

**Cristina BANBAN**

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## apartamento



Text by Coco Romack

Photography by Rafael Rios

**New York City: To those familiar with her work, the 35-year-old artist Cristina BanBan’s one-bedroom Bushwick apartment might seem downright monastic. When we first meet in March 2021, little decorates the walls of the railroad-style breezeway but exposed brick and pre-war panelling. Though she is a creator of art objects herself, she affixes little value to her own possessions, perhaps the result of a sense of transience inescapable after a**

series of international moves. White space is a fresh start, like a blank canvas.

BanBan grew up in El Prat de Llobregat, a municipality on the outskirts of Barcelona. She learnt to draw in part by imitating the anime popular on Catalan television in the early '90s—Doraemon, Sailor Moon—and the Japanese animation style's exaggerated proportions, melded with the figurative techniques she formalised at the University of Barcelona. In 2012, she fled to London amid the Spanish financial crisis. After a stretch of increasingly high-profile exhibitions and awards, she arrived in New York in 2019.

When I met BanBan again recently, this time at her studio—an airy loft space with wide views of the Manhattan skyline—it felt as though everything had shifted. It's difficult to say whether it was the world around us or merely the one inside her artwork. Proportional, almond-shaped eyes seem almost shrunken considering their formerly gooey, oversized renderings. The bright palette has muted with soft, flesh tones, with marks that sometimes reveal charcoal underdrawings. The backgrounds, once furnished rooms, are empty, leaving the characters floating ambiguously and without cause. Bodies appear overlaid; an unexpected dollop of blue paint highlights a breast. Her hands, however, remain large—or are they growing?



Mujeres I, 2022



Mujeres VI, 2022

**The last time I saw you, we were just coming out of a particularly difficult, isolating period of the coronavirus pandemic, and I remember your paintings having these harsh lines and**

**deep colours that seemed to communicate that. These new works look different, a bit lighter perhaps.**

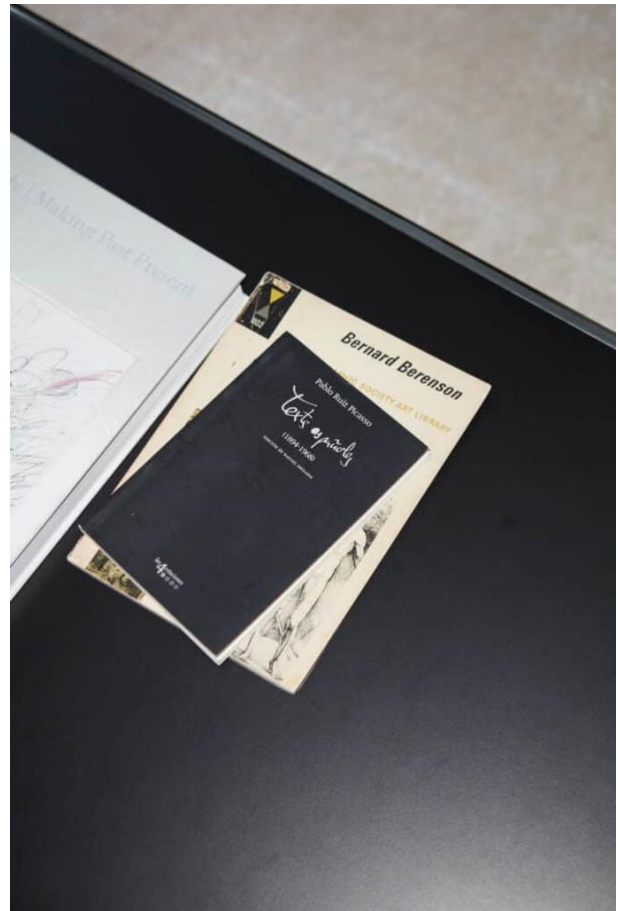
I changed my work a lot in that period. During the lockdown, I was experimenting with many things, like switching from acrylic to oil painting. I wanted to move away as much as possible from having clear narratives in my paintings, like, 'Oh, these are two girls, two friends, talking in the kitchen'. I knew how to do that, and at some point, it became boring for me. Moving away from that became an opportunity to get a little bit closer to abstraction, which you could see in my spring show at Perrotin in Paris.

Now I'm trying to lift the figure even further. I'm learning new mark-making, and I look more at each painting's composition, the colours, and the texture, which I think is closer to how an abstract painter works. I'm in between these two worlds, and it's exciting because I'm learning so much. All I want is to have fun in the studio. It doesn't make sense if I keep repeating things. How can I challenge myself? What can I do next? Every painting is slightly different, too. That's the idea, continue to push the figure and see what happens. I think you can see that the paintings are freer.

**Yet they're still rooted in the figure.**

Yeah, the content is still the female form. Taking pictures of myself or close friends as a starting point, I believe it's also helped me work through my own emotions. It feels closer to meditation, sometimes. Maybe that's why I need the figure. Everything starts with drawing. I make tons of drawings in a sketchbook. When I like the composition, then I go to the canvas. With charcoal, I draw the composition on the canvas, and then I just work. I just go for it. The drawing is always really controlled, but when it comes to painting, it's intuitive. There's no planning it. I think and then I act fast. Slow drawing and fast painting.

I see the superimposition of the lines, and that's really interesting because there are negative spaces that I can use to work with different colours. I try to transport that into the paintings. You can see the flesh colours, the changing palette. I've been looking at abstract expressionists just to see how they play with the brushstrokes and the textures. Sometimes I leave the drawing underneath, which I think adds freshness to the work. I'm exploring, still exploring.



### **Who are some of the painters you're thinking about?**

I look at Willem de Kooning a lot. Helen Frankenthaler. I love Joaquín Sorolla, too. His sketches are like abstract paintings, even though he was depicting light and volume.

### **Are there any principles or rules that guide your depictions of women's bodies, how they should or shouldn't look?**

It's not that I have an intention, but when I look at them, I feel they're all holding their own space, confidently, as they are. They're all different bodies. I like that they're powerful and real. They're also in their own heads, thinking about themselves. Some of them look like me a little more than others, so I believe there is a kind of psychological aspect to it, too. They're vulnerable, perhaps. What do you think?

### **I think so, yeah. There's a roundness to them. They're sexy but not sexualised.**

The other day I had a visitor, and she said, 'It's amazing because you don't paint for the male gaze'. When I paint something, I paint it as real as I can.



**Do you use references?**

I like a mix. I like to take pictures because then it's easier for me to distort the figures. I look at myself in the mirror and take pictures, or I may have a friend come to the studio and I take a couple of pictures. I would love to work from a model but it's quite difficult to always have somebody sitting for you. I work a lot with my iPhone. I get distracted sometimes when I get a message.

**The size of the pieces are quite large. Why do you prefer to work with such big canvases?**

I'm attracted to human size. I work at my own scale, or maybe bigger because I'm quite small, to give a sense of entering the painting. I got used to the language and the brush strokes you can use when working bigger—more expressive. I'm not a painter that sits down. I'm quite active. I like the gesture and the action of painting large canvases.

**The hands and feet you paint are especially massive.**

I think you can tell a lot from someone's hands. I'm very attracted to hands as well, big hands. They always play a very strong part in the composition of my paintings. Faces, too, eyes and lips. They're very expressive—maybe feet not that much, but hands, specifically.



**Is there a work at your latest show, *Mujeres*, at Skarstedt Gallery in New York, to which you feel most connected?**

I always have to be connected to all of my paintings. That way I learn something with each one. Maybe it's the energy that I put into it or a better sense of what I was going through. Sometimes, when I paint a friend of mine, the energy's so different. It's a different dialogue in every painting. I can see which ones are myself. You can tell by the eyes and the chin. And some don't have titles until the very end. I don't give them extra meaning. I want you to view the work as it is, rather than giving you a title and conditioning you.



**In May, 2021, you showed your first oil paintings. How does the material dictate the way you work?**

It was a time in my career when I needed a break to experiment, and I stopped showing paintings because I wanted to develop my technique further. The way I was using images before felt too illustrative. I wanted to think more about emotion and try to communicate those certain emotions with actual painting, rather than depicting them very clearly. I started learning with oil and that's why I needed some time. When you don't really know how to paint with that technique, you make mistakes. It made me a little bit uncomfortable because I felt I was very used to my own hand before. It's completely different, the way you clean the brushes, the smell, everything. It brings back memories from childhood.



**When did you know you wanted to be an artist?**

It was something I wanted to do from a very young age. I remember being in school and my friend telling me how they'd just started at art school. In Spain, children go to school from 9am to 4.30pm and then they do extra activities. Like, you can go swimming or you could go

play music, and there was an art school. I asked my parents to enrol me, and when I was five, I started going there after school every day. There were maybe six groups from children to adults and I did everything: studying from still life, watercolours, and comics.

I remember I had to copy from models. My old teacher was very conservative. She had a pile of old paintings and drawings, and I'd have to copy them exactly the same. So I really learnt from imitation and looking. And then I remember going to the older people and they were painting with oil, mostly from pictures or objects, they used to build up still lifes, like flowers in a vase or whatever the teacher put together.

And then when I was young, manga was a big thing for us, and anime was big on Catalan television. So I used to look at a lot of manga, and every day we watched *Doraemon* and *Dragon Ball* on television in the morning and afternoon. I remember making very thin ladies with very long legs, big eyes. Drawing manga was a way of being close to something creative.

### **What do you remember about your childhood home?**

I lived with my parents and my brother in a small flat. It was on the sixth floor, with a lot of neighbours in the same building. I remember this very cute red elevator and a sense of how everybody cared about the space. The women there cleaned the street. For my family, it was important to have dinner at home every day, and to always meet on Sundays and eat together at our grandparents' house. So I always had this feeling of having to be close to home. But I left Spain in 2012 after the economic crash. I was quite young, 24. I didn't really know what I wanted, but I had a gut feeling I had to leave the city. I loved it there, but I couldn't really see myself growing as much as I needed.

### **What are your parents like?**

My parents don't have anything to do with art. They love good food, taking care of their family and their friends, going out with a van, travelling, and sleeping on the beach. My mom works in a supermarket. My father works in a car factory, same as my brother and grandfather. The person who inspired me to be creative was my grandma. She was a tailor and used to make custom dresses for all the women in the building.

### **What jobs did you do before you could pay the bills as an artist?**

I started working as an art teacher in Barcelona when I was 17. When I moved to London, I worked in a retail shop selling very expensive shoes. And then I started working at a

Montessori school as an assistant teacher and as an art teacher. Teaching was always quite important for me. In 2016, I started painting at a home I shared with my ex-boyfriend. Slowly, I started selling my work.

**Did you speak English before you moved to London?**

No. I learnt through being uncomfortable, trying to find a space to live, and trying to find a job. It was a slow process but gradually you learn.

**Having moved from Barcelona to London and then to New York, is there anything you've kept throughout, something nostalgic?**

No. I don't like that. I moved from Barcelona to London with one suitcase and I did the same from London to here. I like the fresh start. I gave everything away and then started over here.



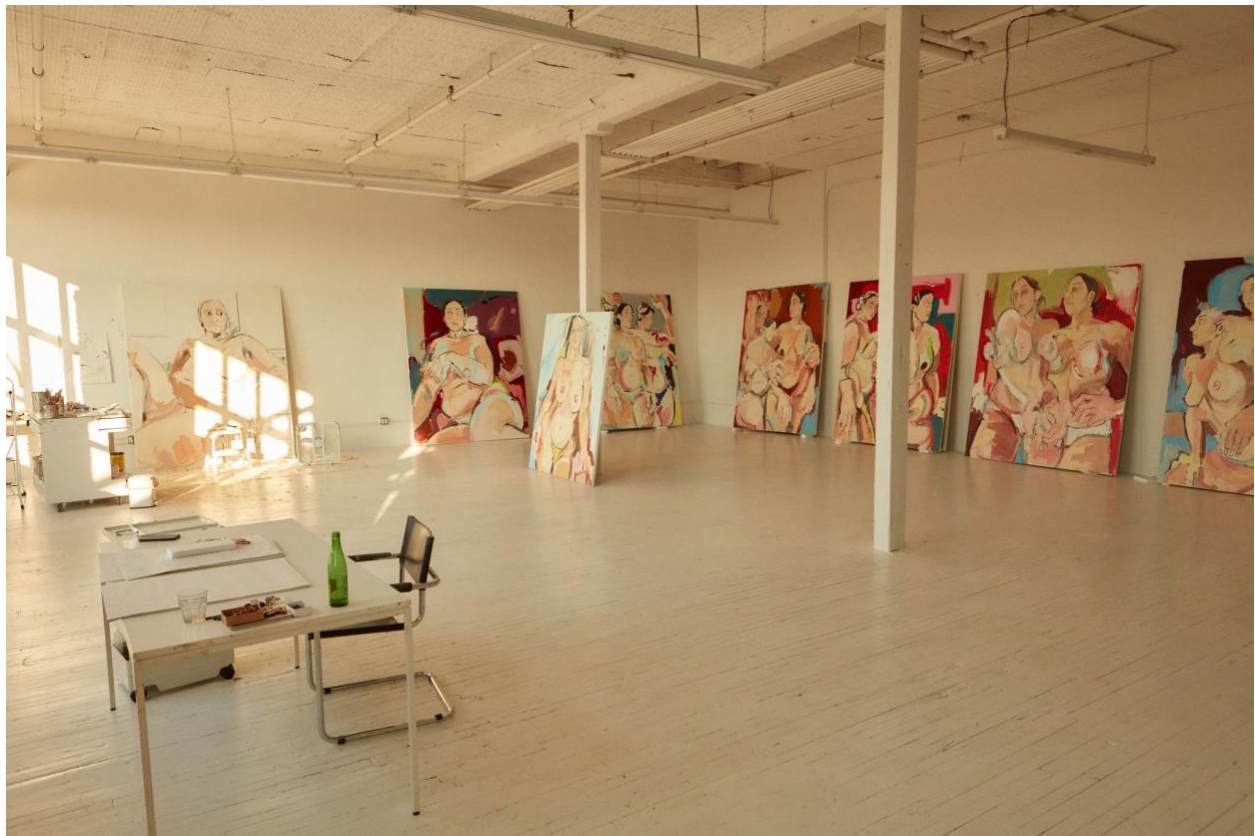
**I can see you like living in white spaces. Why do you think that is?**

I feel I have the chance to build up a space that is comfortable for me, because I live by myself. It gives me peace. I don't like too much decoration. When it comes to work, I always

tidy up and paint everything white. I do have a couple of friends' artworks on the wall, but I keep it very simple still. Everything is either white or black. I have a few USM cabinets to keep everything inside so that I don't have anything out. Some artists like to be surrounded by their own stuff, books and things on the floor, but I don't.

**Do you pay attention to fashion designers and new collections?**

I love personality, and I love people. So if I see how you wear certain stuff, I will be interested in that. I'm not that fond of buying the latest thing. I'm more into building up your identity.



**What are you reading right now?**

Yesterday I got a book about Spanish poems. I like reading poetry because it brings symbols into your head that you can translate into paintings. I like biographies and I'm reading an essay about Picasso's retrospective. And one of the books I read recently that I love is a compilation of interviews with Francis Bacon by David Sylvester. I love Francis Bacon—he was a mad man. Those are the books I have on the table that I keep revisiting. I highlight things.

### **How often does writing inspire or inform your pieces?**

Not that often. Sometimes you listen to music and there's a verse or a word that you like, then you put it into the painting and it works really well, or it gives you an idea to start developing a different sketch or a different drawing. It's very organic. I paint every day, so I don't really sit down and think, 'I want to paint about this'. Everything I do is translated later in the studio. I might have a conversation with you today, see your earrings or your haircut, and then I'll put it in the painting.



Photography by Cristina BanBan



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### **2022 was a huge year for you. Does this kind of success ever feel scary? Does it add pressure to the work?**

For me, it's just a matter of making good paintings. If I have to say no to something, I say no. I'm excited for the opportunities. Having a solo show in Paris was great. The show with Skarstedt was also very interesting and challenging at the same time. When I have a challenge

like that, I push myself in the studio, and then something else comes out of it, something newer or more exciting or more mature.

**What time do you wake up and start painting every day?**

I try to have a routine, so I can destroy the routine. I enjoy mornings, so I try to wake up around 8am and have my breakfast. I love breakfast, sometimes I have it for dinner, too. I never skip meals. I exercise, then I go to the studio around 11am and work until about 8pm. If I only work until 12pm, then the next day I go later. I don't like my days to be the same. I'm trying to read more, and to find more time in the studio to just sit down and look at my paintings.



**What's the most important object in your studio?**

My painting table, that's number one. It was custom-made by a Spanish friend of mine, and it's exactly how I wanted it. I wanted it to be all one unit with a glass table on top. I have different cabinets where I put my brushes, the cloths, and then to store my paints. Number two would be the sofa where you're sitting, because I have my siestas there after lunch. Usually around 3pm, around 20 minutes and then I'm back. I like to wake up twice. In the morning, I work hard, and then stop. After my siesta, it's like another little day, and I start working again.

### **How long does it take you to complete a painting?**

Sometimes I go faster, sometimes I go a little longer, it depends if I'm distracted or not. When I'm painting one figure, I make sure I finish in one sitting, and then the next day, I do something else. But every painting is different. For example with my latest show, I was making one painting a week. The drying process speeds up a lot because it gets so hot. Summer's here in Bushwick are hardcore. It's impossible even with air conditioning because I'm on the top floor. I end up painting half-naked.

