

How Jessie Makinson's carnivalesque paintings "purposely misunderstand historical imagery"

We chat to the artist about her interesting approach to clothing, the literature that has inspired her and why she decentres male figures in her work.

"The figures in the paintings are completely unconcerned by the gaze of others", begins the London-based artist Jessie Makinson, "they couldn't care less." This focus on "gaze" – or the desire to reject it – is a central feature of Jessie's work, and one of the means by which she challenges it is through attention to her subjects' clothing. Being interested in "clothes having no relation to modesty or function," the artist aims for her paintings to subvert traditional perceptions of garments. As well as being in various states of "undress", Jessie creates clothes that "takes up space and adds to the figures. Like another layer of meaning that messes with what happens in a private versus a public sphere". And, hoping to give her figures a sense of "agency" through their outerwear, she creates artistic, abstract pieces, such as angular corsets, flowing thread-like material and billowing trousers.

Jessie's works, whilst clearly being very contemporary in their style and composition, persistently make reference to historical themes and artworks. But, importantly, Jessie presses that she desires to "purposely misunderstand historical imagery". Looking to old, everyday street etchings of sailors on leave, parlour games and surgery, Jessie tries to imagine these scenes, but without their male focus: "by decentring the male figures, I hope to disrupt the play of power between them." But, taking these ideas one step further, by making her figures anthropomorphic, Jessie doesn't only want to decentre men, but also general notions of "humanity". This, Jessie explains, considers "a post-human eco feminist way of thinking, that allows us to imagine other ways of living".





Above Jessie Makinson: Proceed daintily (Copyright © Jessie Makinson, image courtesy of Lyles and King, 2021)

Delving even further back into history, Jessie says elements of Greek mythology also inform her work. Referencing the way in which her subjects could be perceived as “devious”, Jessie tells us that she finds the saying “Kalon Kalon” (which translates to “a beautiful evil”), and was used by the poet Hesiod to describe Pandora, particularly pertinent. “It’s terrifying to think of the first woman in Greek myths, Pandora, and later Eve in the Bible, described this way in stories so powerful and at the root of Western culture”. But, not only exploring material from the past, Jessie tells us that she also been recently inspired by Han Kang’s modern cult-classic, *The Vegetarian*. Particularly, the storyline which focuses on its central female character's desire to transform into a tree and “the erotic power in the sense of an occult feminine knowledge” this image denotes.

Discussing her favourite recent work, Jessie lands on *Stay here while I get a curse*, a piece from her recent solo show by the same name at Lyles and King and one that recently – in collaboration with Avant Arte – has been made into Jessie’s first ever print. And, with its carnivalesque, erotic and heavily patterned quality, it certainly demonstrates all the defining facets of Jessie’s work. With its featuring of a bed scene, Jessie explains it to be directly referencing Stanley Spencer’s *The Centurion’s Servant*, as well as also emulating early renaissance painting.

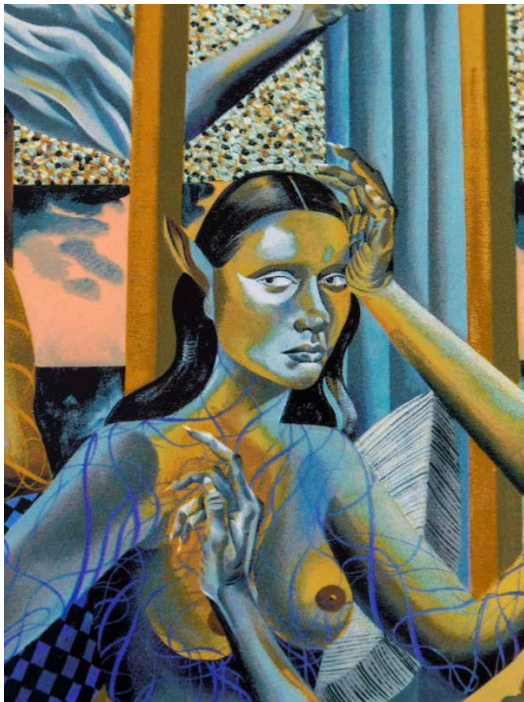
But, in the work, as well as aesthetically focusing on broad themes, Jessie also added small, subtle visual elements that tell a larger story. In amongst the hectic scene, one of the figures has its hand placed upon another head, an act Jessie included because she’s “interested in the duality of the gesture, it’s both an act of power and of care. It has obvious sexual connotations”, she continues, “and I think of it in terms of power and control and how willing a person is to have their head directed.” The next few months look set to be busy for Jessie, in mid-March she will be joining a group drawing show at the British Museum and she is currently working toward her second solo show with Francios Ghebaly in LA.



Above Jessie Makinson: A pox on them (Copyright © Jessie Makinson, image courtesy of Lyles & King, 2020)



Above Jessie Makinson: I just saw your mystery face (Copyright © Jessie Makinson, image courtesy of Lyles & King, 2020)



Gallery Jessie Makinson: Stay here while I get a curse (Copyright © Jessie Makinson, image courtesy of Avant Arte & Lucy Emms, 2021)



Above Jessie Makinson: Mini Riot (Copyright © Jessie Makinson, image courtesy of Lyles & King, 2021)



Above Jessie Makinson: Something Vexes Thee? (Copyright © Jessie Makinson, image courtesy of Lyles & King, 2021)



Above Jessie Makinson: In the studio (Image courtesy of Avant Arte and Lucy Emms)

About the Author

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Olivia joined the It's Nice That team as an editorial assistant in November 2021. A graduate of the University of Edinburgh with a degree in English literature and history, she's particularly interested in illustration, photography, ceramic design and platforming creativity from the north of England.