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# Janice Nowinski and Karen Wilkin: A Conversation

*Janice Nowinski: New Work* opens today at Thomas Erben Gallery. With an opening reception tonight (April 13, 2023) from 6 – 8:30 pm, the show will remain open through May 27. [Thomas Erben Gallery](#) is located at 526 W 26th St, New York, NY 10001.

A folio of Janice Nowinski's recent paintings introduced by Karen Wilkin is forthcoming in *The Hopkins Review* 16.3, Summer 2023. [Subscribe today.](#)



*Image:*

Reclining Nude with Red Hair (2023)  
by Janice Nowinski, oil on board, 8 x 10 in

**Karen Wilkin: Your paintings are notably intimate—small in size, so that you have to come close and look hard. Have you always worked small?**

Janice Nowinski: Yes, I have always worked small. My average size for the figure paintings from the photo sources was 11 x 14 inches. I started working on the 5 x 7 inch paintings, which were half the size, in 2018 kind of randomly. I remember buying the small linen panels from Italy when there was a sale online. When they arrived, I was surprised at how small they were. They sat around in the studio for quite a while before I used them. I eventually started using them and it turned out to be an ideal size for some of the images I was working from. I've been asked if it worked because of the 1:1 size relationship between the photos and the panels. Maybe a little but I don't really think so because I've also used the postcards to make paintings up to 22 x 30 inches. I am a "one brush" painter and the brush I use is a size #10 which is quite small. I think that the size of my brush to the 5 x 7 format opened up some things. When I look at them now, I feel like I was making miniature Ab-Ex paintings in the way I handled the paint with the little brush on the small surface.

**KW: How do you choose your sources? Are they always visual or can other experiences or things heard or read trigger a painting? Do you work directly from your sources or does memory come into it?**

JN: Both. I've been working from a lot of the same images for the last ten years or so. It started with a pack of postcards of erotic nudes from the 18th century that a painter friend gave me. I had done a few transcriptions of the *odalisque* by Boucher which was the beginning of using the erotic nude as a subject. The erotic postcards seemed connected to a lot of paintings of nudes I was looking at by Courbet, Manet and Bonnard. It turned out that Courbet actually had used some of these photos. I did some paintings from photos he used that I found in the Courbet catalog from the show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I ended up finding a great book by Taschen of 1000 nudes, to supplement the pack of postcards. I was definitely attracted to these photos by their relation to 19th century European paintings that have been a major source of inspiration for me.

I work directly from the photos to construct / compose my paintings. I don't use them in a literal way but I do rely on them for information and the basic composition. For example, if I misplace the photo, which often happens, I would not feel comfortable working on the painting. Many of the photos are black and white so I need to invent the color. I would still refer to the photo for tonality to decide which colors to use.

I also have used other images of an ex-boyfriend and members of his family and have done members of my own family including my grandmother and parents.

I found a trove of photos of my grandmother in my father's stuff after he died. I absolutely loved the photos. It really interested me which photos he saved of his mother. I had heard many stories about her. The sense of place and her attitude was so strong in the photos. It was like she was projecting an image of how she wanted to be remembered. I liked how intentional and planned the photos were. (All the photos I seem to like to paint from are posed—not random snapshots—including the Taschen nudes and my photos of the ex.)

The photos were beautifully taken and composed. (I think my uncle took them). I would not have been interested if they were smiling snapshots. The ones I used for paintings in my show at Thomas Erben Gallery were mostly of her posing at famous places in Europe i.e. Versailles, near the Seine when she was on the grand tour of Europe at the end of her life. Childhood and adult memories and stories about her from various sources colored the way I viewed the photos. But honestly all of the photos I use are just a jumping off point. Often the paintings stray very far from the original motivation. My aim is not to depict.

Recently my cousin shared a photo of a family get together from 1961 with a description of family tension etc. Even though I was familiar with the photo, the way she described it made it an intriguing subject to pursue. I love Vuillard's painting of his mother and sister with their complicated emotional issues. Also, I had recently been talking to a student at New York Studio School who was doing paintings of her childhood and fraught relationship with her mother. All of these contributed to bringing to life the photo my cousin sent to me as a possible subject.

The first photos I worked from were from the ex-boyfriend. It was not a planned thing. I took the photos but didn't expect to paint from them since I was still painting from observation. When I began working from them I noticed that it allowed me to bring in a personal emotional response to my paintings that wasn't previously there. I was very clear on how I felt when looking at the photos and explored the various emotions they would elicit. It would be very clear to me when the emotion became present in the paintings. My feelings were complicated, which made for an interesting subject.

**KW: Do you work from perception, as well as sources?**

JN: I strictly worked from perception up until 2012 until I started working from photos (except for painting transcriptions from postcards of masterpiece paintings which I have done consistently since grad school). I painted from the still life and self-portraits mostly. I had a set up in my studio. I used tape to keep the objects in exactly the same position. Around 2012, I stopped working from observation. I can't even imagine doing a still life now from observation. It doesn't make sense to me anymore.

**KW: You repeat motifs, sometimes quite directly. What provokes the return?**

JN: I often repeat motifs. When I'm in a different mood or as time passes, I see the photos differently which can inspire another painting. It often happens from seeing other art or evolving and growing as an artist and person. Sometimes I'm not satisfied with my painting of the motif and return to it to do a better/ fuller job. Also, if one painting of the motif is going well, I will sometimes start another one to preserve the first one even if its temporarily. If something happens of interest in a painting, I find it helpful to leave it intact even though I may return to it later. I tend to have a lot of paintings going at the same time and go back and forth between them. When I first got out of graduate school, I worked on a still life for three years. Part of the way I work now is to avoid doing that. 1) Too many eggs in one basket and 2) it's a way of working which is obsessive and not necessarily constructive.

Also, some photographs are just very paintable and I go back to the "well" for more.

**KW: Who is the artist (living or not) whom you would most like to meet?**

JN: Manet. I find him endlessly fascinating. I have so many books about him and I never lose interest.

*January 19, 2023*

## About Janice Nowinski:

**Janice Nowinski** was born 1959 in Manhattan and grew up in Rockaway Park, Queens. She received her MFA in Painting from Yale University in 1987.

Her 2021 show was reviewed twice in *Artforum* ([Katherine Bradford](#) and [Charity Coleman](#)), twice in *Hyperallergic* ([John Yau](#) and [Jennifer Samet](#)), *The Hudson Review* ([Karen Wilkin](#)), *Painting Perceptions* ([John Goodrich](#)) as well as *Two Coats of Paint* ([Sangram Majumdar](#)) and paintings were then included in surveys at Venus Over Manhattan and DC Moore Gallery (both New York). Nowinski's work was previously included in exhibitions at the American Academy of Arts and Letters, National Academy Museum, American University Museum, Zucher Gallery, and Steven Harvey Fine Arts Projects. She was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2022 and is a Sharpe-Walentas Studio Program awardee for 2022/23. The artist lives and works in Brooklyn, NY.

## About Karen Wilkin:

**Karen Wilkin** is a New York-based curator and critic, recently co-curator of *Ophir and Friends: a Tribute to Ophir Agassi* at the New York Studio School gallery, as well as the author of monographs on Anthony Caro, David Smith, Hans Hofmann, and Helen Frankenthaler, among others. She teaches at the New York Studio School.