



GILLIAN JASON GALLERY

MODERN & CONTEMPORARY ART BY WOMEN

Face to Face II

6th - 29th July 2023

Nancy Cadogan, Jenya Datsko, Alice Herbst, Hope Turnbull,
Serpil Mavi Üstün, Olivia Valentine

Fred in Boots (2022), by Olivia Valentine

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Gillian Jason Gallery is delighted to present the second iteration of our group show 'Face to Face'. Initially held in November 2022, the show features a selection of international women artists who revisit Portraiture as we approach a new era of this genre. This exhibition is part of the campaign 'Portrait Mode', launched by the National Portrait Gallery to mark their 2023 reopening, involving collaborations with art-world players across the UK and internationally.

Portraiture has always been a pillar of art history, taking different forms throughout its development: from the Egyptian statues of pharaohs to the Hellenic busts of Greek gods, from the Renaissance frescos of patrons to the Flemish paintings of peasants, from Rococo's depictions of marquises to Lucien Freud's impasto works all the way to Warhol's screen-prints. The dawn of the 21st century seems to have allowed Portraiture to free itself from standardised canons and traditional conventions, opening up a new chapter of this artistic current, prompting today's artists to explore the genre in an even more independent and unique manner.

One of the biggest influences of the 20th Century's movements on contemporary art is, arguably, the critique towards pure representation. Accompanied by the evolution of photography and the rise of social media, such a consideration prompts us to wonder: what exactly is the place of portraiture in contemporary art? Following decades of focus on abstraction, in the 1980s and '90s, painters began to reembrace figuration, managing to adapt it to the demands of contemporary art and respond to specific contexts, identity questions, and social issues. With the support of Photography as the primary medium for truthful illustration, Portraiture began to broaden its borders exploring meaningful undertones and conveying significant messages. It seems that the representation of the body has become a vehicle for artists to carry their thoughts and feelings.

Over the centuries, Portraiture has also often involved issues of privilege, raising the question of who has access to representation and who is erased. Who is considered to be an appropriate subject for a portrait and with which nuances are they going to be depicted? Intended as the representation of people, the development of the genre paradoxically reveals a history of forgotten bodies, who have been marginalised and overlooked, exploited and appropriated, or diminished and fetishised.

Nowadays many artists redress this exclusion of subjects from the preceding canon of art on account of gender, class, sex or race. This is done not only through the choice of the subject matter, but also in the act of painting itself.

Women, who have been frequently used as sitters with recurrent objectifying traits, are now able to stand on the other side of the canvas and to reclaim their own image. This shift from represented object (or excluded object) to creating subject is a powerful one. Keeping control of their own representation, it means emancipating themselves from stereotypical traits such as composure, sensuality and deference.

The reciprocal nature of the title Face to Face suggests the exhibition's aim to subvert the exclusionary history of portraiture. Whilst illustrating today's innumerable stylistic possibilities of Portraiture, the artists in this exhibition reiterate their role as creating subjects subverting the male gaze that has historically been the main focus of view and representation.

Noonday Dreams, 2023
oil on canvas
75 x 50 cm (left)
75 x 50 cm (right)

£ 13,000



Nancy Cadogan

Nancy Cadogan's portraits depict representations of traditional domestic scenes, showcasing the unifying deep thematic roots of literature, time and stillness. Cadogan celebrates the beauty of the ordinary. Expressing the importance of 'taking a moment' while using the vantage point of the female gaze, Cadogan's paintings show the restorative qualities imbued in tending to one's own inner life. The viewer is therefore encouraged to engage in mindful contemplation of each canvas and explore how we physically inhabit space whilst our thoughts travel through places, things and memories. The works are peaceful, colourful, and carefully orchestrated to create a sense of harmony, but also encourage the mind to wander on a journey. Cadogan's works are snapshots – forms of visual haikus – where the ordinary takes on an indefinable significance, evoking sensory moments of awareness with poetic sentiment steeped in ideas of literature and cultural history.

'Noonday Dreams' narrates a Venetian story. On a recent trip to the city she was given a small flower by a stranger after asking the name of a palazzo where she believed Shelley had stayed. Noonday Dreams is a phrase taken from Shelley's poem 'The Cloud'.

Cadogan was struck by this idea of small, unexpected, kind gestures, and painted the imagined 'Noonday Dreams' as an homage to these little moments which unite people who have never interacted before. The two subjects occupy different canvases, emphasizing the idea that they are in fact strangers. The figures have entirely different atmospheres around them, and the woman looks away in so far that she is not expecting the small gift, on the cusp of entering a lit space. Yet, they are connected by the exchange of the flower; a simple though powerful act of kindness .

'The Cloud'

I bring fresh showers for the thirsting flowers,
From the seas and the streams;
I bear light shade for the leaves when laid
In their noonday dreams.

By your Side, 2023
acrylic on canvas
150 x 100 cm

£ 2,200



Jenya Datsko

Valencia-based artist Jenya Datsko recontextualises portraiture by rejecting the notion of pure representation all together. Datsko's portraits do not represent real, existing people, rather her imaginary subjects act as a metaphor for all women. The artist perceives such women as emblems of strength and determination in their pursuit of establishing genuine connections. By being alone, or silent in the presence of others, they are liberated from external influences and can fully explore their own identity and purpose.

Jenya Datsko captures moments of loneliness and melancholy that at the same time radiate a mysterious and fascinating beauty. Through this recurring presence of contemplative female figures in various spaces, accompanied by the use of a soft colour palette, Datsko invites the viewer to reflect on human nature and the complexity of emotions.

Datsko's compositions are inspired by a wide range of references, including poetry, literature and music. The artist also draws imagery from her everyday life, quietly observing how people inhabit the space that they exist in and the body language that they assume, whether in a restaurant, in the middle of the street or in a social setting.

The embracing couple in 'By Your Side' is portrayed in an intimate moment of affection. Their physical touch and the woman's tranquil expression suggest a deep connection and a strong emotional bond between two characters. The female figure is at the centre of the composition: her serene visage reveals a moment of inner peace. The colour palette enhances this symbolic message. The preponderance of the colour green, traditionally associated with nature, evokes feelings of hope, harmony, and tranquillity. To the artist, this is a scene of real intimacy, trust and reliability.

Late Night in Mallorca, 2023
acrylic on canvas
150 x 100 cm

£ 2,200



'Late Night in Mallorca' transports us to an evocative and mysterious setting. The scene unfolds under the soft moonlight, illuminating a swimming pool in a peaceful corner of Mallorca. The cover of the night evokes the concealed and the unknown, a place where secrets are revealed and self-contemplation is possible.

The three female figures represent different attitudes towards introspection, showcasing the complexity and variety of human emotions. Two of them face away from the viewer: the act of hiding their figure is symbolic of the veiled aspects of the inner self. Their bodies submerged in the water, on the other hand, point towards the deep exploration of the subconscious while the pool itself, as a tranquil body of water, is a metaphor for emotional depth. In this sense, the positioning of the front-facing figure, fully out of the water, suggests an attempt to maintain emotional distance and a more objective perspective.

One Unread Message, 2023
acrylic on canvas
150 x 100 cm

£ 2,200



In 'One Unread Message', Datsko wants to capture the need for introspection and disconnection in the contemporary world. At the centre of the composition is the lonesome figure of a woman sitting in the terrace of a cafe. Uncaring of the bustling city around her, the woman is deep in thought, seemingly contemplating a phone resting on her table. Her gesture, between picking up and putting down the phone, reveals an internal struggle between the need for connection and the search for moments of solitude.

The title of the work, 'One Unread Message' is symbolic. The mobile phone represents instant communication and connection, but its unheeded presence suggests the emotional and psychological charge of leaving messages unread, intended as a conscious choice to disconnect from digital reality. To Datsko, the painting invites the viewer to reflect on our need to be constantly present in the virtual world, a poignant theme in our time. Ultimately the painting is an allegory for the importance of finding the time and space for introspection in an increasingly fast-paced society.

Reimagine, 2022
oil paint and oil pastels on canvas
120 x 100 cm

£ 6,750



Alice Herbst

Alice Herbst graduated from the Gerlesborg School of Fine Art in 2017 and since then she has developed her abstract-figurative style with influences from both Impressionism and the Postmodern Era. Herbst describes her works as “experiences and stories encapsulated and translated into symbolic stills.” The artist works within the genre of portraiture, fashioning her own image and her surroundings to create invented characters which acquire a personality and a backstory through their representation. In her oeuvre, Herbst builds an imaginary parallel reality, imperceptibly different from our own.

The process of creation is fundamental in Herbst’s practice, for her canvases are meticulously planned in every aspect before the first brushstroke. The detailed oil portraits have women as their subject; the artist in fact often uses herself as a model, disguising her identity and masquerading herself into imagined characters.

“When creating a character for a new painting I choose a wig, clothes and a makeup look and then I turn myself into this new person.” (Alice Herbst). The artist develops real personalities for the characters that she acts out in front of the camera - she uses photography as a preliminary tool for her sketches. In this sense, her way of self-fashioning is reminiscent of performance art. Herbst creates stories for these personas, imagining what they think and hide as well as what their past and present look like. Some of these figures recur in different paintings, taking on a narrative life of their own: “I feel as if they travel back and forth in time and they know if they belong in the atmosphere where I have placed them, or if they need to travel someplace new in order to feel at home.” The woman in ‘Reimagine’ has just come back from travelling and “after she dipped her toes in the wrong water, she is now becoming familiar with her new surroundings.”

Fortune Teller, 2022
oil on canvas
120 x 100 cm

£ 6,750



The personalities of Herbst's characters vary a lot and can either align or detach from that of the artist herself: "Sometimes a new character makes me insecure, sometimes empowered and other times very close to myself or who I have been once before in life". In *Fortune Teller* the artist imagines her figure as a woman with a whimsical mind, who likes to invent stories and believes them herself.

The background is equally important to the subject: Herbst creates part of the setting physically, using a variety of props. These include actual objects but also self made decorations of paper and other materials. The resulting staged photos are fragmented and collage-like with missing parts and elements that will be added digitally later on.

The painting process itself follows a strict format. Taking inspiration from the photograph that results from her performative act, Herbst starts by covering her canvases with a layer of abstract acrylic underpainting, characterised by biomorphic and geometric shapes and varied textures and colours. Parts of this layer will be completely covered by the figurative oil layer while others remain visible, and finally, the canvas will be completed with the addition of further abstract elements in oil paint.

Sunday Evening, 2022
oil on canvas
150 x 120 cm

£ 3,000



Hope Turnbull

Hope Turnbull's large-scale oil paintings depict mundane experiences, drawn and filtered through the memory of emotion to create psychologically charged domestic spaces. On the one hand, these works reference the history of representational painting, taking inspiration from artists such as Edward Hopper, Johannes Vermeer, and Mary Cassat. On the other hand, Turnbull desublimates traditional portraiture by rejecting its standard 'pompous' quality and representing figures that enact the routines of daily life: ironing, washing, sitting and thinking or watching television.

In doing so, Turnbull's aim is to reference the liminal space of pre-consciousness, involving the viewer in a feeling of reverie that, while coming from a personal space for the artist, is recognisable by most. "I want the viewer to enter the space without barriers. As such, I use the home as grounding; when we see a bed, we think of sleeping, and when we see a dining table, we think of eating. I hope this allows a viewer to become immersed in the work and see themselves as the figure in their own space. My personal moments can be transformed and translated into their own image." (Hope Turnbull)

'Sunday Evening' references the moments in daily life which are often overlooked. The figure evokes a sense of pathos: hunched shoulders, the hand pressing heavily on the iron, the weight of the head upon the neck. Within the subject's solitude there is a feeling of being enveloped, the figure exists in a carefully constructed space, encompassed by the dark window. For Turnbull, such a composition evokes a sense of safety and comfort, which she emphasises through the use of the calming viridian green, travelling between opacity and transparency.

On the Bed, 2023
oil on canvas
100 x 90 cm

£ 1,750



'On the Bed' captures the liminal state of consciousness between waking and sleeping. Here too Turnbull focuses mainly on gesture: the clasping of the hands, the weight of the head, the stretch of the shoulders. The artist does not reference the dream itself, but rather the body in that specific physical condition. Turnbull creates a synergy between person and space, as though one could not exist without the other; a state of flux, where the subject merges with its surroundings.

Paint itself is used as a tool to emphasise this idea. "Paint is a paradox of materials, it has a duality in its ability to conceal and reveal. I use thin washes of colour layered on top of one another. This creates a lightness, and the white ground beneath shines through, giving a weightless quality to the image. I balance depiction and abstraction. I must resist reality but also refer to it, for the figure in the image is to exist but not to exist." (Hope Turnbull)

Ask Again, 2020
oil on canvas
100 x 80 cm

£ 6,000



Serpil Mavi Üstün

Mavi Üstün's approach to Portraiture is too exemplary of the shift of the genre's focus from pure representation to the narration of feelings. Through her delicate representations of figures immersed in moments of introspection, Mavi Üstün prompts the viewer to empathise with her subjects and question the condition of human beings in today's culture.

Serpil Mavi Üstün's work investigates the loneliness of the individual in contemporary society. Her canvases depict men and women carrying out mundane activities in picturesque scenarios: walking through the city, sipping coffee, buying flowers etc. Mavi Üstün presents us with the personal stories of fragile, perturbed, melancholic heroes, and hints towards the concept of solitude.

A Night Like This, 2021
oil on canvas
100 x 75 cm

£ 6,000



In these fleeting scenes that the artist depicts, her subjects display some personal eccentricities, also appearing to use a less direct style of communication. At times, these personas make us think that they are taking a sort of pleasure in creating drama. They seem indifferent, distant in situations or atmospheres that are generally considered to be joyful. The artist is in fact particularly interested in exploring the personal conflict we deal with in everyday life, showcasing how easy it is to sabotage our own happiness in situations that seem idyllic to the external eye.

For Mavi Üstün, it is in these contrasting feelings that resides the agony of the individual who feels trapped and oppressed by the social system. The protagonists of Mavi Üstün's work also symbolise those who strive to fight back and react to the difficult circumstances that surround us. Mavi Üstün's focus is thus not storytelling, but rather the subjects themselves, captured in a fragment of their lives which reflects trouble - the rest of the context is left to the viewer to interpret.

Caramel Macchiato I, 2022
oil on canvas
80 x 60 cm

£ 5,500



Screen Time II, 2022
oil on canvas
80 x 60 cm

£ 5,500



Fred in Boots, 2022
oil on jute
140 x 110 cm

£ 4,950



Olivia Valentine

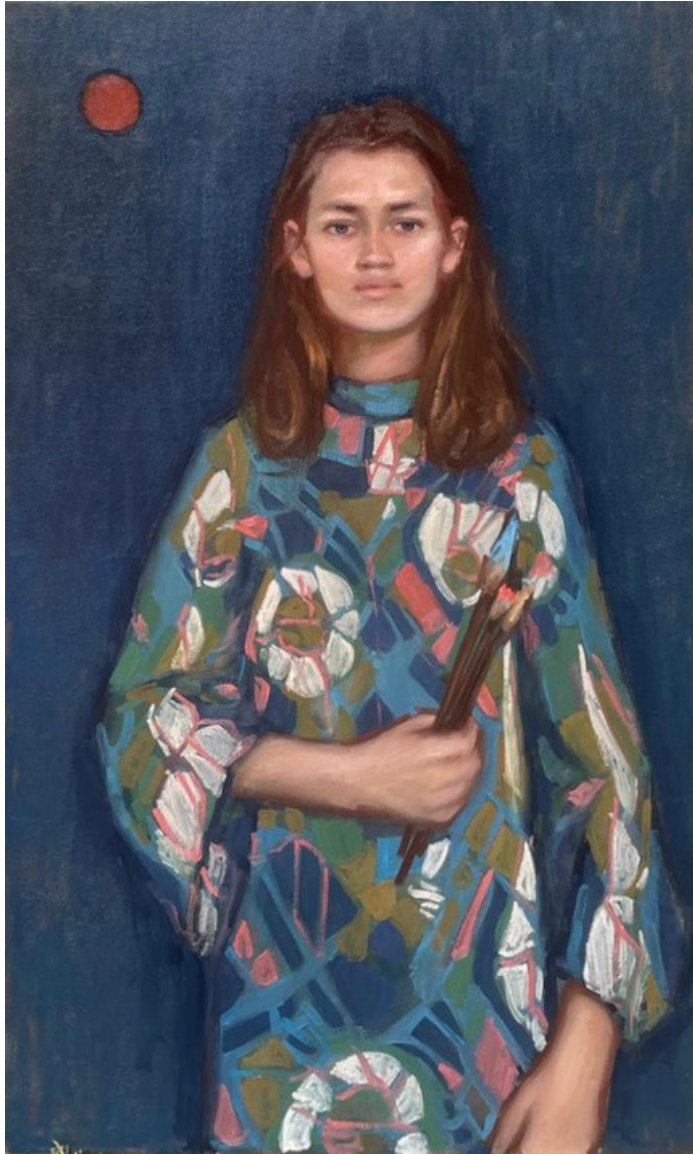
Figurative artist Olivia Valentine studied traditional portraiture in Florence at Charles Cecil Studios, where she learnt the old masters' technique rooted in the practice of Van Dyke, Velasquez and Titian. Valentine later embarked on her own creative journey of self-expression, making use of flattened perspectives and undulating planes to create an altered perception of depth. Paired with the vivid chromatic palette of her backgrounds, this method leads to a unique juxtaposition that confers a playful aesthetic to the traditionally portrayed figures. In any painting, Valentine focuses on capturing the light, fluidity and character of the subject, as well as the chemistry between the artist and the model. Exploring the value and importance of friendship, especially with women, Valentine's sitters often have a personal relationship with her.

The subject of the work, Fred, is a fellow artist and a florist. In this painting, Fred is in the midst of heartbreak, gazing wistfully at the flowers on the table thinking about his ex-lover. Valentine captures his emotions while subtly conveying her poetic understanding of love, pain and relationships.

“Relationships can be the hardest thing to walk away from, they are like a drug in some way. As Alfred Tennyson once said, ‘it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.’ Suffering is an important part of life and I believe it deepens our spiritual experiences as well as strengthening our resolve. Sometimes I think it’s good to see yourself shatter so that when you build yourself back up, you know the very fine pieces that made you. Although Fred’s heart aches and there is a sense of emptiness, there’s also an element of hope in his expression. I believe love will be better, perhaps better than before, if we allow it.” (Olivia Valentine)

Studio Self Portrait, 2023
oil on jute
110 x 65 cm

nfs



'Studio Self Portrait' draws together perspectives on change and spiritual awareness that Valentine came to understand in the face of hardship. Valentine deconstructs and investigates the difficulties imbued in the process of asking for help, especially when one is struggling to find mental or emotional peace. The artist specifically focuses on how, once the seemingly insurmountable pain is trudged, there is transformation and growth on the other side. This line of thought comes from a very personal place for Valentine, who uses self-portraiture to explore her individual experience:

"These days I am most content in my studio, alone with my paints and thoughts, with no distractions. I no longer seek a path of chaos, instead I want to always choose peace and creativity, knowing my worth and filling that void through the connection I have with my work and finding happiness within. This is a painting that expresses my gratitude for the connection I now have with myself and my work. All we have is now. I am grateful to be present in my studio, holding my brushes and practising the strokes that illuminate the canvas." (Olivia Valentine)

'Studio Self Portrait' features the artist wearing her late grandmother's dress, for it helps Valentine feel a spiritual connection with her and feed her creativity. Her grandmother was also involved in the art scene: she had a beautiful art collection and she often exhibited emerging artists in her own home.

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