

Emma WEBSTER

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PHOTOGRAPHER • ARTHUR DELLOYE / STYLIST • MARIE CATTIAUX / HAIR & MAKEUP ARTIST • SALOI JEDDI / INTERVIEW • ELENA CESCON / THE SHOOTING TOOK PLACE AT PERROTIN PARIS, SHOWCASING EMMA WEBSTER'S "THE ENGINE OF BEASTS" EXHIBITION. SPECIAL THANKS TO VANESSA CLAIRET & PERROTIN TEAM

EMMA WEBSTER FULLY STYLED BY ACNE STUDIOS

THIS IS THE SECOND TIME WE'VE HAD THE CHANCE TO SIT DOWN WITH THE INCREDIBLY TALENTED AMERICAN ARTIST EMMA WEBSTER, AND, JUST LIKE LAST TIME, WE'RE WALKING AWAY WITH EVEN MORE CURIOSITY AND QUESTIONS ABOUT HER FASCINATING CREATIVE PROCESS. EMMA IS TALENTED, REVOLUTIONARY, AND FUNNY—THREE INGREDIENTS THAT, WHEN MIXED TOGETHER, MAKE FOR A PRETTY UNBEATABLE RECIPE FOR SUCCESS.



EMMA'S PROCESS IS SOMETHING ELSE. SHE USES 3D MODELING AND VIRTUAL REALITY TO BUILD DIGITAL LANDSCAPES, WHICH SHE THEN TRANSFORMS INTO OIL PAINTINGS. HER WORK FEELS BOTH MODERN AND NOSTALGIC, WITH CLEAR NODS TO ROMANTICISM, 19TH-CENTURY LANDSCAPE PAINTING, THEATER, AND TODAY'S DIGITAL AESTHETICS.

THIS MIX OF NEW TECHNOLOGY AND CLASSIC PAINTING TECHNIQUES HAS MADE EMMA WEBSTER STAND OUT AS A TRUE FORCE IN CONTEMPORARY ART—AND WE ARE HAPPY TO HAVE HAD THE CHANCE TO MEET HER NOT ONCE, BUT TWICE!

There's an intriguing tension in your work: attempting to reconnect with nature through virtual reality tools. Do you see this as a solution, or is it an illusion you play with?

No, I do not see virtual reality as a means of reconnecting with nature. Instead I'd like to create a different world, yes sourced from that around us, but that has evolved into something wholly unfamiliar. There is no substitute for nature.

In your practice, virtual reality seems like a tool for limitless creative freedom, but isn't it rather a framework that helps you tame the chaos of the real world and its stream of images ?

What a puzzling question! No, for me, this tech isn't a method of taming the complications of reality. Rather it's about expanding on things that one can't do in the real world. I don't see the way I use virtual reality as a distillation process. Instead it acts like a prompt or a provocation that forces me to question why things are the way they are.

Your work draws from a rich tapestry of influences: ancient painting techniques like Ingres trompe-l'œil, Dürer, Roman sculptures, and even megalithic structures like dolmens. To what extent do these elements resonate with your personal history, experience, or childhood?

We millennials were the first generation to grow up with the internet and a sense of globalization, and I see that predisposition for fusion in the work. I came of age in a world that had a rapid and frenetic collision of cultures, histories. Nothing in my works is deeply personal, save perhaps their disposition. They are a spiderweb of deeply associative elements.

You define your works as patchworks—what are you trying to mend by recombining all these things together?

Like poetry, they combine unlike objects, sentiments, spaces. It's not simply the unfamiliarity of the scenes rather it is these small incongruities that beg: "What's happening here? Where are we? Why do I feel a certain way?" Just like the innate hunch, the 'gut' feeling, I believe these paintings prioritise sensing over knowing.

Your art is devoid of the human figure. Are you trying to avoid your own species? And what role do you give to this "off-frame" humanity?

I want to avoid 'human time'. It's not to avoid human characteristics or issues of personification. When a person enters the scene, there is a default sense of lifespan, scale, action. The legibility takes off the viewer's pressure of understanding. I would like my scenes to be without human time; a place where it is impossible to decipher the before or after. There is only the present.

This is very interesting—it's like you're creating a parallel universe with its own course and its own rules, correct me if I'm wrong. At the same time, you remain deeply connected to humanity in your day-to-day life. Your next exhibition will take place in one of the most populated cities in the world: Hong Kong. Could you tell us more about this project, which will be held at Galerie Perrotin Hong Kong from March to May 2025? Are you currently working on new pieces specifically for this show?

Yes, my show opens in Hong Kong just before Art Basel at the end of March 2025. I will also have a concurrent exhibition with Petzel in New York (opens March 7). I am still developing the language around these two shows, and see them as foils for one another. As of now I plan to show panoramic work in NYC and more intimate pieces in HK. More on this soon!

The first time we met was in October 2024 in another major capital city, Paris. It was your first solo exhibition at Perrotin Paris, but I imagine this wasn't your first visit, nor your second, and certainly not your third either... As a French and Parisian magazine, we're curious: how would you describe the relationship between a Californian like yourself and the French capital? Wine by the glass or by the bottle?

In fact I studied here in Paris during my time at Stanford. I took classes at the Sorbonne, ISEP, and an art academy. When I think of Paris, I envision the carefully curated outdoor spaces, how over lifetimes, every view has been so considered and made beautiful. The Tuileries, the wonderful museums - it's such a visually rich city! And I love a picnic of cheese by the Seine, which definitely requires wine by the bottle :)

The landscapes and animals that inhabit your work often belong to the realm of temperate forests from the northern hemisphere, the kind we find in children's fairy tales. Are you trying to tell us a story?

Perhaps, but I'm not interested in illustrating a plot. Recently I've been curious about children's stories (Velveteen Rabbit, Pinocchio, Golem) wherein an inanimate object is infused with spirit and comes alive. That transformation from still life (object) to portraiture (character with agency) is a matter of sentience, and one of our time.

You are always on the edge of pure surrealism. What connection do you have with this movement?

My work relates to surrealism in the sense that it conjures the unrelated, unexpected, but unlike surrealism, there is a precision to my depicted spaces. Dream logic requires a haziness and ambiguity. It is challenging to find any precision in a dream. My paintings have such a precise sense of light and space, though there is ambiguity to the symbols.

One last question that could seriously influence our playlist: if your paintings had a soundtrack, what would it be? Any songs you'd like to share with us?

The paintings' soundtrack is probably a forest bathing recording on YouTube. As for music, hard to say, perhaps Bjork's "Army of Me" or "All is Full of Love" for her sense of spatial sci-fi and morphology. I love Emma Ruth Rundle too, for her raw, haunting simplicity.



EVENT, 2023
Oil on linen
152,4 x 213,4 x 2,5 cm

Photographer • Tanguy Beurdeley
Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin

“ MY WORK RELATES TO SURREALISM IN THE SENSE THAT IT CONJURES THE UNRELATED, UNEXPECTED, BUT UNLIKE SURREALISM, THERE IS A PRECISION TO MY DEPICTED SPACES. ”



GREAT TURF (GASPAR), 2023
Oil on linen
152,4 x 213,4 x 3,8 cm

WILY DRAWING, 2024
Oil on linen
27,9 x 35,6 cm

GREAT POET, 2024
Oil on linen
304,8 x 213,4 x 3,8 cm

