

# TWO COATS OF PAINT

Award-winning NYC blogazine, primarily about painting

HOME CONTACT ABOUT ADVERTISING SUPPORT SUBSCRIBE NEWSROLL



CLUBHOUSE CONVERSATIONS

CONVERSATION, SOLO SHOWS

## Bad Boyfriends and Pink Bathers : A conversation with Janice Nowinski

October 11, 2021 12:26 pm



*Janice Nowinski at Thomas Erben, installation view*

*Contributed by Sangram Majumdar / Janice Nowinski makes loose, gestural figurative paintings that might be compared to the Bay Area Figurative Movement, but for their deep, dark palette and contemporary content. On the occasion of her first*

exhibition, beautifully installed at Thomas Erben Gallery, Janice Nowinski and I talked about how time presents itself in every aspect of her paintings – from references to art and personal histories, to the very material qualities of the work.

**Sangram Majumdar:** *One of the things that I know about your paintings and your process is that you've lived in the same place and painted in the same room for years. I imagine this brings a certain sense of familiarity. When the paintings have been shown, they are often on a white wall, but in your current show at Thomas Erben, two of the walls are painted lavender. How did that come about?*

**Janice Nowinski:** What happened was, I had one painting at the gallery. Thomas had another show up mounted on a very deep blue wall and he said, let's put your painting up on that wall. We thought it looked interesting because my painting was in a dark palette with a lot of gray and black in it. We discussed the *New York Times* article about the **Frick Madison** where they painted the walls all different shades of gray.

Thomas quoted the article saying that white walls are the kiss of death for old master paintings. I had been to the Frick Madison, and I remember being really blown away by the installation there. But I hadn't noticed that the walls were gray; I just noticed the Manet painting looked great. So, that's how this thing started developing. And then Thomas was talking about a purplish color. He felt purple is kind of ephemeral, and that painting the walls would give a certain feeling to the room and make a more intimate setting for my paintings, which are quite small.



*Janice Nowinski, Bathers after Cezanne, 2015, oil on Canvas, 11 x 14 inches*

**SM:** *I like that idea, that a slight shifting of the environment, here the color of the walls, made you see the Manet painting perhaps a little differently. It's like a decision in the present reactivated the past in a very subtle way. This makes me think*

*about time and history in your paintings. I'm curious if you can talk about that – how the paintings move between different reference points such as the art historical, the familial, and the genre scenes.*

JN: Yes. I think that's a huge factor in my paintings. In my transcription of *Bathers after Cézanne*, it's not important to me that the original was made in the 19th century. It is important to me that it addresses issues that I have in my 21st century Brooklyn studio. The connections between Cézanne's standing bather in that composition and the standing bad boyfriend snapshot I used for *Bad Boyfriend #1* truncates and dissolves the time distance.



*Janice Nowinski, Bad Boyfriend #1, 2013, oil on canvas, 16 x 12 inches*

*SM: It seems like, maybe when you're looking at the Bathers, you think of the Bad Boyfriend. And then when you look at the Bad Boyfriend, it reminds you of Cézanne's Bathers. Like there's a kind of crisscrossing of personal history and art history coming together.*

JN: Exactly. And sometimes it starts with one; sometimes it starts with the other. I didn't originally see the Bad Boyfriend painting as a relative of the Cézanne Bather, but then I realized that he is like the Bather in that he stands alone and isolated in the center of the composition.

*SM: I was actually going to ask you about how there's a sense that the characters in your paintings come from another reality. In Bad Boyfriend #1 or maybe Pink Bathing Suit #8, an in-between object links history and memory to the painting, which in this case might be photo-derived, whether it's the digital image or an old-school photograph.*

*What makes them come alive is not the descriptive element that comes out of a photographic image. Rather it's almost as if the material of paint, the matter is itself the image. In that, there seems to be a callback to the core element of what a painting often is, which is paint on canvas, and paint is just dirt, ground and mixed with oil and applied.*

*I guess I'm trying to get to the core of what drives your process.*

JN: I like this question. It's making me think of when I was looking at **Bob Thompson's paintings**. He said, "My whole problem is trying to convey without the detail." I relate to this because there were certain descriptive details in the photo reference that I didn't want to include in my paintings. I'm thinking of Milton Avery too. Although I don't have a strong connection to either one of them in the way I'm actually constructing my paintings, I feel like I'm purposely leaving things out as well for expressive reasons.



*Janice Nowinski, Pink Bathing Suit VIII, 2020, oil on Canvas, 14 x 11 inches*



Janice Nowinski, *Two Nudes*, 2020, oil on Linen, 12 x 16 inches

**SM:** *Why are you interested in that?*

**JN:** I want the painting to work without relying on descriptive details. For a longtime I didn't put faces in my paintings. I love the famous thing that Matisse said that your whole composition should be the expression of your work, not the facial detailing. He referred to the proportions, the placement of the figures and the spaces around them as being key. I'm also trying to get the expression of my painting through the way the whole is put together.

**SM:** *As you were saying that, I was thinking that the paintings are in no rush to finish. In many different ways, time seems to be baked into these paintings. We talked about whether it's art historical, familial references. But having known about your work for a while, I know that some of these paintings go on for a while, sometimes months, maybe years. And then there are those decisions that seem to have just happened in the fraction of a second.*



Janice Nowinski, *Grandma Jean #3*, 2021, oil on primed linen panel, 5 x 7 inches

*In a recent Fresh Air review of the new movie The Many Saints of Newark, critic David Bianculi mentions how the original Sopranos TV show didn't really end, but rather stopped. I think your paintings do the same thing, and that stoppage point is what makes them feel in the now, grounding them in our immediate reality.*

JN: Right. I think, yes. Sometimes it doesn't happen for a long time. There is a book by James Lord about sitting for Giacometti. It shows the different phases of the painting's progression. Nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, and then it's a great painting.

SM: *Yeah. I love that book! I think it's called "A Giacometti Portrait."*

JN: What I'm realizing now is that it doesn't take that much of a shift to resolve a painting. It just might take a long time for that moment to present itself. My paintings can go from a gray mess to very clear and resolved in 10 minutes. In order for me to get to that 10 minutes, there's a process that I have to go through and trust that when clarity presents itself I'll recognize it and stop.

SM: *When you used the phrase, 'trying to get more out of this painting', I was wondering about how some of the paintings have a number after them, like Pink Bathing Suit #8, Grandma Jean #3. That's another kind of stretching time, right? That means there are other paintings that have happened prior to this either with the same subject matter or maybe variations of the same imagery, which makes me think of Cézanne's Bathers again, the variations, and there's a history of all of that.*

*I'm curious, what makes you come back to a motif?*

JN: I think Cézanne probably is the model for this. He does revisit a lot of his subjects. I love his variations on his Bather paintings. Regarding returning to repeating themes, sometimes it's just that an image keeps giving and I stay engaged. I had one photo I found with three women in a sauna. I thought it was a winner and actually it turned out to be too composed and there was no room for me. Whereas the photo reference for the Pink Bathing Suit paintings had much less information and more for me to move into. Somehow, the less there is, the more I can get out of it. If you saw some of these photos, you would be surprised. A lot of them are just photocopies in black and white and low resolution. The photo references are a starting point that I continue to refer to the whole time I'm making the painting.

*SM: It's almost like the sources are not images, but signs for you to revisit. There's a schema that you can then use because it can generate so much.*

JN: I think you're onto something, Sangram. I can add myself into it. You kind of get this basic standing person. This one was on a beach, then think Cézanne or Hartley's bather, and then questions like how old is she, how pink is the bathing suit, what's the cut of the bathing suit, what is my relationship to the subject, is she alone, what is the temperature, the time of day.

I think we all have a natural disposition and attraction to particular things. I always liked brown corduroy pants and when I was younger I wore them. Today, I still love them and no, I don't wear them.

**"Janice Nowinski: Recent Painting,"** Thomas Erben Gallery, 526 West 26th Street, 4th floor, Chelsea, New York NY. Through October 30, 2021.

**About the author:** Born in Kolkata, India, **Sangram Majumdar** lives and works in Seattle, Washington. He has recently exhibited at Shoshana Wayne Gallery, LA, Geary Contemporary, NY, Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects, NY and Asia Society Texas Center. His work has been reviewed in *Artforum*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Hyperallergic*, among others. He is an Assistant Professor in Painting and Drawing at University of Washington in Seattle.