, transcend cliché. But most of her paintings are highly idealized, which makes them of endless source of inspiration for me.

**JH** Many artists have a very strong relationship to their work. I want to say the art of the present. Do you see what you're doing as a way of reanimating history?

**EJ** Absolutely. My work dialogues with history—I reference classical paintings and traditional ways of presenting. By appropriating and reanimating, I want to give them a new life. I want to create a very open-ended, open dialogue, in my opinion, Ingres failures to life. It keeps painting alive. While I work from reproductions, transforming certain sections of them, I also feel that I'm bringing the spirit of the original painting to life, painting I'm referencing by faithfully following the original brushstrokes. This is an important part of my process. For me, it is a symbolic way to find a connection between the past and the present from the past. A form of establishing bonds and evoking presence.

**JH** Is each of your paintings based on an actual painting?

**EJ** Most of them are based on historical artworks, but I do invent characters in some. Sometimes I use my own body as a model.

**JH** Do you regard your pictures as a form of self-portraiture?

**EJ** No, not really. When I reference my body, I focus on clichés and conventions of portraiture and rewrite them. When I pose, it's as one of the way women were presented in the past. In other words, it's not self-portraiture, it's a cliché.

**JH** Although your work often references historic painting, there's something very idiosyncratic about it, too. Could you talk about the role of intuition in your work?

**EJ** It plays a crucial role. My clothes and decisions are guided by my intuition, and I don't know why I choose certain things. Something just appears, new forms and shapes swirl and grow in my imagination. It happens automatically. I allow my ideas to develop freely and naturally.

**JH** In terms of making your paintings, what's your process?

**EJ** It is complex and layered. The first stage is research. I look for historical paintings that have a strong impact on me, that have a particular quality that catch my attention. I could be interestingly pleased as hell, or I see a piece of clothing, sophisticated drapery, or the gesture of the sitter. Once I find a painting that I like, I start to imagine how I could make it my own. I make masks and objects that will serve as a reference or a base for my painting. I collect varied wigs, textiles, and jewelry, and plants, which I use in building my sculptures. I then either paint the objects from life or take photographs to work from.

**Ewa Juszkiewicz, *at Black Valley Nest I*, Painting Water Lilies Triptych, Detroit, 2015. Oil on canvas, 200 x 140 cm (78 3/4 x 55 1/8 in)**

**JH** You use quite a traditional painting technique. Could you walk us through it?

**EJ** My process is time consuming. I build up numerous layers of oil paint and glazes. I pay attention to the details, and sometimes I spend weeks working on a single piece. I'm very, very, very meticulous. I'm inspired by traditional Belgian manufacture. Interestingly, Rene Magritte is and he have worked on their canvas as well!

**JH** That's a great link!

**EJ** Yes, it's a lucky story.

**JH** Up close, the surfaces of your paintings are more organic and gestural than you might assume when you see them from a distance.

**EJ** Yes, I want to create a dialogue between the two. It's very important to me. The oil technique is incredibly attractive precisely because it allows such opportunities to play with the paint, to experiment with textures and surfaces. I'm very, very, very meticulous. I'm inspired by traditional Belgian manufacture. I'm a lucky artist. I have a