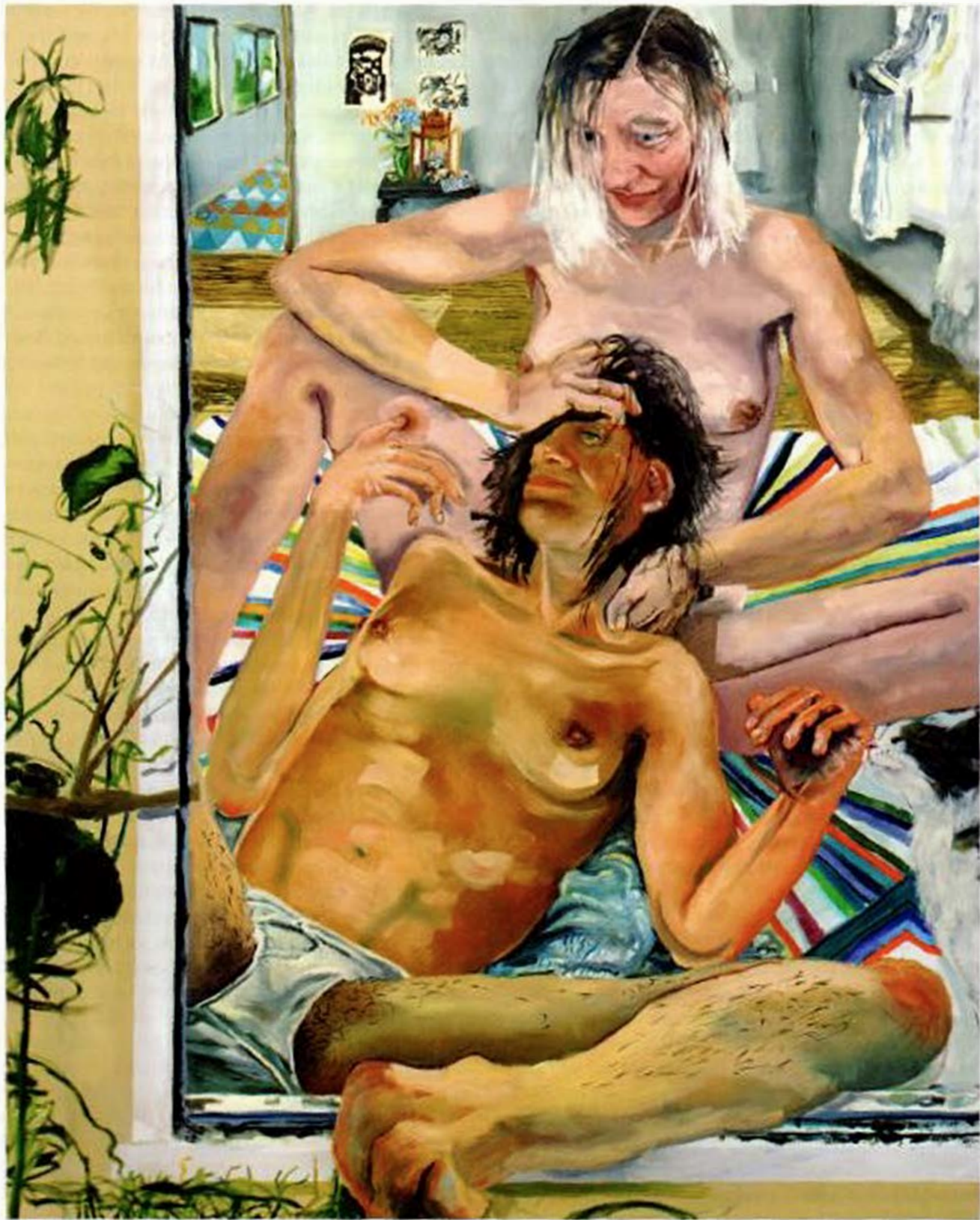


Celeste Dupuy-Spencer by Katherine Cooper



*Sara* 2017 oil on canvas 65 x 50 inches Images courtesy of the artist and Marlborough Contemporary, New York and London.

"I'm dating a committedly masochist painter," my friend Sarah told me about a year ago. "Her name is Celeste." The name and description piqued my interest and kept popping up—on the address line of the airmail letter Sarah asked me to drop in the post, on Eileen Myles's Instagram feed, halfway through Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, and eventually in my inbox inviting me to Celeste Dupuy-Spencer's most recent show, *Wild and Blue*, at Marlborough Contemporary this past fall. I had made a point to get to the Whitney Biennial to see her work there, but I wanted more.

Walking through her exhibition, I was struck by how these paintings could have been located anywhere—museums, basements, houses, junkyards. Their figuration made me believe I would understand what I was looking at, but as I spent more time with them, I began to see that this apparent accessibility was only a gateway to their thematic complexity. The hand that painted them was highly skilled and unrelenting. When I encounter works by artists of such talent and vision, I always hope they have answers for me, but more pressingly, I hope we're asking the same questions.

Dupuy-Spencer's *Wild and Blue* felt defiantly messy and raw, just like our current political—and physical—climate, yet she acts as an assertive guide through our brutal contemporary landscape. Her compositions are organized, her brushstrokes confident, while the depicted scenes are equal turns apocalyptic and quotidian, intimate and political, tender and harsh. I detect homages to Kerry James Marshall and Jacob Lawrence in her paintings, while ghosts of Egon Schiele and David Hockney haunt her drawings. As I walked through the gallery alone, uneasy, even distraught, I knew I wanted to talk to her.

—Katherine Cooper

**CELESTE DUPUY-SPENCER** I don't care about pronouns at all, but I don't use gendered nouns to describe myself.

**KATHERINE COOPER** Like woman or man?

**CDS** Yeah, or in family, it's like no daughter, sister, lesbian ... Jewess.

**KC** Shit. Jewess painter Celeste Dupuy-Spencer. There goes my headline.

**CDS** You know, if it's funny enough, you can do anything you want.

**KC** I wanted to jump off from a word that I think gets tossed around too easily these days: *personal*. It's used to refer to work that is graphic or sexual, or made by a woman or a person of color, or all of these things. What's your relationship to these interpretations of the personal?

**CDS** We're coming to the end of a third wave of identity politics, which I think has become more complicated. There's this idea of the personal being political, and that's valid to a certain extent. But a personal story can be discredited as narcissistic the moment you refer to it as personal.

My work is personal in the sense that I'm talking about things that are meaningful to me, but there's a part of me that wants to take myself out of the equation. I use people and environments mostly because they're what I know. Often, it's a person that I feel is a good archetype but also someone from my life. My work at the Whitney Biennial was essentially a kind of personal essay—months and months of research and reading and translating that into visual work.

I was sort of burnt out after that, but I had this gallery show coming up, and I made a decision to paint things and people I particularly loved. It's a way of super-personalizing a painting and putting myself deeply inside the situation. In the end, I didn't find myself weary to the extent I thought I would. *Sarah*, the painting I made of me and my partner, has a personal note painted for her on the back. I wanted to make it really clear that I wasn't making that painting to talk about gender or sexuality, or to shock anyone or tell anyone anything, but as a love letter.

**KC** If I asked you to summarize the phases in your artistic evolution, what would you call them?

**CDS** Oh, jeez. I'm doing essentially the same thing I've always done. The only difference is that I'm now getting paid to do it, and I'm not completely flipped out about my imminent demise and eviction. It's like a knot's been pulled out of my hair. For now.

I was at my dad's house recently [novelist Stuart Spencer], and he has a collection of my paintings from high school. The work is very similar to what I'm doing now, though back then I had no idea about contemporary art. It wasn't until I went to Bard as an adult that I learned about other painters.

**KC** What were the works you saw and liked as a kid?

**CDS** Like, portraits of people that don't exist but that look so personal. In high school I was looking at Egon Schiele and Alice Neel. They were big influences on me. Our art teacher took us on a field trip to New York City to see the John Waters film retrospective, which blew my mind out of my head. My mother had a ton of books on classical painters, like Caravaggio, and the greats of the Renaissance, whom I loved, but no books on contemporary art. Also, being a kid growing up in Rhinebeck, my aesthetic is 1990s Hudson Valley. My paintings seemed to be of people who I loved very much, but they didn't actually exist. The people I painted were just out of my head.

Some of these early paintings look really religious. Or romantic. This was probably because I was looking at so much Michelangelo and Giotto in my staunchly secular home. But the things that influenced my work have mostly been personal experiences as seen via politics and music. So the phases are basically; painting, not painting, painting, not painting. *(laughter)* Or painting, doing landscaping work, painting, working in a rehab in New Orleans, painting.

KC When did you start painting people you knew?

CDS When I thought that I could get them to look remotely like the people I was painting. I'm not very good at painting exactly what I see. Often, I'm trying to paint something realistically and then I fuck it up and attempt to make that into a good painting.

KC You just had a huge year—artistically, professionally—and you are sort of in a new, perhaps interim place.

CDS This is the first time I've taken an intentional break, knowing the date of my next show at Nino Mier Gallery and how many paintings I want to make for it. I have the materials ready at my kitchen table in Hudson—cold-pressed paper taped to the table, a lamp over it, and my pencils. If I want to start making sketches, it's all there. And every time I go to sit down to do it, my hand is like, "Oooh, I'm not going to hold that pencil right now."

When I was in New Orleans from 2012 to 2014, it was more of a forced break. I thought I was over as a painter. Before that I'd been living in New York, surrounded by artists, having work in a lot of group shows. But then I decided I didn't want to be a painter anymore. I was just sick of the conversation and the insular world of art. I was sick of the notion that art is super important to the lives of people, regardless of whether or not they have the ability to see the work or not, or understand its complicated language, so I went to work at a long-term drug and alcohol rehab for people without resources—many of them homeless or coming out of prison. For about two years, it was my entire world. That's where my friends were. I still did sketches but only for myself, and I'd make drawings for my mom, who lives in New Orleans. Then I moved to LA, where I started painting in a garage, and all of this stuff started bursting out of me, almost out of my control. I understood that, no matter what, as a painter I'm digesting faces, and I should step out of the way of that. Like, if I am in a slump, one way to move past it is to tackle it head on and work through it. But sometimes the brain that drove me into a slump can't be the one to get me out. The brain that got me into a meaningless corner of queer, feel-good identity politics in New York is the same brain that would try to figure out what I was looking at as a painter, so I had

to lay off for a second. It's like trying to think yourself out of a depression with a depressed brain. It doesn't work.

KC What's your relationship to addiction and creativity? Do you want to talk about that? Or ...not?

CDS I'll totally talk about it. That's actually why I left New York. I come from a long, thriving line of Cajun addicts. I'm the last person on this particular branch, and it's been something that I've battled with forever. I do want to talk about it, but I don't quite know how. I tell people that I went to NOLA because of a family emergency, which isn't untrue, but the family emergency was myself. *(laughter)* I went to New Orleans because my mom lives there. Essentially, she came and picked me up in a hospital in New York City and drove me (and my fifteen-year-old dog, Freeway) down to New Orleans and stuck me in a rehab. I actually stuck myself in there for six months, then worked in the same place, which is quite common.

KC Was painting part of your life at that point?

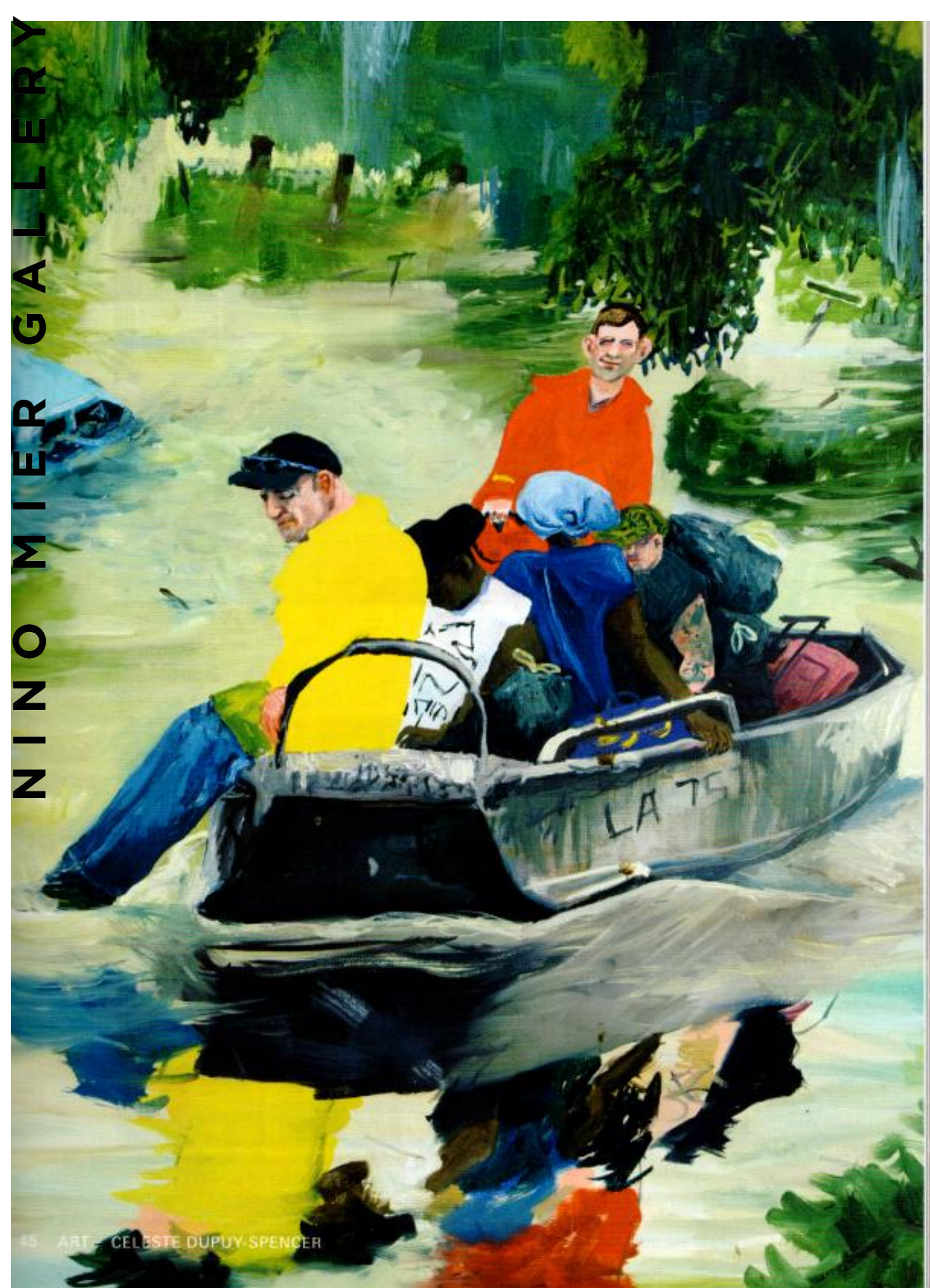
CDS Nowhere near it. I was on kitchen duty in the rehab. I felt like I'd become the pariah of the queer art scene in New York because they'd never met a heroin addict. And lucky them. It was really heartbreaking. Also, I thought my career was over, and I was like, What's an art career anyway? I'm gonna move in with my crush on the bayou and raise her kids! *(laughter)*

Then I got hired into administration at the men's building of the same rehab center I went to. It was life altering. I'm a work addict, so when that was my job, I would be completely emotionally strung out by the time I got home, go to bed, and do it again next day. I burned out eventually because it's the wrong line of work for a work addict! My relationship with addiction is actually really, really present in my artwork. I don't know if you saw my work in the Biennial—

KC I did.

CDS There was a watercolor I did in 2012, in Brooklyn. It's called *Good Morning*. It's the methadone clinic on Sixty-Eighth Street in Manhattan. I was desperate for many years to keep my addiction a secret and get clean, and that became really present in my work but in a lot of coded ways. Luckily, the people in the group I was running with were completely oblivious, so I got to keep my anonymity around it, which ultimately led to them feeling absolutely betrayed.

KC Listening to you talk about this, I get some insight into your practice. I can't help but think there must be a relationship between learning to show up to kitchen duty every day and learning to show up to





46 (i) *Early Snow—Rhinecliff Hotel*, 2017, oil on canvas, 50 × 65 inches. (ii) *Veterans Day*, 2017, oil on canvas, 85 × 65 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Nino Mier Gallery, Los Angeles.

People have inherent dignity and that dignity is attached to a higher purpose. At the same time, people are schmucks.

painting every day. Most artists negotiate some kind of addictive behavior or compulsion—the sister of addiction—in their lives, regardless of whether they identify as addicts. I'm not interested in addicts as one type of person versus everyone else.

CDS Nor am I. I'm an artist. It's wildly selfish, and I defend my time like a pit bull. I try not to spend a lot of time thinking about whether I'm a true drug addict or whether I'm a person who has pretty complicated brain wiring. I know that I'm depressed, sensitive, and selfish. I'm just determined to do this thing, which is paint in solitude, and I will burn bridges to do it, including relationships. That's compulsion and addiction. When I used a drug it got much worse, so it's better for me not to. But I don't know that I want to cure myself of the addictive wiring inside of me because it's what my connection is, my conduit. I don't really want to dull it down. I need to spend forty-eight hours awake in my studio painting, responding to nobody. That's a slippery slope for an addict, but I'm willing to do whatever it takes to make work and to make sure that I'm there when the work starts happening.

C The compulsion to work is something I watch in my own life, and I wonder how it plays out in relation to my work, other people, and the world at large.

CDS I do think that drugs saved my life in a lot of ways and then ruined my life. The goal was to survive. The compulsion to use drugs came from an absolutely devastating feeling of inadequacy. Had it forever. This feeling of just not being able to connect to people, not being good enough, not being smart. A lot of those things are also fueling my studio practice. I'm afraid if I don't show up and don't work as hard as I possibly can, I will be humiliated. People will know that I'm a fraud. Part of me wonders if my goal of life is actually just to make myself feel okay, to find peace. But then I wonder if I'd show up in the same way. Is my brain wiring just something I have to live with, making me feel connected to something greater than myself only when I'm inside my studio working? Do fear and shame become tools for me while I try to make every painting better than the last?

KC So it's the question: Will I paint if I'm happy?

CDS Yeah. My father sent me a note one Valentine's Day with this John Zorn quote: "I'm constantly in doubt about what I'm doing, I'm constantly tortured, and that's why I say happiness is irrelevant. Happiness is for children and yuppies. I'm not striving for happiness, I'm trying to get some work done." My dad really gets me.

KC I want to ask you about your influences, broadly speaking. I definitely see Schiele in some of your drawings. I also see Kerry James Marshall.

CDS He's the master painter.

KC At the Whitney Biennial, your work was shown near Henry Taylor's.

CDS He is also one of my influences.

KC Which other influences are of note?

CDS Lately I've been looking at Charles Burchfield's watercolors. I studied with Nicole Eisenman in college, and she really brought it home for me in a lot of ways. But I don't spend a tremendous amount of time looking at paintings while I work. Sometimes I will run up against a problem and quickly scan around to see if someone else might have found a secret way around whatever issue I'm having, technically. Like, what color is a white house in moonlight? What color is moonlight anyway? Goya? Not quite. Hopper? Maybe. James Gurney? Yeah! And to my surprise, Gurney also painted the Rhinecliff hotel, albeit in daytime.

One of my favorite paintings is *Portrait of the Merchant Georg Gisze* by Hans Holbein the Younger. I lifted his table cloth for *Veterans Day*. It's just a joy to look at. I mostly listen to music, though, when I'm painting. I prefer music that tells a story. I want to paint like the music I listen to.

KC Like what?

CDS I mostly listen to country. Country music touches on subjects that the majority of people are experiencing in life. The profoundness of the everyday, the complications around the simplest as well as the deepest of feelings, the choices we are faced with. These songs talk about people who are widowed by war or coming back from war, not knowing how to interact. They talk about cancer and not being able to pay bills, about having three kids and working a job as a waitress. And they talk about class. In America we're not even supposed to say "class" because it's considered counterproductive to the American Dream. We call people who don't have jobs and are suffering "working-class Americans" and then we call people who are poor "lower middle class." It's just insane. Country musicians are my heroes, as deeply flawed, archetypal artists. Those are my influences.

KC Who are some of these artists specifically?

CDS Emmylou Harris! John Anderson. I love Tim McGraw. George Jones hits these notes that are all the things that are beyond words—the sorrow. Sturgill Simpson is just the most beautiful—mind and heart exploding. I adore Miranda Lambert. The high lonesome sound is what it's like to be a human. Vince Gill and how he could sing the high harmony to Alison Krauss any day of the week. My gateway into country music in 1998 was Steve Earle—who's a fucking commie! I turned on the radio and heard George Strait, Joe Diffie, and Clint Black. Country is the most listened-to genre of music in America, and America is busted, so the music gets a very bad wrap. In many ways, it earned its very bad wrap. The common perception is that the majority of the fan base are ultra-conservatives, maybe even all-right. And those people are definitely deep in there. And so are the Bible thumpers. But that's not all. There's a tremendous amount of room in that genre. The musicians have brains wired like artists, they're politically and socially complex people. Tim McGraw sings this song, "Red Ragtop"—a personal narrative about being in love with somebody who he gets pregnant, but they weren't ready for a kid. It's coded enough that the fan base goes, "No, but he regrets it, so it's anti-abortion," but it's actually him regretting it, like: We live with what we do, and yeah, it sucks, but it was a choice we needed to make. The complex conversations in this genre are wildly beautiful and fascinating.

KC Yeah, country makes a lot of sense as a cross-genre influence.

CDS Bruce Springsteen's biggest influence is John Steinbeck.

KC Butchness has been misinterpreted in your work in the past.

CDS Oh my god, it drives me crazy.

KC In your own words, how would you describe the role and the aesthetics of butchness in your life and work?

CDS I've been categorized as butch; I've been hit on as butch. The only thing I've ever been able to say to somebody who's hit on me based on their perception of my butchness is, "You're going to be wildly disappointed. I'm gonna be bored. Let's not go there." Butch aesthetic is only put on me because I'm identified as a woman. If people saw a man, they would see a fey motherfucker. It's just ridiculous, I don't even know how to talk about it.

KC Yeah, so maybe it's not really relevant.

CDS I don't know. It might be, since I have such a visceral response. It relies on a binary that I completely disagree

with. I find that when I'm being looked at as a butch, so many real things about me are being overlooked. I don't even give a shit about gender. *(laughter)*

I don't think about myself as a queer person when I'm painting. I don't even think about myself as a queer person when I'm painting myself with Sarah. We got together after the election of Trump, sticking together through the inauguration and all the anxiety, these moments when we were just weeping. I was also weeping because all the work my grandmother had put in for the Left, explicitly for women's rights, gay rights, and the Civil Rights Movement—all of which was being undone. These were, and still are, irrational, emotional, and scary times, and we clung together, finding comfort in each other, massaging each other's heads in bed at home. I hope what transcends in the painting I made of us is love. Just that.

Part of my politics is the need for erasure of a specific kind of queer politics. When you start identifying in certain ways, you're giving other people the power of perception and it becomes a complicated hierarchy of really simplified ideals. I want to say right here that I am so happy to be so gay. It's one of the greatest things I've ever been given. I love radical gay history, and when queers take to the streets against oppression, I'm proud to be counted in that number.

But to look at my work only through that lens is presumptuous, even kind of violent. *Hyperallergic* talked about my paintings as all about being gay. The writer referred to *The Matriarchs of the Hudson Valley* (1980s–90s), which is a portrait of my mother and her friends, as "glorifying a homey, soft world of women."

KC A profound misinterpretation.

CDS Then she said that *Veteran's Day*, in contrast, was a butch painting, "interrupting femme associations," because it was about war.

KC In *Swamp Girl*, I see de Kooning, but the female figure seems friendlier than his.

CDS *Swamp Girl* came out of a series of paintings I made while I was at Shandaken Project, a residency in Upstate New York. I had just discovered the absolute joy of doing watercolors and was trying to incorporate what that felt like into oil painting. My previous work had sort of sunk into a hypernarrative pit, and I was losing the paint thread. I was spending too much time making paintings that I didn't really know how to paint yet, skill-wise. *Swamp Girl* was me breaking it up so I could make room in my work for things that were not literally recognizable. Also, there might have been a little bit of a personal white flag waving in that painting.

KC Teeth seem like such a dominant feature of your portraiture. I'm thinking of *Two Guys and a Girl* and



*Not Today Satan*, 2017, oil on canvas, 35 x 28 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Marlborough Contemporary, New York and London.





*Two Guys and a Girl (detail), 2016, oil on canvas, 40 x 30 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Nind Mier Gallery, Los Angeles.*

*Trump Rally.* How do you approach teeth formally and allegorically?

CDS I have very big teeth. Teeth are just ridiculous. What a purely mechanical, utilitarian addition to our crazy bodies. No matter how close we come to envisioning some kind of ideal body—which is an inherently violent thing to envision anyway—we always have to make psychic room for these ridiculous white food grinders in our mouths.

You seem to portray disaster with tenderness. Your painting *Rhinecliff Hotel* compositionally balances order and chaos. Those pointillist stars contrast the fluidity of the foreground. It looks inviting, but then it's a flood.

CDS That painting is actually called *Early Snow, Rhinecliff Hotel*. It's a painting of one of those fluke snows we sometimes get up in the Hudson Valley in the beginning or middle of autumn. Suddenly, it snows while all the leaves are still on the trees. And then it warms up again, and the snow turns to mud. It can be pretty damaging to the trees. Disastrous for the maples! Those stars above the hotel were actually painted by my best friend, Mariah Garnett, who came in and rescued me on a day of tiny dot-making a week before the painting shipped to New York. She also put most of the stars in *Not Today Satan*.

The Rhinecliff Hotel was the local bar for all of us from the towns around there. I was a regular by the time I was fifteen. Mariah was there, too. It was really important to me, and while it may not be the greatest idea for a young teen to be drinking regularly, it made me feel like there was a place I belonged. The bar was filled with the most wonderful people I have ever known (and some really bad ones, too). It was sloped and smelly, and the paint was peeling. Packed with locals. I loved that place. I actually used to have my school bus drop me off there! So, intrinsically there is a tangible feeling of disaster in that place for me. I'm filled with deep tenderness for it, having the fondest memories of that bar between age fourteen and twenty—isn't that a disaster?! It was eventually closed and then reopened as a historic hotel or something where you can have a wedding or spend the night for 150 to 300 dollars. That's the perfect story for what has happened to the Hudson Valley, really.

KC Upstate, New Orleans, New York City, and Los Angeles have all played roles in your work to varying degrees.

CDS The Hudson Valley is just where I grew up. That's my landscape—super rural and a little utopian in a way. In LA, I felt alienated. I didn't really know how to interact with the place except by painting shitty dusty plots of land that people had bought. New Orleans plays a huge role. My family history on my mother's side

is troubling. We were French aristocracy sent to the swamps. We were actually some of the founding families in Louisiana. Whenever I land in Louisiana, I feel parts of my DNA sort of snap in. But in my work, I'm also talking about race. I'm talking about my whiteness very specifically. My family was involved with sugar plantations in the islands, which were basically worker prisons. The money was lost, thank god, generations before I was born, but it's in our blood. When I'm painting New Orleans, I'm talking about whiteness in a complicated, painful way, trying to find the archetype and also out it. I'm trying to celebrate its demise in a certain way, actively identifying it and keeping my heel on its neck. I want to talk about race in contemporary America, and I want to be very honest with what it's done for me.

KC After what we discussed so far, I'm curious about the politics of resentment and the politics of dignity in your work.

CDS I don't think they are at opposite ends. They are at the core of everything. People have inherent dignity and that dignity is attached to a higher purpose. At the same time, people are schmucks. Give them a certain amount of power or social currency, and they have the potential to become monsters. These two don't cancel each other out.

I'm full of real resentment that I believe I've come by pretty honestly. Some of it is directly personal, and some of it is just systemic. Like, I look at white men, and it's a fucking comedy act. I feel a deep resentment. But then I see these moments of heroism that are just the most beautiful thing in the world. It's often brought out in times of unthinkable trials. My favorite archetype is the firefighter. They might be total dicks in their day to day, probably they are, and some of them might be absolutely monstrous. But then the bell rings, the helmet goes on, and they're running up the stairs of a burning building for anyone trapped inside. That's the most extreme example. There is the Cajun navy too. I hear Bill Murray is a real schmuck to strangers who approach him, but, like, thank god for Bill Murray. He is brilliant! I think the natural go-to is to be self-serving. The go-to is basically the jerk, but everybody's capable of getting a "call" and answering it. It may not be what makes humanity worth saving, but it's what makes humanity heartbreakingly beautiful, and that's why we have a spiritual life. That's why we created the archetype and why we believe in god or don't. The calling becomes the standard we measure ourselves against. That's fine. Painful but fine.