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“Julie Curtiss”

by Sholeh Hajmiragha

Julie Tuyet Curtiss creates illustrative and surreal paintings that address themes of femininity, identity, and the grotesque through investigations of the female body and abstracted forms.

Looking at one of her paintings is like looking into the land of Oz -- reality is present to a degree, but the surreal, fantastical, and absurd merge with our perception of narrative truth, causing a disruption in our perception of the very reality that we cling to. Working with both acrylic and oil on canvas and gouache on paper, Curtiss' works blend graphic illustration with figurative abstraction, combining recognizable imagery with imagined spaces and figures. The resulting compositions are detailed paintings of surreal scenes; mysteriously enticing, haunting, and playful. Utilizing recurring motifs throughout her work -- hair, nails, cigarettes -- Curtiss draws attention to the power and implications of objects as symbols and their resulting visual effects. Her work most often explores notions of femininity and its relationship to both nature and social culture through archetypal images that signify context beyond their primary visual state. By obscuring her figures or altering the image perspective, the viewer becomes implicated as a voyeur in a narrative that extends beyond the confines of the canvas, leaving the content, narrative, and meaning open to a nonlinear interpretations and implied meanings.

Originally from France, Julie Tuyet Curtiss received her BA and MFA from l'Ecole Nationale Supérieur des Beaux-Arts in Paris and studied at the Art Institute of Chicago. Curtiss moved to Brooklyn, NY in 2010, and her practice has since been based in New York. She was Antoin Marin Fellow in the Dominican Republic in a painting residency with Jose Cordero Garcia (2010), was a Van Lier Fellow through NYFA (2012), held residency at the Contemporary Art Center at Woodside, NY (2013), and was a resident at the

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Saltonstall Arts Colony in Ithaca, NY (2017). Julie Curtiss has participated in numerous group and solo exhibitions internationally throughout France, Japan, and the United States. This year, Curtiss has shown in the duo show “The Perfect Order of Randomness” with Matthew F Fisher at Monya Rowe Gallery, the group show “Post Analog Painting II” at The Hole, and “Julie Tuyet Curtiss: Reflexions” at Spring Break Art Show. She looks forward to a solo show at the artist-run gallery 106 Green this upcoming Fall 2017.



Julie Tuyet Curtiss, *Duet*, 2017, Acrylic and oil on canvas, 30 x 40 in

What is your background in art and how did you arrive at painting?

I went to the School of Fine Art in Paris and was more of a traditional painter, but I've always loved comic books and graphic novels. I studied in Chicago, but I wasn't really aware of the Chicago Imagists at that time and have only recently began thinking about them because my work has become more and more graphic.

My work has always been about the body. When I moved to New York, I worked on paper and was creating these large landscapes that were very fluid. I saw them as internal landscapes, as the insides of a body, so there is a very guttural element to them. They're very complex in their composition, but I felt trapped within them, like the language was limited. I had this reaction that I wanted to completely change everything with my work.

I started to paint the outside world, and I started to think in terms of particular themes including 19th century French painting, street scenes, women, fashion, and body parts. The work was still graphic, but it was combining my imagination with everyday life, which when combined became surrealist because both were in one image. I thought that it was great because it gave people a point of entry into the work through identifying with the tangible world, but then furthering that into something psychological or imaginary.

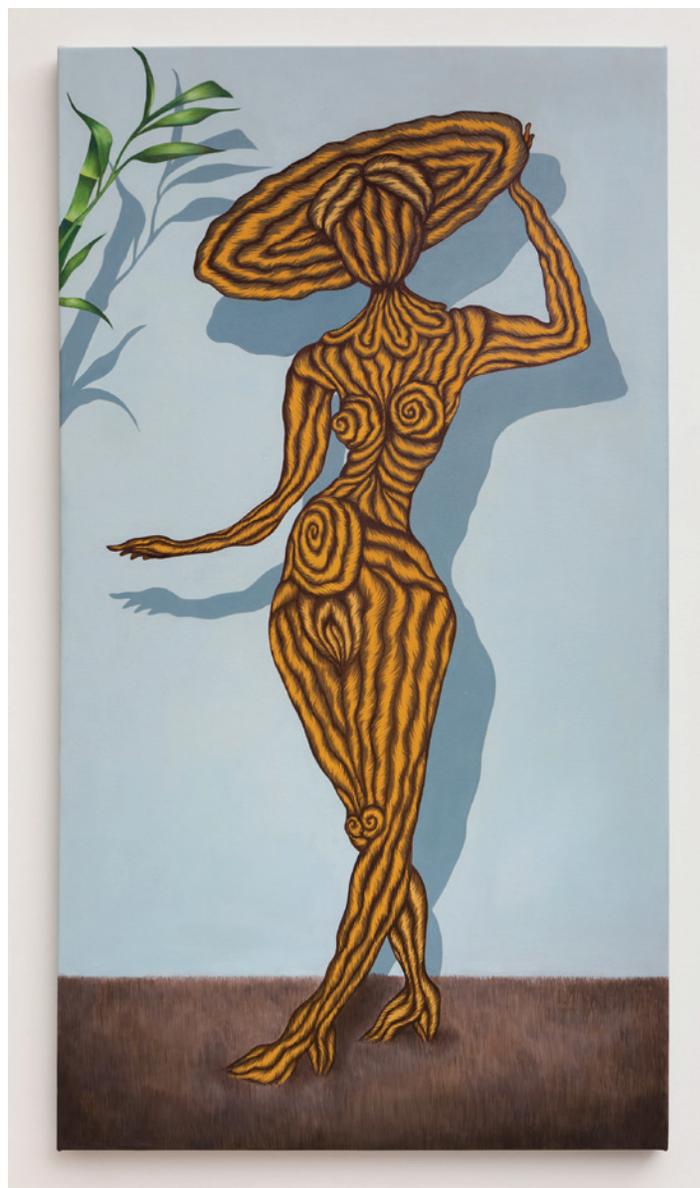
What are you working on right now?

Right now I'm working in the continuation of what I've been doing for the past two and a half years. I started a series two years ago that are smaller gouache on paper works. I started having fun with close cropping and playing with women's body parts and I'm working with a language of recurring elements like the cigarette, long nails, heels, or hair. I'm playing with ideas of masculinity and femininity within the works, and playing with the formal compositional elements to tell different stories.

The hair motif has always been very present in my work although I don't want to let it define my practice. It's just a perfect vehicle for me to talk about gender, women's body and how alien this body can feel at times.

I'm not interested in women in particular, but in the idea of femininity. There are masculine elements in my works as well, but there aren't as dominant. They are suggestive rather than direct,

and are integrated in a complementary way to my female characters. They bring an element of balance to my overly sexualized paintings, a bit like the Yang dot inside the Yin half, for instance the cigarette, the manly hands... Sometimes



Julie Tuyet Curtiss, *Venus*, 2016, Acrylic and oil on canvas, 58 x 32 in

I think of my paintings as self-portraits, they represent the multiple hidden facets of myself. I am currently working on another adaptation of Courbet. I combine his painting of *A Burial with*

The Artist's Studio. It will depict the line at the funeral with a naked woman- the model- standing in the midst of darkly clothed men. It's based of a false memory I had of these two paintings and that's usually how my process works -- blend stuff and keeping the imagery vague enough so that it calls something to mind, but the result is actually new.

How do you approach these works what is the material and creative process like?

The works on paper started almost like sketches for larger paintings, but are now very finished and worked out and I no longer consider them that way. I don't really need to do preparatory sketches for the smaller size of the paper, but as I scale up in canvas size I do. My sketches are really simple, and they're getting more and more important now. They evolve through sketching and developing them that way, and then I copy them onto a transparency sheet and project them onto the canvas. I won't start a painting until a sketch is really right, and my sketchbook is just filled with ideas that I work out and play around with.

But it all really started with my works on paper. I worked on them for years, but ultimately got frustrated because they were so small. I moved from paper to paper on panel because I do really like the feel of working on paper and enjoy the matte feel and how it absorbs a mark. I'm more of a drawer than a painter.

I started to use oil paint in my larger paintings about a year ago, and I never really used it before so it was hard to start using as a new technique. I only use it for certain things, like gradients. I think you can draw better with acrylic because oil takes forever to dry. My work used to be very graphic and flat, and I think that the oil brings it into the world of painting more than gouache does. I like the softness of oil as adding depth to the work, and I feel like I need it.

How do you approach subject matter in your works?

I am interested in combining things that exist in the real world with things that exist in my imagination, or from another time/space. I like to explore the ideas of dreams, parallel worlds, and synchronicity. The work is literal and surreal at the same time, and I like when these two things are informing one another in the painting. For me it is largely about extending the body through objects, forms, and figures. The smoke in my work is literal smoke from a cigarette, but it is also this element that represents abstract thought, like when women smoke it almost becomes a thought bubble. Also, it's about telling the viewer a story but letting him finish it for himself. That's why the works has illustrative qualities, but only up to a certain point. I would like the viewer's experience to be playful. Sometimes, I take classical themes and twist them --still life, nudes, portraits - making them relevant and modern.

Do you work from source images or are you just imagining and creating these images?

I mainly work from imagination. In my mind, I'm looking for an image that is very archetypal, which means that it is an image from the inside that has a very essential quality to it. This is why I don't like looking at things that exist in real life because your imagination can never really just think about them because they're too specific. Instead, I'm thinking about images like a cup of fruit, a feminine hand, or a fish. How does the brain comes up with such images is fascinating to me. Sometimes I'll look at a reference for an image that I've already come up with. For instance, when I was painting my salmon piece, I looked up an image to see what a salmon was actually like, or I'll look at my own hand to figure out what a hand looks like. Occasionally, I look at a painting from a master for inspiration.

The works themselves are so detailed and precise, it's interesting that there's such a loose and intuitive process behind them.

Yeah, exactly. And I really like them to have that quality. That's what I like about works like Harry Potter because it's so imaginary, but the author fabricated the whole world in her head and all the details are so incredibly important and allow for the whole story and world to be tangible. My work is very illustrative and the way that I'm treating things is naive and graphic instead of realistic. It's stylized, but at the same time it has a good amount of precision and is concrete enough in a way that allows the viewer to enter into them.

When did hair enter into your work as a motif and what attracts you to it as a subject?

As long as I've made art, there's always been hair. I went home recently and looked at slides of my work from when I was 18 and in art school and hair was still there. I've always been really interested in the artificial vs. the natural and this has been a constant theme in my work. My depiction of this has changed throughout the years in terms of form and aesthetic, and now it's more precisely concerned with women's bodies. Braids and hair is a physical property, and women's hair is a signifier for femininity, but you can braid hair and style it and it becomes a part of a culture and history. But when you paint hair all over the female body, there is a repulsion that is associated with that, and that's tied to a repulsion with female body hair. In French we have a distinction between the hair on your head and the hair on the body; hair on the head is cheveux and hair on the body is poils, and these two words resonate very differently. There's a dichotomy between them, almost like one is beauty and the other is the beast. I'm interested in that relationship.

Hair also is associated with sensuality and has a very tactile relationship to our imaginations, I think.

Yes, definitely. It also can look very binding and can be very controlled, like a control of culture or a control of ordinance. I work a lot with those ideas of femininity. The hands I paint are really

big and strong, kind of like claws. I make the manicured nails, which is not so much a thing in France, but in America it is a really strong symbol of feminine beauty. I see really long manicured nails as decorative objects that can also be incapacitating, so I think it's a really interesting symbol.

The faces and identities of your figures are always obscured or turned away, which creates an effect of voyeurism, but also builds a suspense for what lies on the other side of the painted image. Can you talk about this choice?

I painted faces a very long time ago, but there is something very unpleasant about painting faces for me. I felt like my paintings were becoming very specific and weren't responding to my desire to address the figure or universal ideas or images. Also, because my work is already so illustrative, I thought it would be interesting to have this figurative work without a face and allow for this element of frustration.

I think my work can be very assertive, but there is also something shy about it as well. I like the idea of making portraits because I think it becomes a lot about the self, and in a way I think these portraits are almost self-portraits, but without the face you don't actually know. They are all forms of portraits, just without the face. Anyone can project into them.

What are you thinking about that is informing your work right now?

I'm looking at works that are iconic or that really shaped me when I was younger. I'm also thinking of iconic gestures -- for instance the gesture of holding a hat on your chest, which I use in my piece *Foreboding*-- and the meanings that they convey to a viewer. There's nothing that I'm exactly looking for, but I'm thinking about images that have been painted in certain contexts and what happens to them when they lose that original context and we invest in them our own meaning and interpretation.

When I first moved to New York and started working for KAWS studio, that position influenced my work and I changed my practice a bit. I also realized when I started to work there that I don't paint a lot of shadows in my work. He paints a lot of shadows, and I slowly started incorporating it into my work. I don't use them now in every piece, but I think that it's become an important part of my work. It makes the objects more tangible.

How do you deal with frustrations or challenges in the studio?

Right now the biggest challenge for me is not artistic, but just really life forcing me to work under pressure. I've never been forced to work under pressure, so this is very new to me and it's really a turn off. Ideally, I'm free to do whatever I want whenever I want, and that's usually how I arrive at ideas. Often my mistakes are interesting things that wind up for the best. But I guess I am just in a phase where I don't have enough time.

How do you define a successful painting?

I'm often uncertain about my work. I know when it hits the point where it's okay and I can let it go and leave it be. I want to have more time so that I'm not leaving things out there that I'm not comfortable with and actually letting the work be. Often people's opinions help and they will tell you if something is good or not as well.

How do you approach color in your works?

It's really been a learning curve for me. When I first started to paint, I felt almost like I was colorblind because I had such a difficult time using colors, and I had a very hard time deciding good color combinations. A lot of my colors were really muddied because I would mix a lot of black or white into them, but I didn't know how to do it right. The more you do it, the more you get the hang of it and learn to see better, but I don't really know how I arrived at this palette. I feel like I picked colors that were slightly off from

the primaries. I like to use vivid colors more as accents.



Julie Tuyet Curtiss, *Witch*, 2017, Acrylic and oil on canvas, 18 x 14 in