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Q & A Marie Louise Elshout

Can you tell us about your path into art? How did drawing and painting become the core of your practice?

I studied at the Willem de Kooning Academy in Rotterdam as a printmaker. After my graduation I started with photography and film as an experiment, as I wanted to explore all aspects of the art world. I did performances with great musicians where I would sing and project my movie in the background. I also worked as an actress many times, but after a while I got bored waiting for the moment and rather wanted to make movies myself. After another film and performance project which cost a lot of money, I ran out of funding and I started to miss my autonomous art, the manual craft of it.

You work in both drawing and painting, blending the two seamlessly. How did this authentic connection between the mediums develop for you?

Originally, I am a printmaker, it's more linear, which I am good at. I am not a painter but I always wanted to be one - at the academy it frustrated me. I had a photography exhibition in Amsterdam in 2001, titled „Stilleben Tote Hand, könnte ich nur Malen“, talking about Romanticism...

In 2005 I finally took the plunge and just started to work on canvas with drawing, it felt liberating. While others took me for a fool since my photography projects were very successful at the time and painting 'was old fashioned' and 'not done anymore' in the art world.

On closer inspection my images are built up from hundreds of pencil lines and charcoal shades. I loose myself in this process, drawn from my subconsciousness. When I feel I can no longer continue this process I start the transparent oil layering for more depth and add colour, which is much more a technical phase and since it's on canvas people call them paintings but they are actual drawings.

Your works explore the ambivalent relationship between humans and animals, leaders and followers. What drew you to these dynamics?

It's a concept that has developed during the years. I get a lot of inspiration from movies, (David Lynch, Cronenberg, etc.), music (PJ Harvey, 16 Horsepower, etc.) as well as literature (Steinbeck, Ian McEwan, etc.).

It's typical how humans behave, we always feel so superior to all other living beings around us, but essentially we are a mere glimpse in history on this planet, we are stardust - just what Joni sang...

Why do you often situate your hybrid creatures in 19th-century historical settings inspired by daguerreotypes?

In my last year at the Willem de Kooning Academy I got the opportunity to do my semester in Baltimore at the Maryland Institute College of Art.

I didn't attend much classes since I was much more fascinated by the people and the surrounding itself, it is such a beautiful country but holds such a dark history.



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I feel the 19th century is such an inspirational era: all these industrial developments but also the last strings to the old world.

Starting point for my paintings are these daguerreotypes, found on an online library based on pioneers, all nationalities who came to America, the promised land.

The landscape in your work is not just background, but often a protagonist. What role does landscape play in your narratives?

Nature is what makes us, it tolerates us human beings, I am in great awe of our beautiful planet earth and all its splendor and I want to show that as often as I can.

Your creatures are not anthropomorphic in the usual sense. Instead, you draw on folklore, superstition, fairy tales, and traditions. What fascinates you about these sources?

I am fascinated by the way human beings act, so learning about folklore is part of that, all tribes and populations have their own rituals, traditions and beliefs.

Fairy tales are a different subject, they deal with the subconscious and secret desires.

Do you see your hybrid beings as mirrors for human society, or more as independent entities with their own symbolic life?

I guess both. I want to draw attention with them but they also have their own presence and beauty. They are about transformation, you never know if you're watching a human being dressed up with a mask or a primate wearing a dress. It's the ambivalence that makes it interesting.

They also portray a journey through the subconscious, which I think is essential these days. People are connected with the outside world 24/7 which often leads to disconnection and emptiness.

Your works invite viewers to reflect on their relationship to nature. Do you see art as a tool to awaken ecological or social awareness?

Artists are the mirror to society. I believe it's an artist's obligation to create awareness. Too bad nowadays with all the renewed prudery a lot is censored these days.

I am very disappointed that our present world is still ruled by narcissistic world leaders and genocide is happening all over again. Don't get me wrong I am a very positive, optimistic person but we humans never seem to learn. But behind every cloud there is a neon lining.

What can visitors in Berlin expect to discover in your works in the exhibition at janinebeangallery?

The gallery has had a great foresight in showing the paintings of James F Johnston and mine in a duo show, I admire him as a musician and an artist.

I think our paintings resonate, they take you by the hand and guide you through a mythical world. I hope visitors will take their time to really explore our works and enjoy the journey.

A big thank you to janinebeangallery for this great opportunity.