

Cristina BANBAN

Juxtapoz,
Cristina BanBan: A Big Energy

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The Juxtapoz Winter 2023 Quarterly, cover art by Cristina BanBan



Cristina BanBan

The Winter 2023 Cover Story is Big Energy

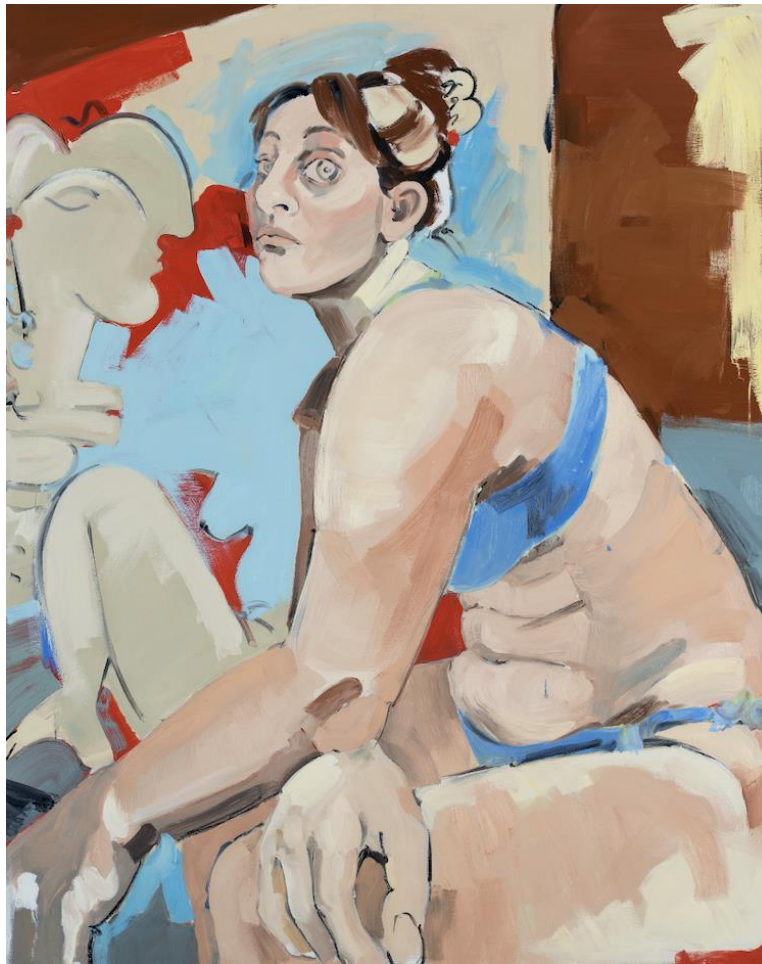
Interview by Gwynned Vitello // Portrait by Bryan Derballa

Cristina Ban Ban paints women, she doesn't paint waifs. Friends gather to drink, dance, work, and lounge, but they're not Taylor Swift's curated posse. Entry into the group is personhood, an appetite for life. Her solo subjects may look pensive, maybe wary, maybe serious, but they're always alert, ready to summon whatever strength is needed. Then again, being alone is rendered as a nourishing facet of life. Whether spiced with cayenne or muted in shades of ochre, energy flickers through the canvas. Eyes probe and dart, hands work and reach out. The paintings are large as life, packing the power of movie stars on a big screen. The immediacy is intentional. Born with a sketchbook leading the way, Cristina is intentional, driven to paint, and fueled by feelings and friendship. Here is our Winter 2023 cover story.

Gwynned Vitello: Welcome back from vacation. Did you go back home?

Cristina BanBan: Thank you, I had a great time! It was much needed after months of intense preparation for my upcoming show at Skarstedt. I went to Spain to recharge my batteries

by reconnecting with nature and being invigorated at the beach and dancing at night with old friends. I can't wait to go back next summer!



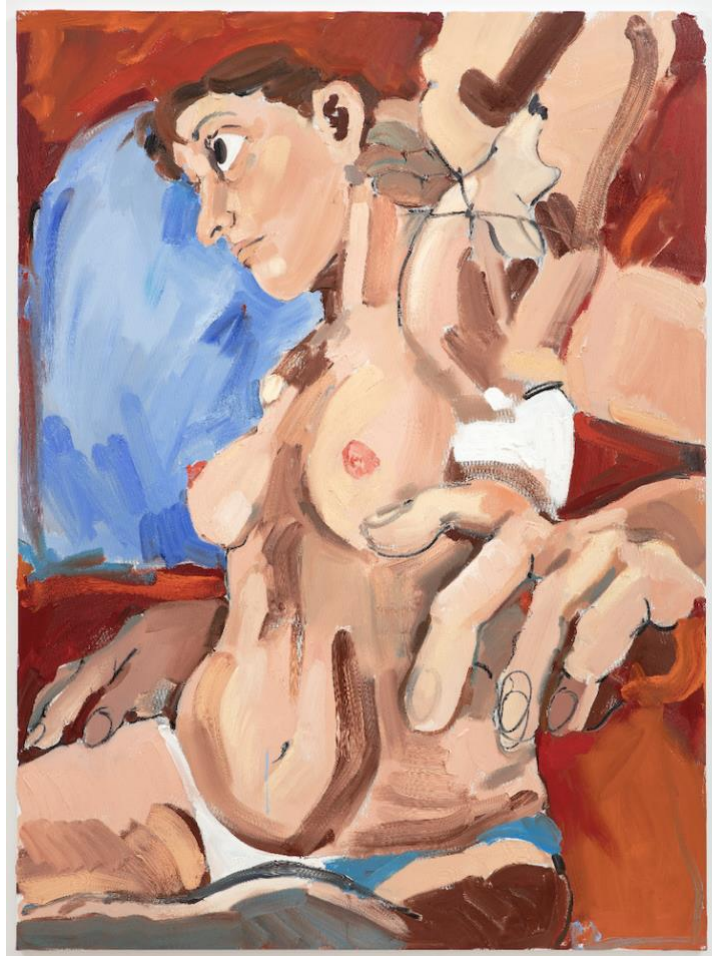
Can you describe your emotions when arriving home? Did you anticipate how you might feel?

I didn't go home to Barcelona, but another home, Ibiza, where I spent summers for many years. It had been so long since my last time there, so returning to the island made me very emotional. It helped me revitalize a part of myself that I had totally forgotten or had left behind, the part of me that is more carefree and spontaneous. I think I lost that for a bit. Experiences like that, reconnecting in that way, are really important because it gives you a change of perspective or mindset that can help you approach painting with a fresh outlook. Sometimes you just have to sit in the sun and eat good tomatoes to put all your emotions back in place.

I'd go there just for the tomatoes! What was it like coming back to New York? Both places have great nightlife, but can you describe other differences and similarities?

I would say in both New York City and Ibiza you get the sense that you are surrounded by a big energy. However, those energies are completely different! Life in New York is pretty much work and art-oriented. I spend long hours in the studio and it feels like weeks pass by

so quickly. In Ibiza, I have the feeling that one day equals two because you do so much. You live life to the fullest without pressure and in a much slower rhythm. I love meeting all kinds of people, making new friends along the way, and celebrating life. People are so warm and welcoming in Spain. Okay, come to think of it, I guess I miss it!



Did you come back with any new ideas or new inspiration for what you want to paint next?

I'm back at work, but not back in New York. I'm in Paris finishing production for my solo show in Skarstedt, New York. They have another base here, and we've arranged everything so that I could paint while awaiting a new visa stamp. Taking two weeks' vacation in a place so different, without responsibilities and schedules, has made me miss painting and being inside the walls of a studio. I came to realize that it is so necessary to stop and have some downtime when I finish a certain number of paintings because, otherwise, I get into a cycle where I repeat myself. I am continuing with a series I've been working on for a few months, but I am sure the palette and energy will be slightly different after the break.

How do you keep track of your ideas? Do you keep a journal, or do you just find yourself in the studio, ready with charcoal and paint?

I don't believe in keeping track of ideas. For me, painting is something more emotional than intellectual. Painting has so much to do with emotion and mood, so I find that whatever is happening in my personal life, my thoughts, or even the music that I am into will influence and take part in the process. I often feel that painting is the closest thing to a journal for me.

Your paintings are so full of life and emotion, but as an artist, you work long hours alone. Does that represent two sides of you, or do you kind of live two separate lives, as in work and then play?

They are inseparable. For me, painting is a part of life that represents who you are. After many years, I have become comfortable with solitude, although it hasn't always been easy. Painting is hard and requires a lot of time and space to be left alone with your own mind, which, at times, can be a difficult place to deal with. I have learned to enjoy both my inner and physical space. I am happiest when I'm in the studio, which has become a sacred place for me. Don't get me wrong, I am also someone who loves to be in the company of good friends, hanging out for drinks and a bit of dancing. But for now, painting comes first!



I wonder if this interest was instilled in you as a child. It's so incredible that you have been studying art for so long. Was your home filled with art, crafts, food, and music, or were you always a super imaginative, creative child?

I don't come from a family of artists or art lovers. However, I was lucky because my family always supported me from the moment they saw my interest in painting and drawing at a very early age. They were able to recognize that it was a part of who I was. It's funny, I don't have a clear memory of me playing with toys, but I do remember always drawing and carrying a sketchbook and crayons wherever I went with my parents,

Is there a member of the family who was most influential, who was either an inspiration or a real source of comfort?

My grandmother Maria was a dressmaker. One of my most vivid memories is the small atelier in one of the rooms of her house. It was scattered with detailed measurements, scissors, fabric cutouts on the floor, and always with the TV on in the background. My grandma had the power, with her designs and clothing, to make women in el barrio and her friends feel beautiful. I think of her hands often and the way she found beauty in bodies and empowered those she dressed. It was very inspiring.

I wonder what your first creations were. What materials did you use and what did you make?

At the age of five, I began to attend art classes and I learned how to use different techniques, including watercolor, temperas, inks, pastels, comics, and animations. The teachers really pushed us to learn to copy reality, which I did. I learned how to measure with my eye and then copy what I was seeing on paper. It was very rigorous, but I think I carried those skills later in life and am grateful for the training.



I've read that you actually gave art lessons while you were still a student, which seems very ambitious. What was that experience like?

It was the highlight of my day! I remember that most of my classmates at University spent their time chatting and smoking cigarettes in the cafeteria while I was always in a hurry to get to my teaching job. At the time, it frustrated me not to be able to hang out, but today, I am grateful for the experience because it reinforced my work discipline even more.

How and why did you decide to move to London? Was it your idea and was there any culture shock? What was the biggest influence that London had on your work?

London felt right at the time. It was an easy step since I was already in England, but I always had it in mind to come to New York. The biggest influence of London on my work was the insane number of hours I invested in developing my practice. I think the cloudy and drizzly weather contributed even more to wanting to be indoors! I never became fond of drinking tea though!

Can you look back and see a thread that follows your style of painting? Or some detours, some diversions?

I have always been attracted to the human figure, particularly women; but right now, I feel the need to experiment beyond figuration. Let's say that I am on the bridge between realistic representation and abstraction. I focus more on color, texture, balance, and composition rather than on the narrative of the image.

What attracts you to representational art, especially portraits?

I would say that it's the manner that came most naturally and allowed me to express myself in a more innate language. It has also been how I learned to approach art, that is, coming from the natural world rather than the imagination. I perceive painting as a vehicle to express emotions, so it works as a journal, and that is why I reached out to the female body or self-portrait.



Your subjects appear to possess such a lack of self-consciousness, and there is often the appearance of motion. Do the models sit for you?

I use models, and they always sit for me. I like to train my eyes and hands to work quickly, which you must do since you have to think and move fast with a model. I try to choose movements and gestures that help me to provide maximum dynamism in the composition. I consider photography a means of starting a painting.

The voluptuous form of your subjects is always cited in descriptions of your work, but what I am always drawn to are the eyes. While the women appear very strong, I sense that they are always on alert. Do you spend extra time on the eyes, and do you consciously emphasize one eye? It's as if one is more penetrating than the other.

I don't do this purposely, but I think it's interesting that each reader makes their own interpretation of what they see. I think that when a painting flows, your eyes go around as if in a circular motion. Then they stop at the gaze, which usually has a more detailed outline

The hands in your paintings are large and strong. Tell me why they are so important.

I have a special admiration for the hands and especially for how much they can express when you meet someone for the first time. They are also an important motive to give dynamism to the painting,

And speaking of large, so are your paintings. Have they gotten bigger as the years go by, or do you think that's become a kind of standard practice now? Maybe because people are so used to murals?

I choose a large format because I can be more expressive with my own movement when I paint. I'm a very physical painter, so I want to be able to incorporate my whole body and range of motion onto the canvas. I like the sound of the brush sweeping across the canvas and want my figures to engulf the viewer,



Describe your work process. It sure doesn't look like you work from photographs!

I use photography only as a point of reference where I take or subtract the information that I need. I work on the distortion of the figure which brings me to moments of total abstraction, but the female body is always present. I always start a new piece by sketching first to find the right composition, then I paint. The preparatory drawing is always very accurate, and I take my time, while painting is fast and improvised. It is very charged,

How would you describe your self-portraits? Would you say that you do a lot of them?

I make a lot of self-portraits because these are the images I most readily have at hand, so even if I don't intend to make a self-portrait, many of the characters will also look like me.

Is it true that you add color at the end of your works? How would you describe the role that it plays in your paintings?

No, I never meant to imply that it's introduced at the end. What I mean is that I always start a canvas with a line drawing and then add color. Painting is very intuitive for me, so adding

color and thinking about balance in the palette, composition and weight just comes very naturally. A drawing is much more predetermined, as it is the skeleton of the painting

There is very much a kind of timelessness in your painting. The woman could be from this century or the last. You don't paint a particular style of dress or hairdo. I wonder if it's because it seems you are so grounded in emotion, in what might be called, more than anything, the human condition. Does that sound accurate?

Yes, true, I guess, if you want to read it that way. I sometimes like to add certain details in the undergarments or accessories such as hair clips or big hoop earrings, as I feel that they represent women of today. I like to depict women with their hair up, as I think necks are so beautiful.

With your new show, are these works you've been planning for a while? What brought about the more subdued palette?

The theme is always the same, the female form. The title is Mujeres because it is the subject matter of all the work. It is subject and content at the same time. I wanted to present the body raw, naked as it is, and explore the different possibilities paint will offer me in creating these images. Color, palette, texture, and pure forms are trapped in the goodies and have allowed me to understand painting for what it is.

What's a typical work day, and do you alter that for an upcoming show?

I try to be very disciplined with my studio practice, so it never changes much; although I'd say that during the longer summer hours I'm productive at the end of the day. Typically, I come to the studio around eleven after doing some admin at home and going to the gym. Music always accompanies me, and I listen to a wide range. I find music helps me focus and I enter a sort of meditative state, so jazz or classical do the trick. Then when I paint, I work with loud beats to keep me going, especially in the afternoon or evening. Right now I'm listening to Ricardo Villalobos. I'll paint until I get tired, usually until seven or eight in the evening. When I have a deadline, I push and work longer. I'm very focused and I live to have a set routine, especially when working toward a show. Then Ibiza!

Cristina BanBan's solo show with Skarstedt in NYC is on view through December 17, 2022.