

In Conversation with Jansson Stegner

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Muscular men, poised for action and blushing, acquiescent women have historically populated the world of portraiture, each mirroring a prevailing male perception of the human form. This premise has been both template and challenge for the painterly practice of Jansson Stegner.

Given classical legacy and the tradition of painting, It's no easy task to develop a modern, personal visual language while rendering portraiture realistically. Yet, with the self-titled "Unrealism" and "Weird Figuration", the NYC-based Stegner has taken liberties with the human form to create a highly stylized aesthetic in his figurative art. Influenced by the likes of El Greco, Ingres, Ensor, Schiele, Dix, Balthus, and Alice Neel, who each invented their own unique perception of the human form, Stegner's work is grounded in realism without being confined by its rules. The results of such explorations are a preponderance of exceptionally tall, powerful and muscular female subjects, proudly bearing exaggerated features. Dressed in everyday attire, often juiced with suggestive detail, they challenge traditional notions of gender roles and norms, but presented in the old-fashioned guise of classical oil on linen painting.

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Sasha Bogojev: According to the website, your paintings are "the opposite of portraits." Can you elaborate, and how does that appear in these new works?

Jansson Stegner: A portrait tends to be an image where the artist allows the character, physiognomy, and personality of the sitter to lead the artist toward the final product. In most of my work, I take different pieces from different sources to construct the figure. Maybe the pose from one model, the face from a second and the hair from a third. So the final product is not a reflection of an individual, but more of a constructed person composed of many attributes. This sometimes helps when I am trying to paint a character that may not exist in reality.

However, a few paintings in this show move away from this practice and are actually more like traditional portraits. The works titled by the sitter's name (Lucia, Emaani, etc.) are real, whole people—not a constructed amalgamation. Though they're still subject to my exaggerations and distortions of form, I allow more of the sitter's personality to come through. I am hoping to explore this path a bit more in the future.

Why are your works more like traditional portraits, and how does that affect the outcome?

The reason I started working with a more traditional portraiture process is that it's simpler. Anything that streamlines the painting process is worth trying. And in trying it, I have become more open to the idea of allowing the sitter's personality to help shape the image.

Apart from that and the large scale of new works, does anything else about this particular body of work separate it from previous presentations?

In previous shows, I included paintings of both male and female figures, but for this show, I decided to focus entirely on female subjects.

Why focus this show entirely on females?

I have always tended to paint more women than men. This show just happens to be all women. I have been painting athletic women on and off for many years, and for this show, I just felt like taking a deep dive into a subject that has long been fascinating and exciting to me.

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When did you start applying the archetypal hyper-muscular male depiction to female characters, and does that approach work the other way around?

Painting athletic women has been a significant part of my work for the past twelve years. I was originally inspired while watching Olympic women's volleyball on television, where many of the players I saw were tall, muscularly built and physically powerful. I am fascinated by the ways in which strength, power, and beauty can be blended within female form, and I've returned to this subject again and again over the years.

I treat male figures in a similar, but opposite, manner. I tend to de-emphasize traditionally masculine attributes, like strength and ruggedness. The men I paint are usually lean and lithe, elegant and gentle. They seem comfortable with being beautiful. I find it more interesting to portray both male and female figures in ways that are somewhat outside the expected norm.

How difficult is it to work with distorted proportions but stay in the realm of Realism, or how difficult is it to work in a comic-like manner but stay within the fine art realm?

Sometimes it's hard, sometimes easy. But that balance is kind of the whole game. To make a painting interesting, you need to blend familiarity with unfamiliarity or strangeness with normalcy. Too much normalcy and it's boring. Too much strangeness and it's unrelatable. The greatest psychic tension occurs when those two elements are in an odd balance that heightens them both. You just have to keep playing until the balance is reached.

Was the work ever confused for the Female Muscle Fetish? How do you avoid sexualizing your subjects?

The women I paint are not devoid of sexuality, but I usually don't want sex to be the primary focus in a painting. So I won't allow sexuality to overwhelm other elements of the work (the expressive exaggeration and distortions of the human form, the pose, the composition, etc.) and become the main focus. I aim to arrange each painting so that if sex is an element in the work at all, it is in the background, not front and center.

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The images have a vintage feel but also an ambiguous sense of time and place. How important is this for you, and why do you create them this way?

I like to compose paintings with a dynamic movement that guides the viewer's eye around the canvas and directs focus toward the most psychologically important parts. This is a very traditional compositional strategy and may contribute to the vintage feeling. Same with the rich colors I prefer as well as the sculpturally modeled forms.

If a style or approach from the past appeals to me, I will use it. Maybe this makes the work feel a bit unstuck in time. That's fine with me. I don't feel compelled to work in a particular moment of time, because history is inescapable. It has literally shaped everything you know. Why not engage with that?

You've been taking gap years between solo shows. How does it feel to return to an NYC gallery after such a long time?

It feels great to have a solo show in a New York gallery again. Especially a really respected one like Almine Rech. My work is slow to produce, so I need more time than the average artist. between shows. Fortunately, during my long hiatus from New York, I have been able to show quite a bit in Europe, LA and elsewhere.