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Ilene Sova

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A Talk with the Artist

The gaze from a painting often captivates people. Books have been devoted to the Mona Lisa's playful and observant eyes. We often want to avoid the eyes from a portrait that seem to follow us around the room. Some faces stare or smile at us so that we wish to know more about the people behind all of that paint—the artist and model(s). We want to hear their stories.

Canadian painter Ilene Sova focuses on portraiture of women as well as expressing a shared female experience. On her [website](#), she says that women are often censored by their cultures and society, afraid to tell their own life challenges and joys. As her [Artist Statement](#) says, Sova's work has evolved from "telling the untold negative stories of the female experience" to including "a stronger, more confrontational protagonist."

Sova also expresses the limitations concerning women as fine artists. She writes in an e-mail, "I often find when we speak about our careers the impression is always of lesser or 'the other' or 'the exception' in terms of how we are viewed (ie. when [I] meet someone new and...say, 'I am a painter.' People will often respond with 'oh how much money do you make painting houses?' It doesn't occur to them that I could be a fine artist—it is reduced always to the lesser position."

The limiting inferences, often made by people about women artists, guide Sova to express the social constrictions within her paintings of women. On her [website](#), we find that women are "at a high disadvantage in the art world" with "only 1 in 10 female artists... actually...becom(ing) a professional artist" and "only 10% of the art in modern sections

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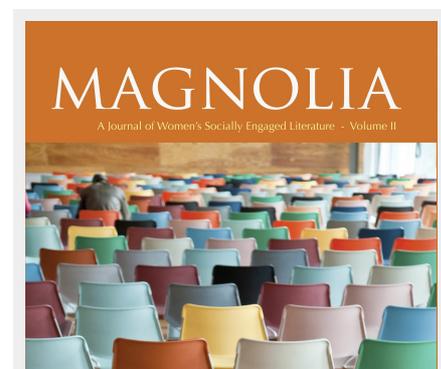
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of museums... (being created) by women.”

Sova paints multiple works in order to create a series. Usually, the series has a common theme with different women models for each painting. In her new Untitled series, Sova’s models capture the viewer. The direct and intimate gaze captured in most of the paintings allows the viewer to interact with the subjects in the paintings. It’s as though you are passing by one of the women on a cold and windy street or you are sharing an intimate conversation with another woman or turning to receive a fleeting, goodbye glance. The paintings bring us into a personal space with each woman. Sova projected a psychological mood into each painting. Not only do the expressions on the faces of the women conjure a change in attitude, but the highlighting colors of Sova’s palette effect the model and the viewer of the paintings. “Katherine” seems to communicate a sad innocence. “Emily” gives us an uncertain but curious side-ways question, while “Lola” shares a smile of confidence and determination.

As compared to Sova’s previous series, the women’s faces in the new work are physically closer. Like the women in her previous paintings, these women stare into the eyes of the beholder. The new women are also larger than her previous work (the paintings measure 36×36 centimeters), a scale that she intentionally sought as an expression of her ideas. It was so important to this series that when I failed to discuss it in our phone interview, Sova wrote to me about it later:

“I have always been thinking a lot about women and their relationship to the size of their body and the idea that there is so much pressure for women to be smaller (loose weight etc) in popular culture. This essentially equates to taking up LESS SPACE. And in terms of how this could work on a psychological level—always wanting to be smaller and not take up too much space in a room or in relationship to other people.

“The second thing is that women are often being ‘reduced to the smallest denominator’ in how they are treated in language and culture in general (eg. A kitchenette has the feminine ‘ette’ attached to it because it is smaller and less, in turn less important and useful than it’s opposite word ‘kitchen’....So—having said all that...the scale is to make women more important, take up more space, be larger than life, become giants, be monumental, and in doing so increase their importance in a culture that is constantly trying to make them smaller.”

In her earliest work, “epic series” (1996-2000), the models are placed within a dark, domestic setting that seems to close in around them. The two following series question identity and appearance by utilizing symbols of pop culture. In “Blue Wig Series” (2000) and “Tiara Series” (2001), the women in the portraits face the camera wearing either a blue wig or a tiara. The position of the models against a flat, solid color background is reminiscent of mug shots and/or passport photos.

Sova says about this “deliberate choice” that she was affected by Barbara Kruger’s image “No Progress in Pleasure”, which includes the text “Your gaze hits the side of my face.” Sova points out that women in art history are painted from the male gaze. “It’s usually that the women are not looking at the viewer,” she says during our phone interview. “They are turned away. I made a very deliberate choice for my women to be looking directly at you and to be confrontational.”

The series “Engaged in Transit” (2001-2004) shows a series of women each in front of a different Toronto subway stop (the name of the stop is behind them). This series, as well as “Berlin Series” (2006), focuses on women in particular places, even if Sova doesn’t include scenes from that place. The women represent an urban space. The “Berlin Series” demonstrates Sova’s desire to communicate the strength of women in their environments. On the website, she writes that these women “who had grown up (until adolescence) in a divided country...had amazing confidence and eloquence in vocalizing their views” (concerning “German feminism, racism, and the immigration policies in Europe.”) She continues to communicate strength in her new series; however, the changes in her painting techniques are evident.

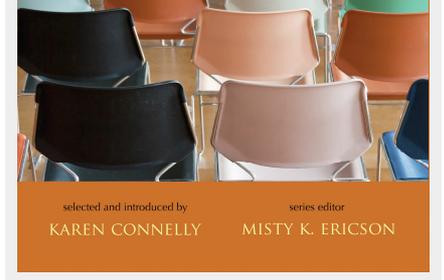
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During my phone conversation with Ilene Sova, I learned that she painted the new series of 9 paintings within a prolific two weeks. She said, “I’ve been obsessed. I’ve been waking up at 7 a.m. and waking up in the middle of the night, thinking about brush strokes.”

On the invitation to her Salon Show, during which she unveiled the new series, Sova named the Salon Show: “1875-2008 Salon Show Inside My Studio—A Record of a Crisis and Its Solution.” I wondered about her crisis and discovered that it concerned brush strokes, a John Singer Sargent-inspired palette, and other technical elements of portrait painting that didn’t allow for a lot of sleep. When asked about the crisis, Sova said, “For years, I have been painting portraits like you saw on my website. This is a lot about technique, not so much about content...I would always have an interesting idea, but I didn’t feel like the paint was painted interestingly, so I wanted a balance between interests. So that when you look at my work, you might get excited about the concept, but also I wanted people to be excited by the aesthetics of the paint and also for me to be more present in the work. The action of painting to be more present. When you look at it, maybe I’m also there in the image. So, you see a gestural brush stroke...and you imagine me making that brush stroke. In the summer, I was painting...and I was trying to make things more gestural and more dynamic, but the face was falling apart—it wasn’t holding together.

“I had this show about identity and had dressed my roommate up in all these different urban, female identities, so there was a business woman, hippie, fashionista, hipster, and I had painted her in all of these costumes, so it was like an installation...talking about how inside one woman there’s all different types of personalities and yet we are peg holed into one or the other. And I had this show at this very prominent gallery with these works. When I was at the show, I, all of the sudden, hated my paintings, so I had this crisis. I didn’t like the way that the faces were painted or the flesh was painted. I was very upset. I thought, well I can either just stop painting...or I can find a solution to the problem. I was thinking a lot about art history and training and I thought, maybe I need to go backwards in order to go forward. I was searching out a classic portrait painter...The solution was that I had to go back in time to learn this old method of painting in order to go forward.” She chose to go backwards under the tutelage of John Singer Sargent in order to master her methods.

Since we were discussing technical elements, I wondered about the significance of the flat, solid-colored backgrounds in Sova’s paintings. She said, “In terms of the history of my work, you’ll see that the first time I did those backgrounds was with the blue wig paintings, and this was a huge change between those dramatic, dark,



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psychological interiors ["epic series"]... I'm a very contemporary person and love pop culture and pop art and graphic images. As I was growing up—I was looking at my old sketchbooks as a child—I was always drawing women, even from when I was five years old, drawing women...and I was always looking at fashion magazines to draw the figure cause I didn't really have anything else to look at....And I think that this [the solid backgrounds in the paintings] comes from advertising and fashion editorials. It's very basic in the background and references pop culture in contemporary times....

"The most recent trend in image making from popular culture is to simplify everything. We are just getting bombarded by so much information all of the time that people have become poster blind. When you actually see an image that's simplified, it grabs your attention more than one that's over-labored or has too much information. I'm very drawn to that kind of imagery...very basic, very stark, high contrast, simple and to the point. And I think very critically about advertising. I do workshops with youth about how to break down advertising methods...."

For the new, Untitled series, the blank background seems to work differently for the viewer. Instead of simply being a plane for contrast, the backgrounds allow the viewer space to create a scene that accompanies each woman. Each painting communicates a story that the viewer imagines and sets into motion. While all of Sova's previous work communicates either psychological oppression and/or strength in confrontation and/or a unique expression in spite of mass production, the gazes from the women in the new, Untitled series appear more intimate and interactive.

-Shana Thornton

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Shana Thornton

Shana Thornton serves as Editor-in-Chief of Her Circle Ezine and Assistant Director of the Institute of Arts and Social Engagement. Her first novel, *Multiple Exposure*, reveals an intimate, ghostly portrait of the impact of war, and generations of military service, on a family. *Multiple Exposure* will be available for purchase on Sept. 2. Read more at <http://shanathornton.wordpress.com/>



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