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Interview | Elise Ansel: yes I said Yes at Cadogan Contemporary

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by Eric Block



Portrait of Elise Ansel. Photo: Winky Lewis

As arguably the biggest week in the London art-world calendar sets in, there is a striking exhibition on display at Cadogan Contemporary in which the acclaimed American artist Elise Ansel reclaims female identity from the old master paintings.’

Entitled *yes I said Yes*, this major solo exhibition of new paintings acts not as a critique of the old masters, but rather a use of their depth and resonance to shine a light on disparities existent today; translating them into a contemporary pictorial language through the lens of feminine subjectivity.



Elise Ansel, 'Europa Consensual', 2019, oil on linen, Courtesy Cadogan Contemporary

Comprised of over fifteen paintings, the exhibition includes responses to masterpieces by artists such as Titian, Rubens and Delacroix transforming scenes of violence against women into images of consensual pleasure.

At face value, Ansel's work is not overtly political or feminist but by applying her contemporary female perspective to centuries-old male works of art, Ansel addresses art history's hegemonic, and often misogynistic, narrative, as well as the continued gender inequality in our society.

It is the balance between social statement and painterly process that gives Ansel's work its compelling combination of depth and accessibility. Her political message may be strong, but it never overshadows the sheer beauty of her paintings, which act as a dialogue not only between artist and viewer, but also artist and artist.

On the eve of *yes I said Yes*, I caught up with the artist to discuss in detail her practice, as well as the upcoming exhibition. Read the full interview below.

Eric Block: The title of your upcoming exhibition, *yes I said Yes*, is carved from the last line of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, specifically Molly Bloom's infamous soliloquy, what do these words mean to you?

Elise Ansel: These words are unequivocally positive; they embrace life. At the same time, they signal the presence not only of a subjective feminine voice or point of view but also of a necessary stylistic shift, the creation of a new and different type or use of language with which to communicate that point of view.

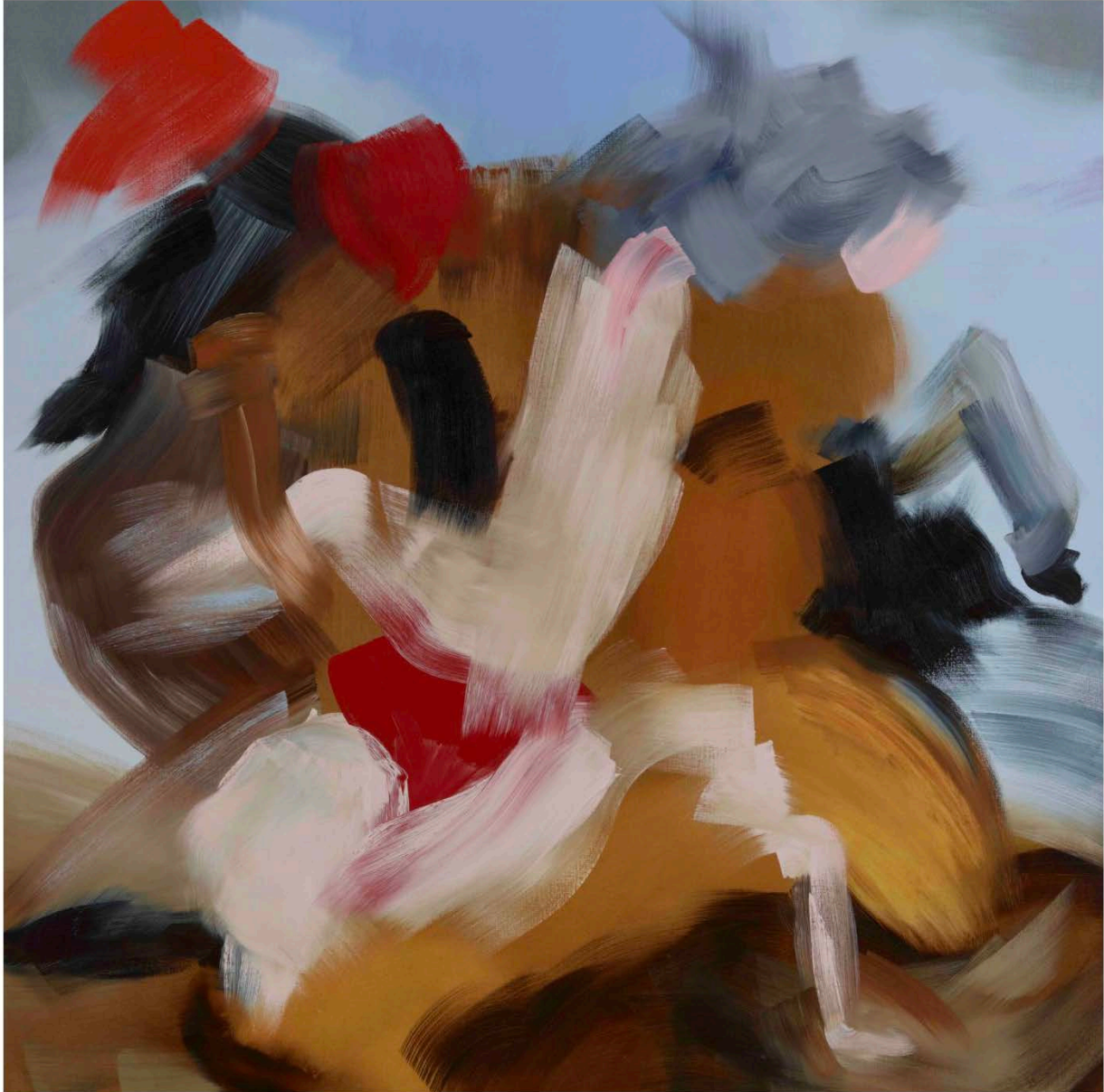
Joyce's *Ulysses* was the novel that first inspired my project of translating classical works into contemporary language; slicing and rearranging words from this text manifests transformative energy, the sparagmos, the tearing apart, weaving, unraveling, and re-weaving is the heart of my activity. Selecting words from the final Molly Bloom/Penelope chapter, a chapter that gives voice to the novel's most conspicuously silent character, echoes and re-enforces the idea of rendering subjectivity in the feminine in order to reclaim female agency, and give voice to the silent and the silenced.

What work can we expect to see on the opening night, and what do you hope audiences will take from your work?

You'll see large scale paintings that spring from works by a diverse range of old master painters; including Titian, Rembrandt, Vermeer, Rubens, Tiepolo, Boucher, and Delacroix. My intention is not only to make original work while deepening my own appreciation of old master paintings, but also to bring historical paintings into focus for other people, to enliven and reinvent them in the context of contemporary life and culture. My hope is that audiences will both find my paintings energizing and gain a deeper understanding of the unfolding meanings behind the masterworks from which my paintings spring.

Can you say more about the lens of feminine subjectivity and how you respond to these masterpieces by artists such as Titian, Rubens, and Delacroix?

The paintings of these artists are deep, rich, evocative and beautiful. Timeless. Brilliant. However, they are also definitely painted from a male point of view. At one point, I realized that artists whose talents I respected were representing women in either an idealized way or a sexually objectified way. In some paintings, the sexual objectification moves into outright violence, images of rape and murder, as in *The Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus* by Rubens, Titian's *Tarquin and Lucretia*, and Delacroix's *The Death of Sardanapalus*.

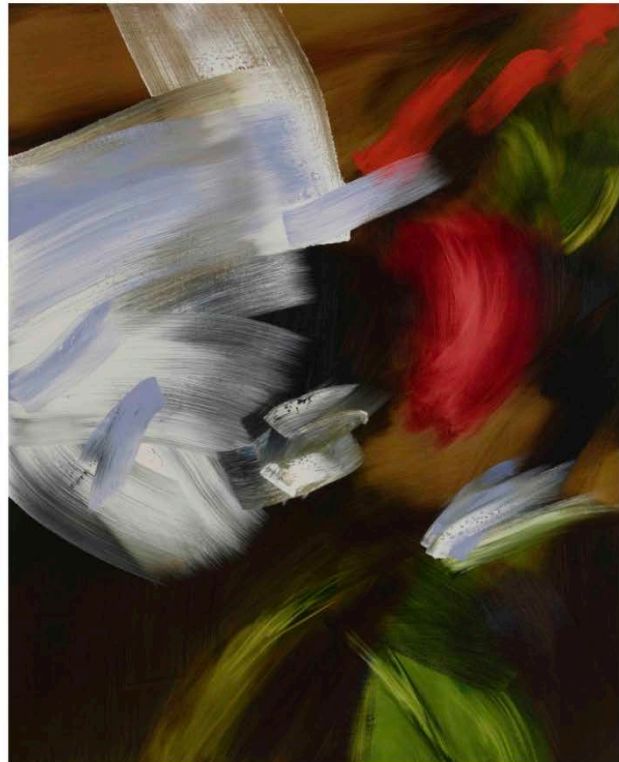


Elise Ansel, 'Dioscuri Consensual', 2019, oil on linen, Courtesy Cadogan Contemporary

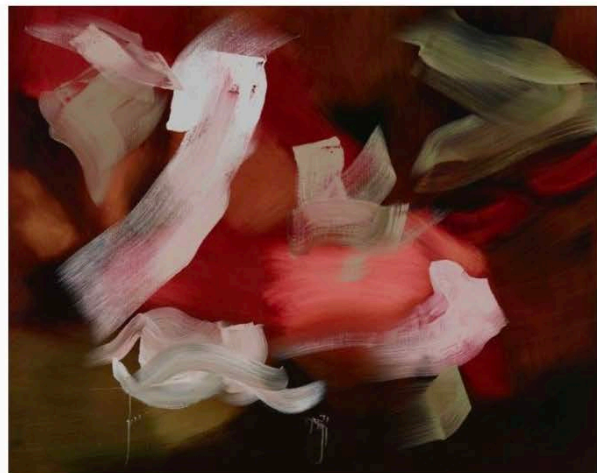
These paintings are, in effect, advertisements for violence against women. Advertising pairs something desirable with the idea or product the advertiser is trying to sell. From my perspective, the thing that is desirable is the undeniable beauty of the old masters painting, its depth and resonance, the brilliant way these paintings are constructed. My work reclaims and delights in the positive aspects of the work, while recasting the negative messages it was used to convey.

Old master painters used mythological content to explore eroticism. My attack is on sexism, not on sex. My intent is to reclaim the erotic energy and discard the violent coercion by transforming scenes of eroticized violence against women into images of consensual pleasure.

In my transcriptions of Titian's *Tarquin and Lucretia*, and Delacroix's *The Death of Sardanapalus*, I turn the source paintings upside down in order to overturn the narrative. I flip the orientation and use abstraction to interrupt a destructive narrative, and transform it into a revel of color, movement, and asymmetrical balance, building on what's already there to create something new. While all of my works involve interpreting old master paintings through the lens of gestural abstraction, my painting *Sardanapalus Meets Pink Angels* interprets Delacroix's painting through the lens of a specific



Titian, *Tarquin and Lucretia*, 1571, oil on canvas (left) & Elise Ansel, *'Lucretia III'*, 2019, oil on linen, Courtesy Cadogan Contemporary (right)



Eugène Delacroix, *Death of Sardanapalus*, 1826, oil on canvas (left) & Elise Ansel, *'Pink Angels for Delacroix'*, 2019, oil on linen (right)

piece of work by de Kooning: *Pink Angels*, c.1945. This painting contributes to the spiral dialogue my work engages in like the large figure on the lower right is itself a quotation from Titian's *Diana and Actaeon*. Like many of De Kooning's paintings, *Pink Angels* is a work in which women's bodies are literally chopped to pieces. My painting celebrates the undeniable beauty of De Kooning's paint handling while defusing and transforming the violence it celebrates. I do this by means of basic darkroom technology, negative/negative interaction, using a negative of a negative to create a positive. A de Kooning of a Delacroix to create a positive image of consensual pleasure.

Your paintings are not a critique of old master paintings, but arguably pay homage to them whilst reconfiguring their content. How do you perceive this dialogue between artist and artist?

The old masters have become my unlikely allies in shining a light on gender imbalances that afflict civilization today and indeed that threaten the environment and continued existence on the planet. I didn't set out to become a feminist artist. I set out to be a visual artist and I ran into roadblocks. I realized these were related to the way women were being depicted in many of the canonical artworks I was looking at as well as in television, commercial cinema, and print media. The veil of misogyny in the art world, academia, and popular culture is subtle, invisible, pervasive and nebulous. As such, it is impossible to pierce. By contrast, old master images are stationary, definite objects. They hold still long enough to be transformed.

The artist to artist dialogue, however, is deeper and more mysterious than this. Some people say there is an unconscious dialogue between all artists living and dead. My own experience is that the old masters are a friendly presence in the studio, artists and mentors with whom I am united in a common love of the craft of painting, an unending source of inspiration, standards, and knowledge.

Could you share with us some further details regarding your recent 2019 painting named *Europa Consensual (Boucher) II*?

My painting is a transcription of Boucher's *Rape of Europa*, 1747, which is, itself, in conversation with Titian's *Rape of Europa*, c. 1560 – 1562. A remarkable intermediary link in the chain of transcription is Boucher's *Triumph of Venus*, 1740, which is extraordinary in that it quotes the form of Titian's *Rape*, while radically transforming its content. Titian's painting is about rape. In his painting, the strength of the male aggressor is re-enforced by the agency of the male painter. Boucher's *Triumph of Venus*, which bears significant visual and compositional similarity to Titian's *Rape*, by contrast, celebrates feminine erotic pleasure. This is an astonishing conceptual leap. It is, in fact, the heart of my project, foreshadowed in an image created two hundred and seventy-nine years ago by François Boucher. My recent painting *Europa Consensual (Boucher) II* springs from Boucher's *Rape of Europa*, 1747, which shares the title of Titian's

painting but builds on the ideas on display in *The Triumph of Venus*. My painting is an homage to Boucher's conceptual leap and the idea of radical transformation.



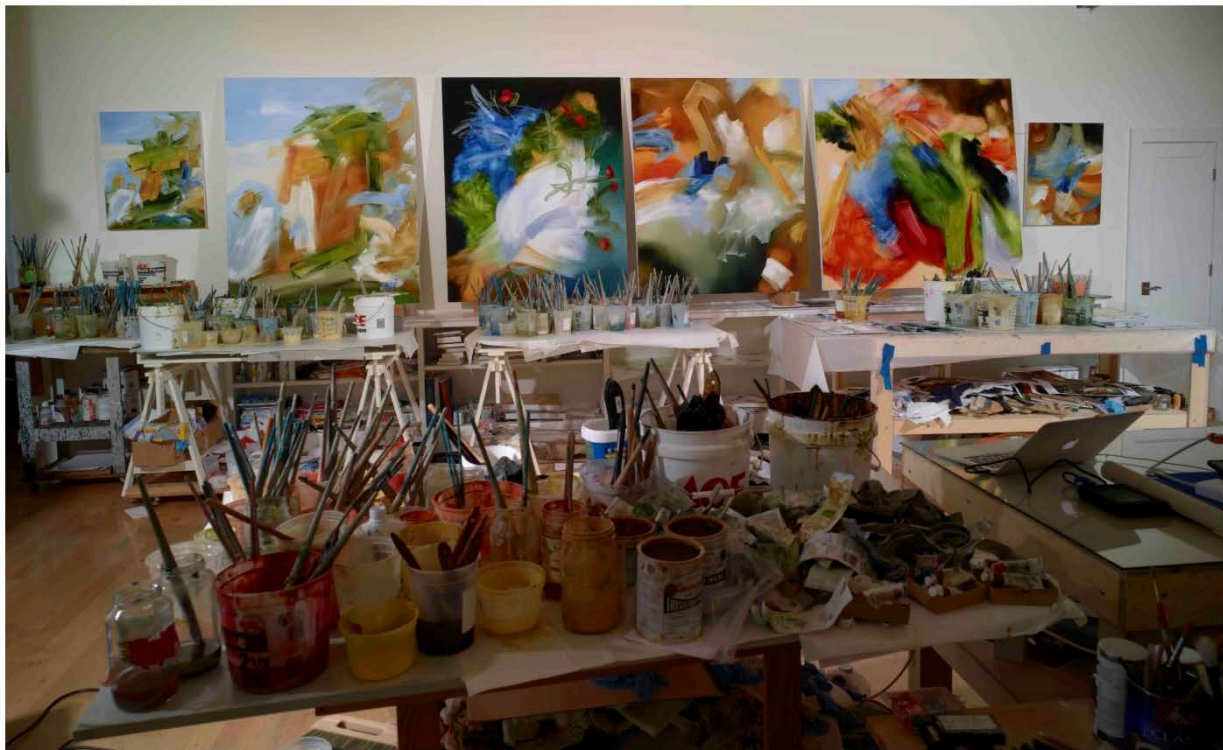
Elise Ansel 'Europa Consensual (Boucher) II', 2019, oil on linen, Courtesy Cadogan Contemporary

What opportunities does the medium of paint provide and what does abstraction allow you to do?

The medium of paint is nonverbal. It allows me to subvert a novelistic tradition of story, told from a male point of view which presents itself as uniquely objective and omniscient. Abstraction allows me to interrupt this masculinity of narrative structure and transform into a sensually capacious non-narrative form of visual communication that embraces multiple points of view. The sheer joy of palimpsesting the originals, of interrupting art history and replacing it with raw expressive power makes a case for painting itself, and for the life-affirming intelligence of supporting difference, of allowing other voices into the conversation and the canon.

What is a typical day (or night) in the studio like for you?

I am a morning person. I like to get up early, go to the studio and start working. In general, I begin with a series of small, improvisational oil studies. Employing Renaissance methods and a grid, I translate these into large-scale paintings. The large paintings embrace the choreography of the small works with an increased emphasis on color and gestural expression. Spontaneity, instinct and intuition eclipse rational, linear thinking during the process of making the small paintings. The large paintings, however, are more considered. Like Franz Kline's enlargements of phonebook sketches, they are the result of forethought and planning. I like to work the entire surface of the large paintings wet-on-wet in one long session. The process of transcription and enlargement involves exploring the balance between abandon and constraint, intuition and intellect, accident and design.



Artist Studio – Elise Ansel, Courtesy Cadogan Contemporary

Can you name any artists you, lately or generally, take inspiration from?

Contemporary artists who inspire me include; Marilyn Lenkowsky, Kara Walker, John Hilliard, Martin Puryear, Wagenchi Mutu, Albert Oehlen, Joan Mitchell, Carrie Mae Weems, Sigmar Polke, Cindy Sherman, Ida Ekblad, Julie Mehretu, Nina Kluth, Stanley Whitney, David Salle, Charlene von Heyl, Howard Hodgkins, Per Kirkeby, and of course, Frank Auerbach and Gerhard Richter.

In 1995, Colin Wiggins curated *Working After the Masters*, an exhibition of Frank Auerbach's transcriptions of old master paintings at the National Gallery of Art. This exhibition, in conjunction with a series of transcriptions Gerhard Richter made in 1973 of Titian's *Annunciation* in the Scuola Grande di San Rocca in Venice, helped me see that translations of old master paintings could be the subject of serious contemporary painting. Further, the work of Auerbach and Richter helped me connect the dots between what Joyce had achieved in *Ulysses* and what can be accomplished in visual art. My unique and admittedly hybrid contribution is to bring Joyce's idea of rendering subjectivity in the feminine to bear on the history of painting.

Interview by Eric Block.

yes I said Yes is showing at [Cadogan Contemporary](#) from 01 October – 18 October 2019, Monday – Friday 10am to 6pm and Saturdays 11am to 6pm.