I Like to Watch: A Literal Rendering of My Own Gaze

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I Like to Watch: A Literal Rendering of My Own Gaze

by

Jenna Gribbon

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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When looking at figurative painting, every viewer assumes a voyeuristic position. Much of the pleasure of encountering the human form in paint derives from the access granted by the artist to their subject. Our eyes can linger as long as we please, and even when the subject meets our gaze, they will never know they are being observed. Often, the mind of the viewer travels logically to consider the relationship between painter and painted (many of us have found Bonnard’s intimate depictions of his wife endearing, or Balthus’s fixations on his young subjects incriminating). I am interested in highlighting my own role in looking, but I’m also interested in making the viewer aware of the ways in which they are implicated when consuming figurative work. In her seminal essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey posited that the viewer, in film at least, is in a masculinized, phallocentric position. Mulvey draws the conclusion that the voyeurism of narrative cinema is “sadistic” and sets out to suggest that a new paradigm needs to be constructed outside of the patriarchal one we currently utilize (Mulvey 840). She writes, “It is said that analyzing pleasure, or beauty destroys it. That is the purpose of this article” (Mulvey 835). I have no desire to destroy the viewer’s pleasure, or my own. I am more interested in delivering that familiar “old painting experience” that most of us will admit to enjoying, as a means of posing uncomfortable questions or making the viewer hyper-aware of their own role as consumers of beauty.

When I arrived at Hunter, I was making pretty paintings of “X”s. They were abstractions of eighteenth-century landscape portraits (think Thomas Gainsborough) with the figure removed and replaced with an “X,” rendered in the original palette. My intention was to find a way to love these paintings in a less complicated way. To remove the figure was to remove the problematic part. The resultant paintings were simultaneously lush and empty. By removing the problematic
part, I was actually removing the interesting part. In the last decade I have tried several times to shy away from the responsibilities of representation but have been unable to completely move away from my love of figurative painting, perhaps because it is essential to my development as an artist. As a child growing up in East Tennessee, I wasn’t yet aware of my queerness. I knew I felt different than everyone around me, and somehow also knew instinctively that art was supposed to be a refuge for outsiders. Although there was no awareness of a contemporary art world or really any knowledge of art history in my immediate family, I spent all my time drawing and painting. My mother was blindly supportive and accepted that I would be an artist without really knowing what that meant. We didn’t have any art books in my home, but I would seek them out any chance I got in bookstores. At some point I found a Mary Cassatt book on a bargain table and begged my mother to buy it for me. I spent hours obsessing over those images, transfixed by the intimacy of Cassatt’s work and by the way her feathery brushstrokes combined to deftly form a convincing reality.

For me Mary Cassatt was the pinnacle. I wanted to understand how to perform her kind of magic, to make something so tender and moving with such authority. It wasn’t until I was about thirteen years old that I encountered painting outside of reproduction. Uninvited, I begged my way onto a school trip to see a “Masterworks” exhibit in a small Nashville museum. The exhibit was filled with minor works of major artists, but again, I was completely moved. I couldn’t believe I was so close to a physical object created by an artist’s hand, close enough to see how paint actually “works” in real life. I looked at each work for so long that the rest of the students kindly waited an extra hour for me to finish looking. It was the most profound spiritual awakening of my life, and the feeling of sheer awe for artists and paint are present with me always. I’m still moved by the magic of the material and by the feeling of proximity to the artist.
when standing in front of their work. For this reason my relationship to painting has never been cynical, even in the face of legitimate questions about its history and relevance. In fact, after the deluge of process-based abstraction and “zombie formalism” as well as hostility toward craft and figuration that dominated the contemporary painting in the early 2000s, I emerged even more stubbornly fixed in my devotion to those things. Interestingly, several other queer figurative artists working now seem to share my romantic attachment to lush paint. Artists like Doron Langberg, Jennifer Packer, Anthony Cudahy, Louis Fratino, and Celeste Dupuy-Spencer all use the medium to lovingly render an intimate relationship to their subjects. Perhaps some of them were also outsiders in middle America who felt “saved” by paint and now feel the need to come to its defense.

I think a lot about how for these artists painting someone is an act of devotion to medium and subject, and about how this relates to Susan Sontag’s ideas about camp. In *Notes on Camp* Sontag writes

> Camp taste is a kind of love, love for human nature. It relishes, rather than judges, the little triumphs and awkward intensities of "character." . . . Camp taste identifies with what it is enjoying. People who share this sensibility are not laughing at the thing they label as ‘a camp,’ they’re enjoying it. Camp is a tender feeling. (Sontag)

My work employs a good bit of this brand of tenderness and, as a result, trades heavily in Sontag-style camp. Perhaps the connection between camp and the work of many queer artists can be traced back to their urges as children or adolescents to create alternate worlds in their sketchbooks or elsewhere, and to a habit formed from reaching back to the methods that helped them satisfy their earliest creative impulses.
For example, Marsden Hartley’s paintings of male nudes are decidedly campy in an adolescent way. I think about his paintings a lot, and about how much we all enjoy the over-the-top cheesecake quality of them. It was in part thinking about Hartley’s nudes that led me in the campy cheesecake direction in my own work. I knew I was entering sticky terrain, but I thought, that if queer men had those paintings to enjoy, maybe I could make some kind of equivalently pleasurable figuration from the perspective of a queer woman. As an update to Hartley, my aim was to be sure that the enjoyment of looking would be accompanied by a hyperawareness that looking is not a passive act.

My subject, for the last year or so, has often been my girlfriend Mackenzie Scott. While I do find my admiration for her to be a generative place to begin a painting, I also feel protective of her agency as my muse. Mackenzie is a musician who enjoys the public performative aspect of her work. If I am a voyeur, she is an exhibitionist, and as such her role in my work is symbiotic. I feel comfortable using her image to help me pose questions about the nature of the relationship between the viewer and the viewed, and often feel as if, together, we are setting traps in my paintings to ensnare the unsuspecting. In “Watching Me Swim” Mackenzie is relaxing with her coffee on a deck chair, looking out of the frame. In the chair next to her is an abandoned mug and red bikini, the implication being that those items belong to the “me” that’s referenced in the title. The viewer enters into a kind of feedback loop of the gaze. We are watching her watching me, and the “me” is also the artist with the omniscient view of the entire scene.

The painting is a consideration of the trappings and seductive nature of an eroticized gaze. Mackenzie is topless in the painting, and the viewer’s eye is forcibly drawn to her nipple and held there by its fluorescent pink color. However, her dark sunglasses ensure that even if she were to turn toward the viewer, we wouldn’t have the satisfying return of her gaze. The position
“Teleological Suspension of the Ethical,” 2018. Oil on linen.
of Mackenzie’s body is not one of a typical muse: she is slouched in her chair, facing away from
the viewer and towards the object of her own interest. Her knees are parted not to titillate, but for
her own comfort. There’s a line in her song “Righteous Woman” that could be the soundtrack to
this image: “I am not a righteous woman, I’m more of an ass man, and when I go to spread it’s
just to, Take up all the space I can…” A key aspect of the scene is that her own desirous gaze
leads the viewer into the imaginative territory where she watches me swim in the ambiguously
painted blue waves without the swim suit I left behind on the chair. I am the nude figure in the
painting but only she can see me.

“Teleolgical Suspension of the Ethical” further complicates the relationship between
subject, viewer, and artist. In this small oil painting of two women conversing on a dock, the
woman in the foreground has a comical presence: she has been “caught” with a bathing suit top
on but no bottoms. She stands in a reverse contraposto that serves to push her rear conspicuously
into the focus of the viewer, and she’s unflatteringly donning a towel on her head. The woman in
the back is holding a banana, but her limp-wristed grasp of it undermines any sexual suggestion.
The scene takes place in daylight, but there are stars in a dark sky, which indicate that we are
inhabiting some kind of non-reality, and an outsized swan floats by leaving an oily slick of
magenta in its wake.

As is typical of my paintings, the scene holds mostly true to naturalistic colors, but there
are chromatic shifts and amplifications. The women inexplicably cast turquoise shadows and the
woman in the back’s legs turn from a convincing flesh tone to a nice lavender for no good reason
but to please the viewer. The paint is applied loosely yet with seductive finesse. Some of the
brushstrokes that construct the background swell up over the figures, and the image moves in and
out of illusionism in favor of its preoccupation with paint.
“Teleological Suspension of the Ethical” is a comically serious title for this irreverent painting, but there is real meaning implied. The phrase usually refers to Kierkegaard’s analysis of the story of Abraham and Isaac, in which the father is told by God to kill his son as an act of faith, an obviously taboo act committed to serve a higher purpose. The viewer could assume that these two women are supposed to be reenacting the scene, perhaps the banana-wielding woman is being faced with sacrificing her friend. In truth, the intention of the title comes from my own moral dilemma as a female painter using the bodies of the women to seduce the viewer into looking at my painting, and perhaps pose unanswerable questions about the relationship between artist and subject.

There is a similar meta-gaze loop constructed in “Me Looking at Her Looking at Me.” The scene is a depiction of me and Mackenzie, legs are entwined on the couch — she's reading and I’m writing — but the viewer looks through her eyes at me. The viewer is looking at my looking both from the outside in by seeing my face, and from the inside out through my perspective as the artist applying paint to the canvas. Mackenzie's perspective in the painting is similar to how Joan Semmel paints herself, looking down at her own body. This work is indebted to the feminist painter’s self-portraits as well as to her sometimes expressionistic and sometimes photorealistic depictions from the 1970s of heterosexual couples entwined in coitus. Semmel was also interested in constructing compositions that prompt self-consciousness in the experience of the viewer. A cursory glance at “Me Looking at Her Looking at Me” sets up the expectation that the tangled limbs in the painting are part of a sexual scene much like those in Semmels paintings, but it takes a sharp turn into the benign realm of the domestic. The figures are ensconced in green velvet pillows and are lit by a lamp that sheds warm light on Vuillard-like wallpaper, evoking his sweetly domestic vignettes. While the scene gets a mild erotic charge from the way my hand
reaches down her thigh, it remains within the sphere of quotidian domesticity, thwarting the hopes of anyone who has ever typed “girl on girl” into their browser.

If “Me Looking at Her Looking at Me” seems sexual but isn’t, “Erotic Hand in Public” almost certainly comes off as more chaste than it’s title seems to imply. I have an erotic fascination with Mackenzie’s hand, and with the idea that — even though it’s a kind of sexual appendage for a woman who has sex with women — it can be taken out in public. The painting
was made with an intentionally eroticized and focused gaze. The flesh of the hand is rendered in
delicate glazes carefully blended. The desired effect is a convincing realism, but also an art
history quotation. The painting technique and the opulent rings could have been lifted from a
17th century European painting. However, as the eye moves back in space to the clothing, and
then to the small glimpse of booth and red stools implying a restaurant interior, the references shift centuries.

“Mackenzie’s Lack of Interest in Gallery 827” is another painting that conflates my infatuation with my girlfriend and my infatuation with the history of painting. In this narrative scene, Mackenzie strolls casually past a couple of Pierre-Auguste Cot paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The heavily romantic depictions of a heteronormative ideal hold no interest for her, a gay woman, and she moves in the direction of the illuminated exit sign. On the other hand, my own interest in the paintings is clear, and evidenced by the fact that the replications of them are the most carefully observed parts of the painting. There is also attention paid in the painting to the museum infrastructure. The exit signs are included, as are the little stands and ropes that keep the viewer at a distance, and the reference to the gallery number reveals my interest in the Metropolitan Museum of Art as an institution. I have placed Mackenzie in this context — one that reifies the patriarchal canon of art history which embodies history of exclusion of both female artists and depictions of same-sex relationships — behind the barrier between the current object of my romantic gaze and the romanticism of 19th century painting.

“Self-portrait as a Voyeur” is a cropped glimpse of Mackenzie’s tampon string hanging out of her bathing suit on the beach. Visually the painting offers the thrill of seeing something that is meant to be hidden, and the painting is also a small effort (literally so at 6” x 4”) to normalize/eroticize menstruation. Perhaps more importantly though, the title of this painting is a clue that each of these works is essentially a self-portrait in the sense that what they render is my own focused, queer, infatuated, and sometimes conflicted gaze. The strong scopophilia present in the work might connect me to Elizabeth Peyton, whose way of looking at her subjects also conveys an intimate infatuation. While Peyton and I share some sensibilities and a fondness for rosy cheeks and candy colored lips, I feel more of an affinity for the paintings of Francis Picabia.
When Picabia painted his “Impressionist” paintings from postcards instead of *en plein air*, he wasn’t deriding the movement. Rather he was painting an homage. He wanted to both love and think about those paintings, but with a sense of humor that served to “dethrone the serious” to borrow another phrase from Sontag’s “Notes on Camp” (Sontag).
In the 2017 exhibition “Francis Picabia: Our Heads are Round So Our Thoughts Can Change Direction” at the Museum of Modern Art, audiences were treated to the full range of the artist’s genre-hopping throughout his career. In this context it’s impossible to dismiss his pinup girls of the 1940s as pure kitsch. While his conceptual or intellectual reasons for using this imagery remain somewhat mysterious 75 years later, I relate to his attraction to images that are at once populist and erotic. He was inviting the viewer to take pleasure in the sensuality of the paintings, but at the same remove vantage point that his postcard Impressionist paintings offered. Like me Picabia was using camp like a wink to his audience. The over the top style was a signal that the work was to be enjoyed, but not without consideration.

Writer and lesbian theorist Audre Lorde stated that we cannot “dismantle the master’s house” using the “master’s tools.” Picabia was handed the master’s tools, and used them to create funhouses that placed us in front of warped mirrors. I, on the other hand, picked up the tools as a child and didn’t know they were stolen. I haven’t dismantled or destroyed anything. I simply built a house next to the master’s that looks a lot like his and invited everyone in (of course invitations aside not every previously excluded person will feel comfortable entering a house built from the western history of painting, but that’s perhaps a subject that warrants another essay and many more paintings). In my house, those who perform and those in the audience are guests on equal footing who engage in a reciprocal exchange of pleasure, and I’ve provided many comfortable places to sit as a way to encourage conversation. The catch is that I’ve also installed cameras in the house, and everyone, the subjects and the audience, are aware they’re being watched.
Bibliography


Exhibition Image List

Title and Description

Gribbon, Jenna, *Watching Me Paint*, 2019, oil on linen, 72 x 40 in

Gribbon, Jenna, *Mackenzie’s Lack of Interest in Gallery 827*, 2019, oil on linen, 11 x 14 in

Gribbon, Jenna, *Close Attention*, 2019, oil on linen, 10 x 8 in

Gribbon, Jenna, *When She Held June I Saw Her Like An Old Painting*, 2019, oil on linen, 12 x 9 in

Gribbon, Jenna, *Self-portrait as a Voyeur*, 2019, oil on linen, 6 x 4 in

Gribbon, Jenna, *Elizabeth Working Out Poses For Her Diana Sculptures*, 2019, oil on linen, 36 x 24 in

Gribbon, Jenna, *Diana*, 2019, oil on linen, 12 x 9 in
Gribbon, Jenna, *Very Straightforward*, 2019, oil on linen, 12 x 9 in

Gribbon, Jenna, *Elizabeth Watched By Me and Her Neighbors*, 2019, oil on linen, 12 x 9 in

Gribbon, Jenna, *Mackenzie Undressing In Front of Me and the Neighbors*, 2019, oil on linen, 10 x 8 in

Exhibition Installation Images
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