

**JOANNA WOŚ** succumbed to contradicting, raw feelings and staged, manipulated emotions.

Playing with her limits on what she can share and show, the painter Joanna Woś talks about her personal and historical references, abrupt feelings and fears of losing control within her work. She uses numerous techniques to disguise personal story-telling with charged sex scenes, anonymous bodies and avoided eye-contact. In this conversation, she speaks with Anna Hugo about the lack of an overarching narrative and the presence of traumatic catalysts that she wished never happened but has fantasized over. In many ways, her abundant technique of layering earthy-colored oil paints allows her paintings to face an unpredictability between confrontation and benevolence. Keeping the works on the edge.

**It is apparent in most of your work that there are histories and intertwined relationships – with families, sexual partners and strangers — is there a narrative behind this?**

These relationships are more of a catalyst rather than an independent and individual narrative. They are transferred to, for example, historical themes in a non-literal manner or imposed onto anonymous figures and more abstract motifs.

Yet, sometimes I do paint people from my past and present life in a more realistic form within settings that reveal stories about myself. For example, my teenage years had a significant impact on me because I was beginning to explore my sexuality coinciding with observing disturbing, intense and difficult relationships between my closest family members and friends. During that period, everything circulated around the theme of sex and love as well as how much power it holds and what it meant to be in a dominant position or being dominated. This shaped my view on topics connected to gender norms within sex, love and relationships... showing the destructive side of those dynamics.

**You mentioned one of your main sources are images you collected in your teenage years on the internet: scenes of porn, fetish and crime. Why are these images so important to you?**

It is more the memory of collecting these violent image files and short erotic stories on online blogs during my teenage years and reflecting on why I needed this. I think I always looked for something significantly stronger than my own experience and what I was surrounded by at the time. I was testing my limits and that's what I was looking for – the feeling of something exceeding one's boundaries and having an escape. Likewise, I was also looking for answers to these questions: what are my limits? Are they defined the same for all of us? How do others feel about them? The Internet was somehow essential in this process.

Thinking about it now, I do wish I would be able to access those images again.

**So is your work based on memories, desires and realities?**

You could say that, yes.

**In your painted scenes — fragmented, dreamlike and ghostly moments, faded earth tones, layered and overlapping figures and objects — seem to reject a simple answer of what is happening, but at the same time feel brutally honest. Are you trying to protect or confront something?**

Since I can remember I have had the contradicting feelings of wanting to be invisible and at the same time wanting to be seen; being very fearful, but at the same time very confrontational. Thus, my paintings are an extension of my personality and those specific traits. They are also a reflection of my inability to focus with my insistence of jumping frantically from one thought to the next and therefore being immersed in a tangle of thoughts combined with profound feelings of emptiness.

I like these combinations of banal juxtapositions and threadbare provocations of brutal scenes bathed in fading, delicate colors and overlapping scenes. So yes, I'm trying to do both at the same time: to protect myself and confront something.

**I cannot help but see your work in the mental state of fainting — a moment of despair, lack of control, fading away — this sensation of dizziness within the multiple layers is fascinating. Was this a feeling you were trying to evoke?**

That's an interesting perspective, I didn't think of fainting.

I was thinking of the sensation of being on the edge: of knowing you have absolutely no control over a situation, of being deeply ashamed. Maybe, the sense of the intense urge for immediate relief, like a quick, hasty and interperate masturbation with a spasmodic orgasm, followed by that high feeling that your heart can barely stand.

It is this lack of control that becomes one of my biggest fears and an obsession within my work and daily practice.

**I was surprised to hear that one of your main image references are stock images. Searching for a »feeling« on Google and encountering an accumulation of absurd, awkward, kitsch and staged sources. How do you bring this type of imagery in your practice?**

I'm interested in feelings as commodities and staged emotions. These stock images are supposed to help to evoke specific »feelings«, but are mostly obscenely inaccurate! It also perfectly adds to the eccentric sceneries in my paintings and gives them a twist, which I really appreciate.

**There is so much movement in your paintings through the constant overlapping and shifting figures. I was wondering whether the moving image, i.e. film, is a medium you refer to in your work?**

I like the sensation of the paintings being staged. The figures I paint are deployed in different roles like actors in a second-rate play performing in a dusty, forgotten town, where they are stiff, insecure and unaware. Their unnatural expression of emotions seem as artificial as those of the characters from medieval paintings or illustrations.

I definitely find many inspirations in film, especially the psychological drama genre. My paintings also divagate about different psychological aspects through observing people and different patterns of behavior.

But, going a step further, Reality TV in particular has affected me in my process. The never knowing what is part of reality and what is just the script, how much of the personality is authentically revealed and how much is fabricated, even its specific idea of time. The narrative is a reconfigured storyline, never given in its original chronological form. Everything is staged and a controlled setting of exhibitionism, yet it is supposed to show the authentic "real life" experience. This is what translates into my paintings: from questioning time and linearity, through exhibitionism, to autobiographical yet fictive and manipulated elements. Furthermore, the depiction of basic and common desires of love, sex and power, which Reality TV oscillates around.

**Last question, a repeated image in your work is your self-portrait in different settings, positions and conditions. I was wondering if this is a tool to ground the viewer and bring their attention back to you?**

The fact that I appear on the painting obviously doesn't mean it's solely about me, or that it is me perceived in (only) a literal form. My body is also just an easy tool. Maybe it goes back to the need of being seen and invisible at the same time? I don't want to bring attention to myself in that sense, but I feel it definitely reflects exhibitionism of our times.

But looking in a more literal way at the self-portrait, I wouldn't dare to paint anyone else in such brutal, violent sceneries. In that sense, to see what happens to these people on the painting's surface, I can either paint a character that is completely fictional or make my own body the subject.

Analyzing another layer, it also goes back to the history of painting and the tradition of other female painters trying to oppose the patriarchy and the oppressive, male-dominated area of art by depicting female nudes in self-portraits.

It gives me a sense of being in a dominant position, but is that the case? I don't think I can ever have control over the viewer. Painting myself, it gives me a – probably a false – sense of gaining back control, but I can at least determine what may and may not be seen.



Photo by Julian Lee-Harather

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Text by Anna Hugo

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