

Interview: Jansson Stegner

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Jansson Stegner has a large number of canvasses on show as part of the “Body Language” exhibition at the Saatchi Gallery. I caught up with him during an interview at the Private Press View earlier in November, and asked him some questions about his work. Due to my fixation with feminism, *ways of looking* and fetishism I have only included the questions and answers regarding this, which demonstrate the role of the patriarchal gaze in art and its prevalence in images, whether it is the artist’s intention or not!!



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[IMAGES FROM "BODY LANGUAGE" : "Sarabande", "Grey Sky", "Great Plains", Jansson Stegner]

1. Who was your intended audience? Do you have any conscious thoughts of spectatorship during the creation of your works?

I don't have an intended audience, really. I make paintings in order to make something concrete out of an abstract idea in my head. They are not created with any particular audience in mind.

2. I understand that you have used women in uniform to create a notion of strangeness in your works, but did you have any intention to portray the fetishisation of women in your use of uniform?

In my work, I like to take different signifiers of power and beauty, masculinity and femininity and mix them together to form new combinations. These signifiers can be a pose, a uniform, a body type or any number of things. All of my paintings in the Body Language show are of rather delicate-looking female police officers, so I suppose I can understand how a person viewing my work for the first time might think of it as fetishization. But I paint delicate-looking male police officers too. In this cop series, men and women are treated pretty much the same way.

3. Or evoke any of Freud's theories, such as the *castration complex*, which has been suggested due to the uniform, yes, but also phallic shapes in your work – batons and straight, up-right arrangement of limbs?

I don't feel that the women in these painting are threatening my masculinity in any way. Putting a gentle-looking figure (whether female or male), into a police uniform is a way of softening the ideas we associate with the *uniform*. These paintings are really about presenting a different way of thinking about power in general and state power in particular. In a sense, I wanted to rehabilitate the negative stereotypes that liberals like myself hold toward the power of the state. I wanted to create a gentler image of it that could serve as potential inspiration for a future world.

4. Did you intend to follow the traditions of western art history as a male artist depicting passive women? Despite their authoritative attire they are in the painting just to be looked upon?

It's funny that you mention that. My first name doesn't always make it immediately apparent to the viewer what my gender is. So a lot of people who see my paintings for the first time don't know whether they were made by a man or a woman. What I have noticed over the years is that when people see my paintings of women, they assume I am a woman. When they see my paintings of men they assume I am a man (usually a gay man, for some reason). To me, that suggests that most viewers recognize that I have sympathy for my subjects. I don't think there is really anything obvious in the works themselves that embraces typical notions of the "male gaze". My paintings are basically portraits of imaginary people. People in portraits tend to look passive.

Jansson Stegner answered question number 3 stating that his canvasses do not evoke the castration complex as his women are not threatening in themselves. Whilst this is true, his women are sweet and vulnerable, his use of uniform as well as his positioning of the female's elongated limbs, upright shapes and batons in his work unquestionably demonstrate Freud's theories. Despite this obviously not being his intention, Freud is right, again, his theories prevail.