

HOW I PAINT

ELISE ANSEL

By striking up a conversation with the Old Mistresses of art history, this American oil painter has brought their stories to life via her fresh and abstracted style



Elise Ansel was born in New York City in 1961. She studied a BA at Rhode Island's Brown University, where she later returned as a visiting artist and lecturer. An MFA in Visual Art followed at Southern Methodist University in Texas. Her paintings are an attempt to translate Old Masters into contemporary artistic language, and she has been exhibiting them in the UK and US for more than 35 years. Elise currently lives in Portland, Maine, www.eliseansel.com

TALKING WITH ARTISTS

Your work has been focused on translating Old Master paintings into modern pictorial language, so I'm guessing that *Flowers in a Glass Vase I* is based upon a particular painting, is that right? If so, could you tell us what that painting is, why you chose it, and what your ambitions were in translating the particular painting?

Flowers in a Glass Vase I springs from Rachel Ruysch's 1704 painting *Flowers in a Glass Vase*, which is in the Detroit

Institute of Arts Museum (DIA) collection. In 2019, gallerist David Klein saw my work and asked if I would create an exhibition in "conversation" with masterpieces at the DIA. I was inspired by many of the paintings in the collection, but the encounter with two works by female Old Masters (or "Old Mistresses" as they were famously called by Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker), Ruysch's *Flowers in a Glass Vase* and Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith and her Maidservant*, proved transformative. I was energised by the opportunity to align the particular painting?n myself with female artists from another time, another place; to draw strength and inspiration from their accomplishments, and to extend what they had begun.

Ruysch's *Flowers in a Glass Vase* was crawling with details I wanted to paint. The richness of its voluptuous floral forms and the teeming insect life within the painting are evocative and open to interpretation. They are

TOP *Sardanapalus Meets Pink Angels*, oil on linen, 122x152cm

a celebration of both feminine energy and nature; a visual articulation of Sir David Attenborough's idea that "the natural world is... the greatest source of so much in life that makes life worth living."

For the first time I began to make collages, hybridising sections of my own previous transcriptions with details of my paintings of the Ruysch. I was excavating details within details; cropping, cutting and pasting; zooming in, pinching out; allowing the visual density of the source to reveal itself on deeper scrutiny.

Flowers in a Glass Vase I was my attempt to get at the truth at the heart of Ruysch's painting. The idea of the profligate generosity of nature, fecund and fertile, swarming with life and death. Simultaneously a celebration of biodiversity and a harbinger of decay. >



Rachel Ruysch's father, Frederik Ruysch, was a professor with a vast collection of insect and botanical specimens to which his daughter had full access. His botanical and entomological work enabled her to create impossible fictions. She juxtaposed images of flowers in full bloom that, in reality, do not bloom at the same time. In her paintings, colourful insects, many of which are now extinct, act as agents of cross pollination while devouring the growth they helped create. Ruysch's paintings depict the gluttony of the Golden Age as the catalyst of its own demise. This has a connection to the current pandemic: the idea that havoc is wrought by unintended consequences of the accelerating growth of human populations.

TOP *Uffizi Judith I*, oil on linen, 76x61cmLEFT *Cloud II*, oil on linen, 152x122cm

MULTIPLE VERSIONS

Further to this, you've clearly made more than one painting based upon this single Old Master painting. Had you always planned to do multiple versions? And what were you trying to achieve in each one?

I usually begin my interpretation of an Old Master painting with a series of small improvisational oil studies. The small studies are pared down responses, painted rapidly as a way of obscuring representational content, distilling colour and composition, and rehearsing gesture and palette. I use the small studies as points of departure for larger works, allowing the constant discovery of one state to give rise to another. The large paintings embrace the choreography of the small works with an increased emphasis on colour and gestural expression.

The multiple versions result from the fact that I am never fully satisfied with my paintings, and so I want to try again and again. Each time I work from a source I learn something that I then use in the next painting. I cross back and forth over the border between abstraction and figuration, searching for things that are fresh and unexpected. My goal is to step away from the Old Master painting and create an original work of my own that can stand alone while at the same time remain in some way rooted in or reflective of the source. I consider each piece in the series both a valid work in its own right and a potential source for future paintings.

I like the idea that there is no "right" answer, no one way to do things, no one perspective or approach that is "correct" that obviates all other attempts and points of view.

MATERIAL CONCERNS

Are you interested at all in mimicking Old Master techniques or are your paintings very much modern takes on them in that respect?

In general, I don't mix anything into my paint, though when I'm finishing a work, I sometimes add a bit of linseed oil to the paint used in the final layers to maintain the fat over lean balance. I think real confidence is something every artist struggles to achieve. Hauser & Wirth recently aired a terrific documentary about Philip Guston in which he speaks about the transition from his mid-career refined abstractions to the more controversial figurative late work. Guston referred to "some mysterious process at work that I don't even want to understand". I think the more an artist can give oneself over to that process, the more confident one can become.

Confidence also comes from the ideas behind the work and from the thrill of finding new sources in art, in nature and in oneself. My work deals with intersectional feminism and is a concrete manifestation of my effort to give prominence to voices and points of view excluded from the canon.

I feel very confident in my assertion that the white male point of view, or "way of seeing" as John Berger put it, which has for so long been dominant in the world of visual art – in terms of academia, amount of successful practitioners, assessments of quality, structural analysis, and museum and gallery representation – is not the only valid point of view. This is what gives my



brushstrokes confidence, energy and power. My work challenges monocular thinking. Inscribing my perspective in the space of the Old Masters signals the presence of voices excluded from the canon. Old Master paintings were, for the most part, created by white men for white men. I search for exceptions to that rule. Further, I use abstraction to interrupt a one-sided narrative and transform it into a sensually capacious, non-narrative form of visual communication that embraces multiple points of view. The goal is inclusivity. To be clear, I'm not trying to destroy the past but to build on it, to reconstitute what's problematic and to celebrate what's beautiful, to radically reinvent historical art through my own perspective, in my own language, for my own time. My collages and paintings are not critiques of the Old Masters but rather a vehicle for shining a light on imbalances existent today. In this, the Old Mistresses are my powerful allies.

On a technical level, the large visible brushstrokes are created by dragging a large loaded brush through wet paint. I bought some oversized Vulkanisiert bristle brushes

at Atlantis Art in London that I like a lot. I also like the large bristle brushes made by Omega and Da Vinci. I am interested in examining the material characteristics specific to oil paint. This, in combination with a kinesthetic sense of touch developed over a lifetime of painting, informs my ability to gauge the pressure necessary to create the visible brushstrokes.

CREATING IN QUARANTINE
2020 has been a difficult year for many. Given your work relies a lot on things like improvisation, gesture and intuition, I wondered if outside influences ever make it harder to work in this way?

Outside influences can make it hard to work, but also can fuel or inform the work and become part of it. At the beginning of the pandemic, everyone in my family was home, working, social distancing, taking classes online. I was concerned about the difficult things going on in the world and I had less time to paint. I kept working but my pace slowed, and I scaled down. Rather than making large scale oil-on-linen paintings, as I was doing before the pandemic.

I focused on creating a new series of small oil studies on paper – one of which, *Incandescent II*, became the seed for *Flowers in a Glass Vase I*.

Created under quarantine during the first months of the pandemic, this series not only references Dutch Golden Age floral still life painting but also alludes to Edouard Manet's *Last Flowers* and Jean Fautrier's *Hostages (Les Otages)*.

TOP *Incandescent II*, oil on paper, 46x35cm

TOP RIGHT *Yes II*, oil on linen, 101x152cm



On a technical level, the large visible brushstrokes are created by dragging a large loaded brush through wet paint

Both artists worked in isolation. Manet painted the last flowers in the early 1880s while dying of syphilis, each painting a response to a bouquet sent by a friend, a gift reciprocated, a glimmer of hope. Fautrier's isolation was caused by the Second World War. Comprising anonymous, featureless heads and abstracted floating torsos, Fautrier's *Hostages* were described by André Malraux as "the most beautiful monument to the dead of the Second World War".

In the 1990s I took a class in French academic portrait painting. I've repurposed techniques I learned in that class to contemporary ends and I've improvised on them. My work is a hybrid of the traditional and the contemporary. You could say I'm interpreting Old Master techniques through the lens of Abstract Expressionism, which is, in a sense, now, also an Old Master technique.