

GILLIAN JASON GALLERY

MODERN & CONTEMPORARY ART BY WOMEN



ELEANOR JOHNSON

ELEANOR JOHNSON | THE FEAST OF FOOLS

15th November 2023 - 13th January 2024

Eleanor Johnson's latest series of works exhibited in 'The Feast of Fools' explores the concepts of excess, power and overindulgence in contemporary society. Here, Johnson uses Marco Ferreri's 1973 film 'La Grande Bouffe' as a point of departure for her artistic enquiry. Reflecting on the satirical and pungent nature of the movie, Johnson approaches profound and unsettling subjects through a soft humorous lens. This is achieved by incorporating into her complex and multilayered canvases elements of the 'Carnavalesque', a literary theory by Mikhail Bakhtin that often informs Johnson's practice. The beautifully rendered compositions, reminiscent of a classical aesthetic, include eccentric details such as insects, phallic inferences, a boxing speed ball, a floating moon, or a bull's head.

Making use of this subtle expedient, Johnson amplifies the slow-looking feature of her works, for the viewer's eye travels around the pictorial surface in the search of these delicately concealed items, getting lost in contemplation. Such Carnavalesque cues, also serve to put the audience slightly on edge and provoke thought, imbuing Johnson's canvases with a confrontational quality that arises from the polarity between ambiguity and explicitness. While this attribute runs through the whole series, further, more specific dualities inform every canvas: desire and disgust, war and love, conflict and sexuality, beautiful and grotesque.

With a persistent eye on the Old Masters, Johnson draws this idea of dichotomy back to the work of Rubens. "I remember looking at paintings such as 'The Rape of the Sabine Women' for the first time and thinking: how can something so dark be painted in such a beautiful way and become such a beautiful image?" (Eleanor Johnson). Intrigued by the notion of two such different worlds coexisting on the same pictorial surface, Johnson takes provocative and difficult subjects and makes them into aesthetically striking compositions. To attain this graceful and arresting virtue, the artist starts every canvas by breaking down and emulating the chromatic palette of a Renaissance work, including in this series, Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel and the works of Annibale Carracci and Pontormo.

The delicate and alluring attribute that results from this technique is further enhanced by Johnson's heavy use and treatment of oil paint, which she dilutes with linseed oil to amplify its liquidity and visceral properties. This process, inspired by that of Willem de Kooning, is particularly relevant to the representation of the fleshy limbs that appear regularly in Johnson's work. While the dynamism and sensuous elegance of the Old Masters' colour palette is evident in Johnson's work, the artist also takes inspiration from a variety of contemporary sources such as digital images or magazine clippings, which serve to heighten the relevance of her painting today. Johnson deconstructs these images, repurposing them and creating intriguing and unexpected parallelisms between the older Renaissance compositions and more contemporary imagery, such as a rugby scrum. By bringing all these different elements together, Johnson produces vibrant, large-scale paintings that teeter on the edge between abstraction and figuration. Playing with presence and void, the artist creates a unique balance of positive and negative spaces where biomorphic forms are captured in the process of becoming.

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Pile-On, 2023
oil on canvas
180 x 230 cm

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'Pile-On' follows on from the themes introduced in 'Red Lights', and also focuses on the dichotomy of sex and death, love and aggression. When closely scrutinising the pile of bodies portrayed in this majestic composition, one can see figures embracing and fighting, seemingly at once in pain and elation. Such an ambiguity makes us wonder what exactly we are witnessing, whether it is a scene of war or an erotically charged interaction.



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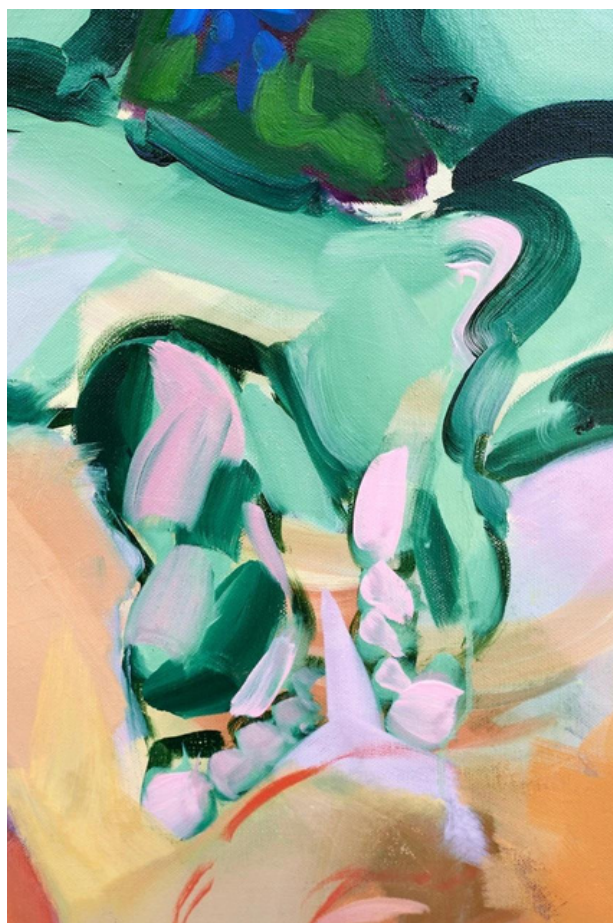
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Beast Mode, 2023
oil on canvas
150 x 200 cm

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The term 'Beast Mode' is a gym phrase that refers to athletes training at very high intensity, pushing themselves to the limit. This subtly satirical painting explores the idea of the display of strength within the parameters of the performance of masculinity. Johnson approaches this theme with a certain irony, including muscular torsos and weightlifting figures, but also phallic symbolism pertaining to the sporting industry, such as the trophy in the bottom right corner and the boxing speed balls at the top of the canvas.

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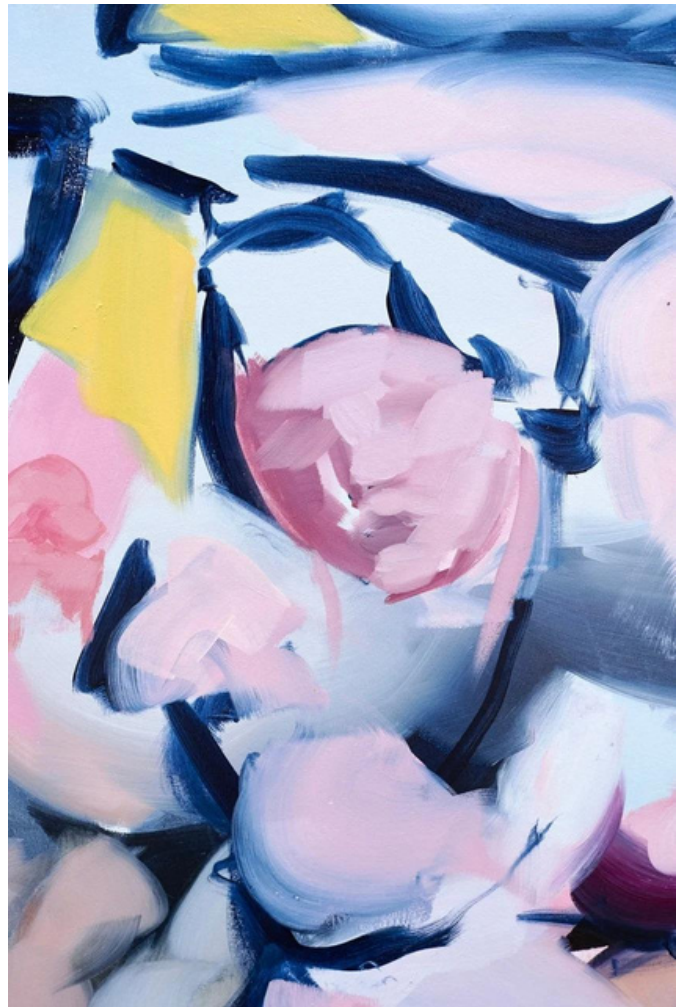
Pissing Contest (Amazonomachy II), 2023

oil on canvas

140 x 225 cm

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'Pissing Contest' is based upon a sarcophagus carved with a scene of an Amazonomachy, which Johnson encountered during her Palazzo Monti Residency, in 2019. An Amazonomachy is a mythological battle between the Ancient Greeks and the Amazons, all-women warriors. This relief is of fundamental importance to Johnson, both in terms of aesthetic and thematic weight. On the one hand, the incredibly complex composition served as inspiration for more than one canvas in Johnson's oeuvre. On the other hand, the underlying subject of war is incredibly relevant to today's global landscape, as well as to this series of works. Following from 'Beast Mode', this painting too, explores the performance of masculinity, in this case it is satirically rendered through the redundant inclusion of phalli across the canvas, which in turn alludes to the very contemporary tradition of graffiti.

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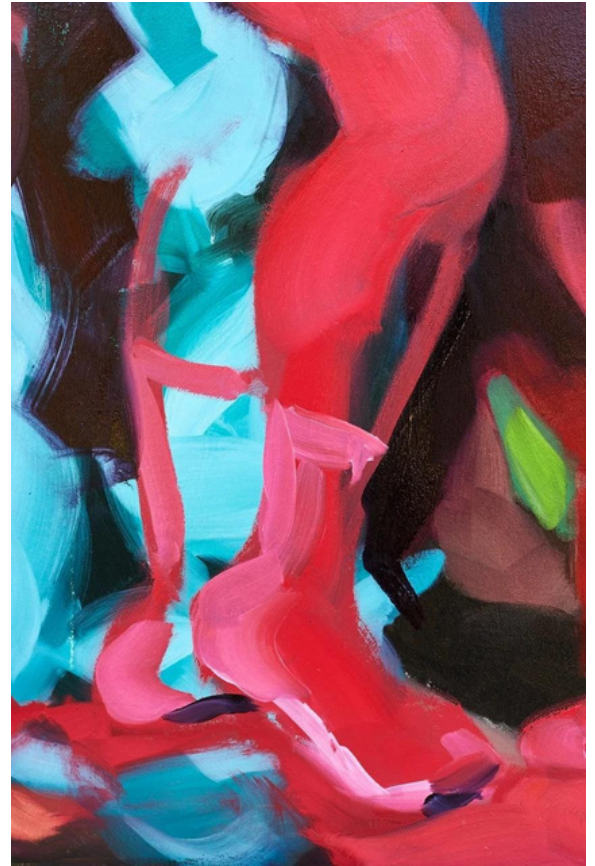
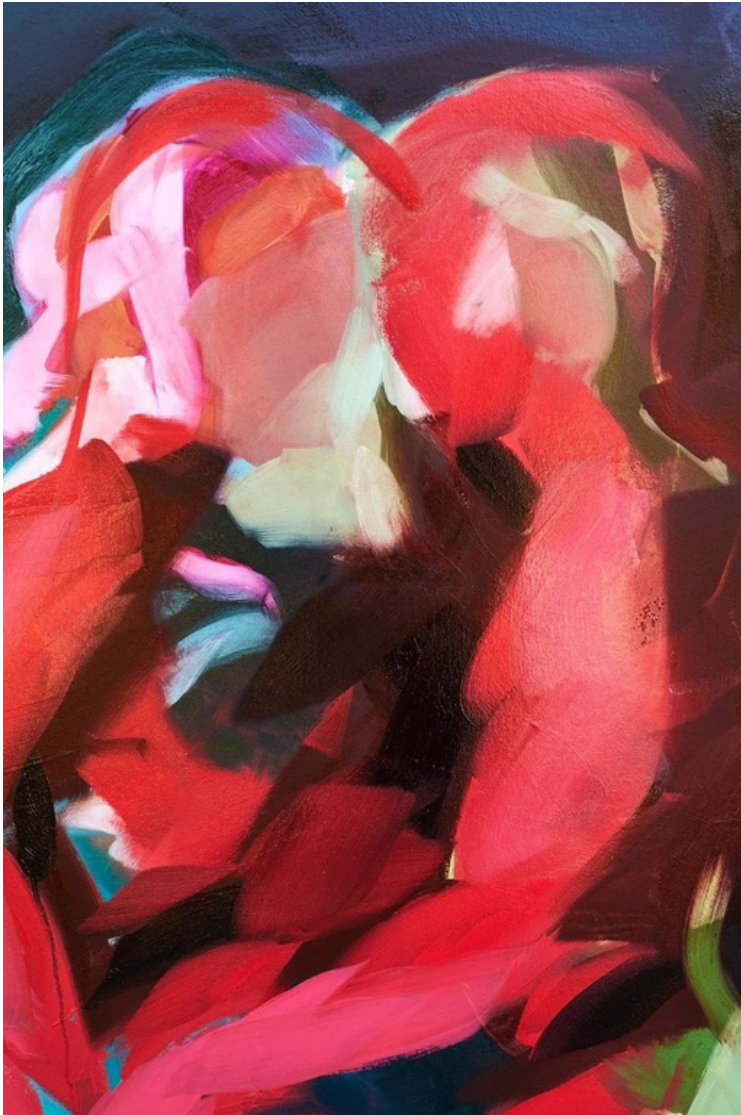
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Red Lights, 2023
oil on canvas
180 x 140 cm

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In 'Red Lights' Johnson brings her constant investigation of the classical technique 'chiaroscuro' to the contemporary realm. The artist emphasises the use of light and shadow through a red lens. With sexuality and love on the one hand, Johnson also considers the association of red with blood and death, once again exploring a dichotomy; in this case through the metaphorical, dual meaning of the colour. The first layer of the chromatic palette is inspired by Pontormo's 'Carmignano Visitation' (1528), which represents four women interacting with each other. Johnson's obscure composition skillfully turns these women into male figures, subtracting herself from the traditional representation of women sitters, often including nuanced objectification.

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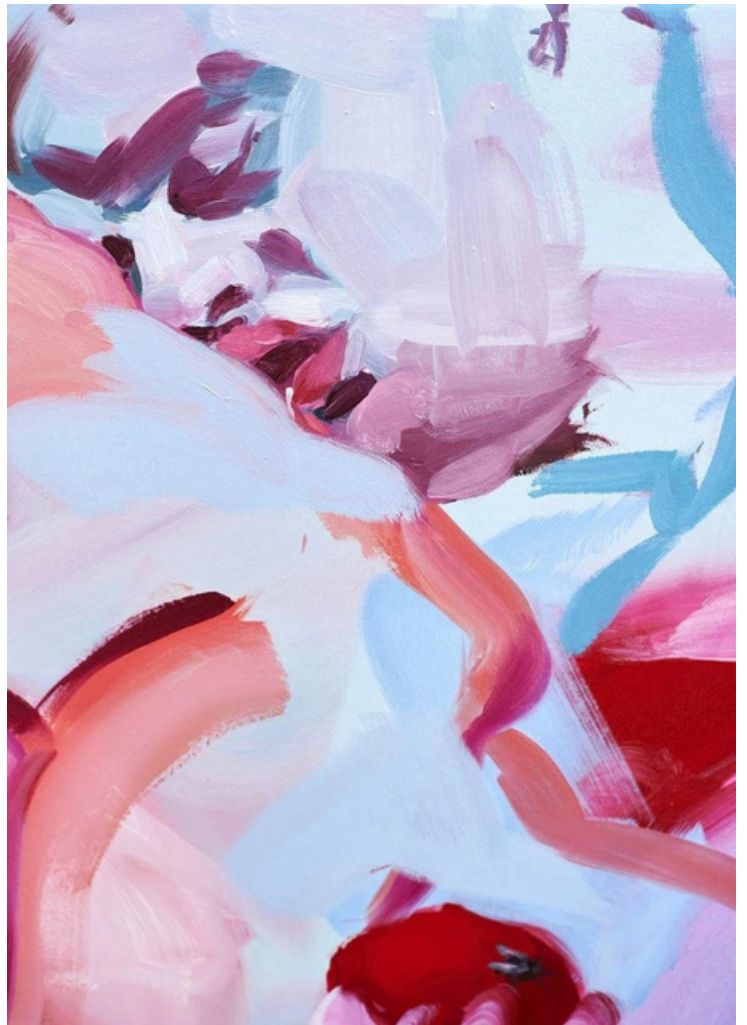
The Feast of Fools, 2023

oil on canvas

140 x 225 cm

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‘The Feast of Fools’ serves as a jumping off point, encapsulating all the themes and dichotomies that run through the rest of the series. Loosely based on Leonardo Da Vinci’s ‘Last Supper’ (1495–1498), this painting transforms what arguably is the apotheosis of traditional composition into an incredibly modern and challenging image. As an immediate response to ‘La Grande Bouffe’, this painting looks at overindulgence, gluttony, and eroticism. Across the whole pictorial surface are sexual connotations, from the dripping milk and the melting butter, to the pile of sausages and the plant of aubergines. Yet, the rather subtle inclusion of flies across the canvas suggests the idea of decay and death, once again touching upon a fundamental duality.

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Milk Her Dry, 2023

oil on canvas

150 x 200 cm

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'Milk Her Dry' shows a group of four women kneeling before the viewer in a metaphorical comparison with the meat industry. Johnson here, is thinking about how the female body is often objectified and commoditised, not unlike many animals in contemporary society. The choice of the title 'Milk Her Dry' refers to humanity's tendency to exhaust all available resources, with 'Her' referring to Mother Nature. While the undertone of the canvas is quite dark, the work is imbued with a sense of humour and absurdity: cow's udders dangle from the top of the canvas, while across the whole pictorial surface we can see Milk Melons, a Vietnamese fruit that resembles the aesthetic of a breast.

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Rough and Tumble, 2023

oil on canvas

140 x 170 cm

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'Rough and Tumble' portrays a group of grown men engaging in a pillow fight. Through this representation, Johnson is interested in investigating masculinity and power dynamics: "Often the power lies in the hands of men, and there is a very small number of men leading the direction of the world at this moment. I wanted to capture these figures in an unusual childish and jolly act, reflecting on how something innocent like play fighting can unravel into aggressive behaviour" (Eleanor Johnson). Deconstructing the subtle threshold between playful and bellicose, Johnson pairs unsettling faces with delicate and fragile elements such as feathers running across the canvas.

Rough and Tumble, 2023

oil on canvas

140 x 170 cm

The Feast of Fools | The Colour Studies



The Colour Studies micro-series is an extremely relevant body of work that not only informs the aesthetic of the full exhibition, but also allows the viewer to access Johnson's creative process. The artist in fact starts every work by breaking down, investigating and recreating the chromatic palette of an Old Master work. This first layer, often mostly concealed in the final result, heavily influences the direction of each piece. Here, Johnson leaves her chromatic investigations untouched, unveiling her process of observation, and translation of form and colour onto canvas. For this series, two frescoes served as inspiration: Annibale Carracci's 'The Loves of the Gods' (1597-1608), Palazzo Farnese, Rome and Michelangelo's 'Sistine Chapel's Ceiling' (1508-12), Palazzo Apostolico, Vatican City.

Colour Study (After Annibale Carracci), 2023

oil on canvas

130 x 140 cm

The Feast of Fools | The Colour Studies



Colour Study (After Michelangelo I), 2023
oil on canvas
120 x 180 cm

The Feast of Fools | The Colour Studies



Colour Study (After Michelangelo II), 2023
oil on canvas
15 x 20 cm

The Feast of Fools | The Colour Studies



Colour Study (After Michelangelo III), 2023
oil on canvas
20 x 15 cm

The Feast of Fools | The Colour Studies



Colour Study (After Michelangelo IV), 2023
oil on canvas
20 x 15 cm

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The Feast of Fools | Works on Paper



Works on Paper, 2023

30 x 25 cm

The Feast of Fools | Works on Paper



While Johnson's oil paintings spur from an observational approach, borrowing inspiration from both contemporary and Old Master imagery, the works on paper are exclusively from the artist's imagination. Here Johnson takes inspiration from Carl Jung's theory of 'Active Imagination'. Jung's meditative technique is oftentimes employed to create new images and narratives within the subconscious.

The result of using this technique is a body of work that can seem infantile and with a playfulness that appears naive, however, the aesthetic of these water-based drawings also informs the larger works with their absurd and irreverent details.

CV

ELEANOR JOHNSON

b.1994, Oxfordshire, UK

Eleanor Johnson holds an MA in Fine art from City & Guilds of London Art School (2023) and a BA in Art History from UCL (2017), London. Johnson currently lives and works in Oxfordshire, UK and is represented by Gillian Jason Gallery. In 2019, the artist participated in a two-month residency at Palazzo Monti in Brescia, Italy. Johnson's work is in private collections and foundations in the UK, US, Europe, West Africa, Asia and South America.

EDUCATION

- 2023 MA, Fine Art, City & Guilds of London Art School, London, UK
- 2017 BA, History of Art, University College London (UCL), London, UK

RESIDENCIES

- 2022 GJG Residency, Casteggio, Italy
- 2019 Palazzo Monti, Brescia, Italy

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 2023 The Feast of Fools, Gillian Jason Gallery, London (solo)
Lightness of Being, Kwai Fung Salone, Hong Kong
- 2022 Through the Prism, Gillian Jason Gallery, London, UK
Reclaiming the Nymph: A Force of Nature, Gillian Jason Gallery, London, UK
- 2021 Dancing Giants, Dew Drop, London, UK
Women in Paris, Galerie Hussenot, Paris, France
Heart of the Matter, Online, Gillian Jason Gallery, London, UK
- 2020 There Is a Rapture on the Lonely Shore, Paul Smith, Albemarle Street, London, UK (solo)
- 2019 THIS IS WHAT IT MEANS TO BE HAPPY, Paulilles Gallery, London, UK

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