

Elizabeth GLAESSNER

Frog,
Elizabeth Glaessner

June 2022

Elizabeth Glaessner

T

Interview
by
James Casey
photographs

by
Guillaume
Zicarelli

his interview took place in two parts. The first was during a visit to Elizabeth's studio in Brooklyn, New York. After our recorded conversation we spoke candidly about artists and references—a casual moment that uncovered a lot of interesting insights. Glaessner agreed to allow me to follow up a few days later with a phone call to revisit these thoughts. All in, these conversations are reproduced here exactly as they occurred and any deviations in thoughts, subject, and form are entirely of my own doing.

— *Let's start with process. When I look at your work, I find a confluence of classicism and the contemporary—things that recall work that stretches back even to the early Renaissance in form and pose,*

but then the color and the process make everything feel a lot more contemporary. Can you talk about the body's form in your work?

The pose is important, it holds a lot of power and feeling. I look at everything; a screenshot of something on Instagram, books, paintings, film stills: there's no hierarchy when it comes to references. I usually start out by doing a lot of small paintings, where I'm working out composition and form. When I'm working large, I refer to the smaller pieces—so, hopefully, what's left in the painting isn't the reference but a feeling that leads you somewhere else.

— *The figures are human or humanoid at least, but they're not clearly direct representations of the things that you've seen. Right. They morph.*

— *I'm fascinated by how you build towards those bigger paintings. Are the smaller pieces works in themselves or studies of sorts?*

I'll start with a bunch of works on paper. I like to work on the floor when I'm doing those. I work on several at once, just getting ideas out in a very direct way, mostly working from my head at this point. These are ideas that I've maybe sketched out in a sketchbook, sometimes just a thought or an arrangement of words. Or maybe I start by playing with color and materials and then see where that takes me. Those are very intuitive and in the moment—the action or gesture is important.

— *Pressure is maybe the wrong word, but do you find that there's an imposition of importance on the smaller paintings, or do you allow for improvisation and even mistakes?*

That's kind of the whole thing. Especially in the big paintings, I'm always screwing up and then learning something. I find color to be very difficult. I'll put something down, and then it changes how I see all the other colors in the painting. I don't work in Photoshop, and I like to do everything on the canvas. So there is a lot of morphing and shifting as I'm working.

— *Those smaller pieces, while one might call them a sketch, they're not necessarily sketches, because the deviation from one to the other can be quite profound, right? The smaller pieces can look very different to the final larger pieces as well.*

Oh, yeah. It's almost impossible for me to make an exact copy, I don't even try. In terms of technique, I do a lot of pouring. To just put paint down and see what that does, and see how that informs



There is no right or wrong way.
Everyone's going to bring
their own experience
to looking at a painting.

the painting. I like to allow for those mistakes or improvisation to contribute to the content of the piece.

— *Is it fair to say that scale doesn't determine a hierarchy, in terms of whether you like something or not? Sometimes you seem to fall in love with smaller pieces, and vice versa. I feel like there is a degree democracy between the smaller work and the larger work as well.*

Yeah. Those smaller pieces have so much energy embedded in them because of the nature of the process of making them. When I'm making the larger pieces, I'm looking at the smaller ones, thinking, "Oh, I remember moving my hand like this to make this mark." I'm trying to capture that energy in the small pieces and translate it on a larger scale. I have to scale up tools, and I'm obviously standing to make the larger pieces so it is a very different process. I think that's why it's important for me to have so many small works around me, so I can pull things from each piece, and remember how I made them.

— *I sense there's a dialogue between the past and the present in a lot of your work. I see moments telegraphing from ancient art history, but then the color feels contemporary or, at the very least, modern. How do you work with color and light?*

I think of color as symbolic of feeling. The light source is not consistent or accurate to reality—really nothing in the painting is accurate to reality, because it's this in between world.

— *There's an inner illuminance, especially when I look at some of the highlights, where the highlights are colored. It reminds me of theater—*

Bob Wilson for example—and even cinema in some ways. And there's an ethereal hazy quality. It feels like there's a mystery and magic to the light.

I think it's all pretty intuitive. Color is obviously an important part of the paintings. It's almost like the color that you might see in a dream, or that represents the feeling behind what's happening in the piece. I'm not painting a tree as it would appear if I looked outside and looked at a tree, it's more the feeling of a tree at a very particular moment, that supports the feeling of the overall painting.

— *You often delve into extant mythologies and fables, but also suggest new ones. I'm intrigued how you feel about this, and our receptiveness to them as ideas. For example in *Blue Recluse*, I'm reminded of many things—nymphs, sirens, monsters.*

In that piece I'm thinking about Arachne, and spiders, and also multiplicity in terms of the self, like having multiple selves, or multiple limbs. There's a lot of doubling, and detachment, and even disembodiment... Wait, I'm going off on a tangent.

— *Ha. I was just asking about myth. How much are you pulling from extant existing mythology? And why is that important? Besides, are you also creating new symbols of new mythologies as well?*

I do reference mythology, not in every painting, but in some. Myths have this moralistic imposition that I'm not interested in. I like to take it out of that context and place it in a neutral one. There is no moral cue that you should walk away with, after



looking at the painting.

— *These tales have been in our culture for so long, that we may not necessarily know the stories, but we subconsciously know them when we see them, if that makes sense. We know we're tapping into a broader type of cultural dialogue that's existed for a long long time.*

Right. Maybe the figure looking into the water makes you think of Narcissus, or just self-reflection in general. But then it's overlapped with other meanings and becomes something else. I don't think of the paintings as linear narratives in the way that myths are linear.

— *To me they're sublimated somewhere in between symbolic and surreal. If you were to find someone looking into the water by themselves at night, it's totally removed from reality. They seem to be hinting at a broader narrative beyond what we actually see.*

There could be more.

— *Exactly. And we're catching a moment. They remind me, in some emotional way, of Leonora Carrington's work.*

Oh, yeah. I love her.

— *Strange characters, shady alcoves, out of sight places...*

Right. You look at her paintings, and it has the feeling of a familiar experience but that also seems impossible. They're completely invented, imagery that never existed before except in

her mind. In this Narcissus painting over here, the image of someone looking at their reflection in a pond is very recognizable. But as I was making this painting, I stepped back and realized if there was a head up here, the figure could be seen from both directions. It's either a figure giving birth to a head down there, or this is the head and it's looking into the water—or maybe the figure in the water is coming out. I think I will add something up there. I guess that's an example of allowing the process and the subsequent form to affect the content. It started as a more obvious reference to Narcissus, but now is talking a little bit more about a sort of interchangeable beginning and end—a vicious loop.

— *That painting is fascinating—the way I see it, the head seems to be entering the water but we don't see the reflection of the bottom of the head, so there could be actually two figures here, each interacting with the other. There's something almost sexual about it as well.*

Oh, yeah. Like a kiss.

— *Or oral sex.*

Oh I see that. There are so many ways to look at it. I like to keep all that open.

— *I do like that lack of objectivity in this work because I think that you let people come to it. You don't have to define exactly what you're trying to say.*

It's stripped of morality. There is no right or wrong way. Everyone's going to bring their own experience to looking at a

painting. I'm not trying to dictate how someone experiences the painting at all.

— *[I see reference pieces on the studio wall] Oh, those Cranach [the Elder] paintings are amazing. I've never seen those before.*

They're both titled Melancholy and they're so bizarre. There are more—there's always a woman that's carving this wooden tool with babies and witches in the background. Back then at that time, carpentry was a signifier for the state of melancholy. I find it just really interesting that if you were alive at a different time, you would interpret this painting in a very specific way. But then looking at it now, it feels so random, and disjointed, and confusing. I'm interested in how much context changes the meaning of a piece.

— *Before we started recording, we were talking about Cranach. Full circle.*

I look at him every now and then, mostly because he does so many different versions of one theme. And I think it's interesting to see how things evolve with each version.

— *How do you begin to paint? You mentioned the process of pouring paint onto the canvas at the start. There's a freeness to your painting—a sort of automatism—that the pouring process creates.*

To be honest, I start every painting differently, but pouring is usually a part of it. And that's just to give me something to work against and also to allow the accident to inform what's happening.

— *How controlled is that moment in the beginning? Is it very loose?*

Very uncontrolled. I have the canvas or paper, whatever I'm working on, on the ground. And then I mix up color into cups, and then water it down. Or if I'm using oil, I'll dilute it with mediums. And then I'll just wet the whole canvas. I always work wet into wet and then start pouring the colors and tilting the canvas. Sometimes I have an idea when I start, sometimes I have an idea of what the composition will be. So I try to pour color in more specific areas, but it really runs all over the place. It's very hard to be exact. None of my forms are really exact, so it ends up informing the forms that I paint on the canvas.

— *There's a quote attributed to Michaelangelo about how the sculpture is already complete within the marble itself. [“The sculpture is already complete within the marble block, before I start my work. It is already there, I just have to chisel away the superfluous material.”]*

Oh, yeah, like Galatea and Pygmalion. There's that myth of Pygmalion falling in love with his own sculpture. I'm working on a piece referencing to that. I did a small work on paper—actually before the pandemic—and then I started this large one which might be interesting to see as it is just the pour. You can see where that figure will go. Sometimes the pours are really exciting, and successful, and alluring—which can make it harder to work over. So in this one, I really will try to keep a lot of that.

— *Do you feel this one was a successful pour?*

Yeah. But sometimes they're just really shitty.

— *And you start again, or you just paint over it?*

I paint over it. And then it becomes like this really belabored process.

— *Even looking at this pour here, it seems like there's apparitions, there's like ghostly presences that make themselves known even in the beginning. And then somehow, you are working to pull them out of the ether.*

Definitely.

— *It's almost like a seance or a commune, with characters that are summoned to the fore. I'm reminded of the automatism that the surrealists were interested in.*

Yeah, I'm pulling them out. [Looking at the large painting] I do want to keep this figure more ghostly, because they're going to be holding this object or person. So it makes sense, in terms of the content, for me to have this figure be more ghostly, transparent, more of like a shell of a figure. And then, their creation is a little more solid. I like that play, or the difference in terms of materiality of the two figures.

— *Do you know much about, or have you looked at early 20th century or even late Victorian spirit photography and images of ectoplasms? I love that stuff. Now, contemporarily, it's like those aura photographs you get in Chinatown.*

Oh, yeah. I've gotten my aura photographed on canal street.

— *Tony Oursler had this great exhibition called Imponderable at MoMA and Bard College. I think Oursler's grandfather worked with Houdini to debunk a lot of fraudulent mediums, seances and spiritualists. There was a section on spirit photography—ectoplasm—ghostly matter that are coming out of people's noses and things like that. Those fantastical phantasmagorical things were an obsession of mine as a kid. And I just wondered if you feel like you are having a communion with something. If that makes any sense.*

That's interesting. I'll definitely look up those things. The human shell idea came from reading a chapter in *A Thousand Plateaus—One or Several Wolves* by Deleuze and Guattari which my friend, another painter, Aisling Hamrogue, recommended. They talk about the body without organs—I'm thinking a lot about that chapter at the moment.

— *I can see that with the figures.*

So that's one way I think of them as like this shell, or like a skin containing multiple selves. And then I also think of them as, in that vein, like water balloons, the way that humans are kind of water balloons. But they're also inhuman. I guess it's also related somewhat to dreams, and how you just sometimes don't see anything, but you know that in the dream, maybe like a flicker of light, is a very specific person.

— *The person that's referenced in your dream looks nothing like that person whatsoever.*

I'm really interested in the idea that anything can be a person, and the painting is about the feeling of that person. So maybe that feeling looks very different from what a person physically looks like.

— *When I was looking at your work before I arrived, one of the words that kept coming to me—and I don't mean it in the mawkish kind of*

I've gotten my aura photographed on canal street.

way—but they feel quite spiritual. And I don't mean spiritual in terms of spirituality, but they feel like they are filled with figurative spirits. I think of these twilight moments, what those gallery press releases might call "liminal spaces." There's a term in French, "between dog and wolf," which is that moment between daylight and nighttime—that dusk moment, where it's neither light enough nor dark enough to distinguish between things. A lot of these things remind me of these in between moments where things are neither as they seem and exactly as they seem at the same time.

Yeah. Did you ever read Murakami's *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*? There's this chapter or part of the book where he writes about this. If you go in your backyard, the space in between fences, where the fence of your backyard meets the fence of your neighbor's backyard, there's that gap. It might have just been an alleyway in the book. And walking into that gap is entering another realm.

— Going back a little to the spirits—your characters often seem consumed by them. I think we mentioned Henry Fuseli before: obviously there's *The Nightmare* painting where this goblin is perched on a woman's breast as she sleeps. There's something of the Gothic sometimes in your work. Like over there at the bottom of the painting, I can see there's some creature holding a bone. At least I assume it's a bone. And I assume it's a creature too.

It's a vanitas, I guess.

— And sometimes, there seems to be something that resembles fear. Well, not fear explicitly, some reckoning with the sublime. I'm sure I'm forcing the gothic narrative, but could you talk a little bit about some of the painters that you really admire? Not necessarily that informed this. But we talked a bit about Cranach earlier. Is there anyone else? Yeah. I have so many. My mom is a painter. I grew up around art, or just going to art museums and reading books with her. I've always been fascinated with painting. Or I guess I fell in love with painting at an early age thanks to her. I really love Munch. He also

did a painting—or a couple of paintings—called *Melancholy*. The title is the only thing that connects them to those Cranach paintings. But I like to think about them as related. There's one of a guy sitting in a field holding a sunflower. His heart is bleeding.

— The way you play with color emotionally reminds me a bit of Munch. And I think that a lot of these paintings put me into different psychological states. I think that the *Blue Recluse* feels very calm, and then other things feel...

Right. I don't know if I'd mentioned that when you asked me about color. But I do think of it as an internal psychology. So the color is helping to create the interior psychological state of the figure.

— Great. [I see a photograph on the wall next to the painting] Oh, wait who's the actress on the left?

That's Jennifer Coolidge! I just love her. She makes me happy. She reminds me of one of my grandmothers and a very special friend. I'm lucky to have 2 Jennifer Coolidges in my life.

— I realize we left off and then thinking back it seems like we jumped a little too far into the deep end. Sorry to ask, but maybe just start from the beginning. Could you just tell me where you're from?

I was born in California, in Palo Alto, and then moved to Houston, Texas when I was like, three or four? I grew up in Houston, and then moved to New York in 2007.

— After I stopped recording we were talking about a certain mood in the paintings. You reflected that the mood was really inspired by Texas in particular—that there's a kind of magic. I just wondered if you could talk about that feeling—how it relates to where you came from and also where you spent time developing this work.

In 2019 I did a residency in Galveston, Texas. I hadn't been back to Texas for several years because my family all moved back to the

East Coast when my sister and I moved to New York. I applied for this year long residency—I was feeling like I wanted to get out of the city. It was a good opportunity to just get away and really focus on painting because I was, at the time, working, teaching, and doing some freelance design work so it was really hard to focus. Even when I was in my studio with the door closed, it never felt private the way studios should feel. It was hard to find time and then hard to really focus when I was there. So I got to Texas in 2019, and it was immediately so nostalgic—just getting off the plane I felt like I could take a really deep breath. The landscape in East Texas is sort of haunting—it's swampy, lots of huge oak trees. And Galveston is an island on the Gulf of Mexico—very humid and hot. I think being back in that environment instigated all the bizarre memories and experiences I had as a kid growing up there.

But then COVID happened that year. There are way less people living in Galveston than in NY, so in a way I was lucky to be there. And the residency was small, there were only two other residents, so we were able to continue going to the studio, and I was able to continue using all the facilities that the residency offered.

—*We spoke a bit about the twilight spirit stuff before. How do you feel like that's connected to the area you were from and the area where you started to really develop that work? Texas is very much the center of American mythology.*

Well, there was a hurricane in 1900 in Galveston that wiped out everything. There are some structures that still stand from before then, but it definitely has an eerie quality. There have been several subsequent hurricanes since then. It's also the South so it has a pretty horrific history. Someone described it as the place where people who are running from something end up because you take I-10 to get there and you cross the bridge from mainland Texas and you keep driving until you hit water. There's definitely a different energy on the island.

—*Funnily enough I had read about the Balinese Room in Galveston a few days before we met up. It's one of my joys in life to just read about random things on Wikipedia. I then read about some grand hotel on the island which once was host to presidents and huge celebrities.*

The Galvez.

—*I was just struck after looking at the work and sitting with your work in my head as if there was this sense of spirits. And then we talked about Galveston, we talked about the hurricane, and I think there are forces of nature within your work. We're going through a whole new moment with rapid climate change and while I don't think that that's on the surface, there are certain things that are happening in those paintings that are bigger than us.*

Yeah. It's hard to describe without visiting the island, but Galveston is a place where every type of person that lives in Texas—which is a very wide range of people—visits. It's not really hyped up so it's still affordable. Even though the waters are brown from silt and pollution and there are oil rigs in all the ocean views, it's still a beach vacation destination. When I was a kid, we used to go there every other weekend during the summer—it was a real highlight.

—*That residency seemed to spur a new way of working, or at least a new way of thinking about the work. Now, you're back and live in the biggest city in the country. How is coming back to New York and channeling that feeling working?*

In Houston, there is so much space you can see far into the distance. In New York, everything is so clustered together. I've been here a long time and definitely adapted to that claustrophobic nature. And of course, working in a tight environment. I used to share a studio so I know how to make big paintings in a small closet and it's not preferable.

Going back to Texas and doing this residency, I think the space, that feeling of being able to take a full breath and seeing into the distance and being in that lush, swampy eerie landscape was revitalizing for me and it just incited a lot of visuals, a lot of memories that I think I'm not reminded of every day here. But I'm glad to be back in NY, the political situation in Texas right now is nauseating.

—*When I was looking at your work in the studio, there was something in there that reminded me of Kees Van Dongen. I recently saw the Signac collection exhibition at the Musee d'Orsay which had a handful of amazing Kees van Dongen paintings.*

You're right. I haven't thought about that artist in a really long time, but there was a painting at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, by van Dongen, of the Woman in the red hat. We used to go to that museum a lot and there were always a few paintings that I wanted to look at. They're artists that I don't consciously think about now, but I'm sure they have had an effect on my work in some way because I visited them every time I went to the museum. I actually had a poster of that particular painting that you brought up and grew up with it in my room from when I was a kid through high school. I think I'm trying to access things on a subconscious level, and it's a very intuitive process. I try not to have an explanation for everything being in a painting. I want there to be room for things to seep in there and teach me something, or make me think back on an experience or maybe ask a question in a different way.

—*There was another painter I thought about when in the studio and I loved the connection there too. I saw a color palette in places that reminds me of Kirchner—especially in the greens and yellows. Then you mentioned the Eastern European side of your family which kind of makes sense.*

You were spot on. Kirchner... my grandparents on my dad's side migrated to Brazil and eventually NY from Vienna Austria which they actually didn't talk about much because they're Holocaust survivors. But my grandmother loved painting and had these framed postcards of different artists from Vienna around her house. We would always look at them together and talk about them. She loved Kirchner and Klimt. And then Munch, who's not from Austria, but another one that she introduced me to. His ability to paint the inner psychology of his figures and even landscapes, his landscapes are so psychological. There's one painting in particular that I've been looking at a lot lately of bathers. It's like a bird eye view and there's a figure in the water with its arms and legs spread, and it turns into this frog-like creature. It's such a powerful pose and alludes to so many different things. It's not just a painting about a person swimming, it's so much about the psychology of figure and our sort of animal instincts.

