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Beer With a Painter: Janice Nowinski

“I am trying to keep the immediacy of my emotional experience while I’m painting.”



19 hours ago



Janice Nowinski, "Nude with a Dog #1" (2021), oil on linen, 9 x 12 inches (all images courtesy Thomas Erben Gallery)

On a summer evening, Janice Nowinski and I met in her home studio, a dedicated room of her apartment in a prewar Park Slope building. She moved there at the age of 19, after returning to New York from a trip to Italy. It remains where she likes to paint, especially since she works into the night.

Nowinski’s paintings have an intimate quality that seems suited to a home studio. I think about her work as related to “cabinet paintings” in art history. Her paintings are mostly small

in scale; sensuous in both subject matter and paint quality. They deal with private lives, family scenes, and interiority. They ask to be held in one's hands, and looked at quietly. In this, they connect to the work of the Nabi painters, in which forms are compressed into a frontal plane of expressive brushwork, and domestic scenes emerge through darkness and pattern.

The psychological intensity of Nowinski's work stems from this feeling of containment. She paints from snapshots and found photographs, and also transcribes art historical paintings: Cézanne, Titian, Boucher. She doesn't rely on facial expression or detailed rendering; in fact, facial features are rendered briefly if at all. Instead, she locks her subjects into suggestive poses in dark, evening worlds, enclosing them in a universe of quirky geometries, direct brushstrokes, and coarse, unembellished surfaces. In this way, she suggests an empathic understanding of her subjects' interior lives.

Janice Nowinski was born in Brooklyn and grew up in Rockaway Park. She studied at the New York Studio School of Painting, Drawing, and Sculpture, and received her MFA in painting from Yale University. Her work has been exhibited at the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the National Academy Museum, and the American University Museum. She has been the subject of solo exhibitions at the Riverside Arts Center Freeark Gallery, Chicago, Illinois; John Davis Gallery, Hudson, New York; and the Washington Studio School Gallery, Washington, D.C. Nowinski's work is represented by Thomas Erben Gallery, where her solo exhibition, [Recent Paintings](#), is on view through October 30, 2021.



Janice Nowinski, "Bathers in a Stream" (2021), oil on linen, 8 x 10 inches

Jennifer Samet: *Are there experiences you had as a child looking at art or making art that are especially memorable?*

Janice Nowinski: As a kid, I didn't go to museums or look at paintings much. I am from

Rockaway and there wasn't a lot going on out there, culturally. However, my family was very musical, and they did their best to expose us, but I don't think they were very interested in painting. They liked it, but were more interested in music. It was a bit like being the black sheep of the family when I got into painting; they were disappointed that I didn't want to play an instrument. They all played instruments. If we got together, they would talk to each other about music. And then they would ask, "Oh, what are you doing, Janice?"

My sister did like to draw, and I went to the Brooklyn Museum with her because she was taking classes and didn't want to go alone. I wouldn't participate; I would just go along. She would have to buy me a hot dog.

I finished high school and I didn't have any goals. I think it was because I grew up in an area which was suburban and kind of sterile. I didn't know what I wanted to do, so my parents suggested I go to violin-making school in Italy. My Uncle Bill was a violinist, and he used to go to Cremona to buy violins.



Janice Nowinski, "Woman with Arms Up (2021), oil on linen, 8 x 6 inches

Before I was to travel, my parents gave me a year to study Italian, and to do whatever I wanted. Perhaps because my sister had taken classes at the Brooklyn Museum, I decided to take a sculpture class there. That's when everything started happening for me. It was a daytime class on weekdays, so the students were mostly retired people. There was something about not being with people my own age that worked for me. I liked working with clay, and with the figure. The teacher was very energetic. It was exciting.

The school had a lot of history. It was similar to the history of the Art Students League. I took a class with Joan Semmel. I was exposed to a bohemian art world, and that got me going. The people I met were from the Lower East Side. I started going to drawing groups. It was the

1970s, so it was a rough, gritty New York. Also, many of the teachers were connected to the 1950s New York School art world. There was a taste of the energy from 20 years before, like the Cedar Bar. That really turned me on. I completely changed at that point.

When I arrived in Italy, and went to violin-making school, the atmosphere was also very bohemian. It was an international school. The artists I met in Brooklyn had given me advice about what art I should look for in Italy. I was there for eight or nine months and I traveled all over the country, looking at a ton of art. It was also a politically tumultuous period in Italy: the time of the Red Brigades, when the president of Italy was kidnapped and killed.

I lived in an apartment that cost \$11 a month. The building dated from the 1500s. My father came to visit me and said, “This is a medieval slum.” One room was the refrigerator because it was so cold and the other room had the stove so that’s where I slept. But I loved it.



Janice Nowinski, "Twisting Nude" (2021), oil on board, 7 x 5 inches

JS: *After you returned from Italy, you studied art at the New York Studio School of Painting, Drawing, and Sculpture, and then went to Yale University for your MFA. Who were some of your influential teachers?*

JN: At the New York Studio School, the main topic was focusing on the rectangle of the picture plane. Nicholas Carone said everything was a rectangle and everything was geometry. Well, I'm not really into geometry, so I just couldn't do it at the time. The way that I paint is that I have my own geometry that develops in a painting. I do think about planes, but not necessarily the very specific way that they were teaching it.

I studied with the artist Fred Thursz, and he was very intimidating. He would say, “The first line you make is the fifth line.” That's enough to stop you in your tracks. How can you really let

something emerge and grow when you're thinking about that? Not everybody's brain works that way. If you're forced to try to work in a way that is unnatural, you get very bad results.

Then I studied with Gretna Campbell. She was at the New York Studio School, and I also worked with her when I got to Yale in the year before she died. She said I didn't need to worry about the edges. I could stretch the paintings after I painted them. That was a pivotal moment.

William Bailey said "paint towards freedom." Gretna Campbell said, "Why are we making things harder for ourselves?" When Bill and Gretna said that, they lifted the burden. You can do it another way. Gretna talked about Bonnard, who would tack his canvases on the wall, and stretch them afterward. He composed his paintings at the point that he stretched them. It's amazing, because they are so well composed. There are many ways to get to the edges.



Janice Nowinski, "Bad Boyfriend #1" (2013), oil on canvas, 16 x 12 inches

JS: *I know that in the 1990s and 2000s you made still life paintings from observation that still have a very human quality; the elements almost become personages. Can you tell me about this work?*

JN: The still life paintings had a lot to do with my interest in Cézanne. I thought of his body of work as an example of what a great artist would do. He worked really hard, and he developed. Ultimately, trying to recreate Cézanne's structure was unhelpful. When you're painting, you have to find your own structure. You can't use other people's structures, and each subject requires its own.

There is a still life painting from 1991 — a still life that my close friend, the artist Kyle Staver, has called the "mother of all my paintings." I went after it tenaciously for three years and finally resolved it. I felt virtuous when I was making the still lifes. I was working on one as

recently as a year and a half ago. I finally took the still life setup apart and I threw out the painting. It was a sign to stop. At some point I started to dread working on them.

It was about observational painting, but, for me, it didn't allow other things of interest to enter. At that time, I was also making transcriptions of Old Master paintings. One of the paintings I transcribed was Gericault's "The Raft of the Medusa" (1818–19). I considered it helpful for making the still lifes, because they were multi-figure compositions. But I realize now that I was also interested in working with the figure.

The first individual figure painting I made was when I transcribed Boucher's "The Brunette Odalisque" (c. 1745). I did many versions of the painting and it was very pivotal for me. I was focusing on a different kind of pictorial space.



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

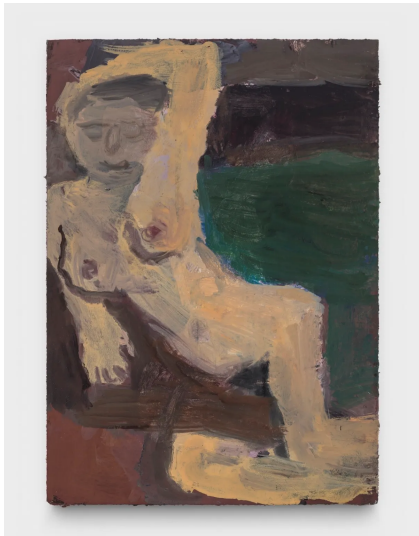
JS: *Your recent body of work includes paintings that stem from found family photographs. How did this body of work develop?*

JN: My cousin sent me a photo of a July 4th family gathering from when I was about two years old. She wrote, "This was one of the worst get togethers ever." She's about five years older than me. Our grandmother had changed her will, and everyone was very upset. The photograph intrigued me, and I thought it would make a perfect painting. But it didn't. I'm still working on the painting of the whole family. However, I noticed when I was working on it that Grandma Jean became the most interesting person in the painting. She died when I was seven, so I mostly knew her through stories.

After my father died, I had ended up with a stash of photos of her — a real trove. A group of them were taken on a trip to Europe. She was a low-level antiques dealer, and a bit of a

character. She was a putting-on-airs type. My uncle took her, before she died, on a trip on the Queen Anne to Europe.

In the photographs, she's dressed in all this finery, even though she is really a Coney Island Avenue person. There are photographs of her at Versailles, in Paris, and in Rotterdam. I felt I had to paint them. She's often holding her black pocketbook and wearing the same white shoes she wore in the backyard photo. Those shoes must have made her feet look good.



Janice Nowinski, "Nude with Green Pillow" (2021), oil on primed linen panel, 7 x 5 inches

JS: *Do you consider your project as investigating this combination of people you know but also those you have distance from?*

JN: Yes, I think this is the way that I work. A theme branches out once I find an intriguing situation to explore. I made a series of paintings of a former romantic partner, and this expanded to paintings of people he was connected to. It started with paintings of a bad boyfriend wearing a towel on his head. From found photographs, I made paintings of a gathering he was part of, with a birthday cake. My paintings of the woman in a bathing suit are actually his ex-wife.

JS: *You are also working from 19th-century erotic photos. Can you tell me about these?*

JN: I think many of the photographs I am using were originally taken as source material for painters. The setups often look like famous paintings, like Ingres's odalisques, or Corot's paintings of women with mandolins.

I like the way the women are posing for the photos, trying to be erotic. I feel like I can see through them. I like the artificial aspect of their efforts to be seductive, because it makes them more human.

Recently I was reading the exhibition catalogue from the [Titian, Tintoretto, Veronese: Rivals in Renaissance Venice](#) exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (2009). I think I transcribed practically every picture in that book. The subject of the nude in the Renaissance was about sensuousness. I still find it sensuous. Women's bodies, the poses, and flesh are very good material for me.



Janice Nowinski, "Bathers after Dürer" (2016), oil on canvas, 11 x 14 inches

JS: *Do you see your project as being about re-working this material through a female gaze?*

JN: I am female, and I identify with the figure; I have my own body. So there is a female gaze. But I wonder, when I consider the female gaze: How about the painter's gaze? The men who collected the work might have been the ones using it for pornographic purposes. Titian's paintings were commissioned by Philip II of Spain. Titian would write letters to the royal family saying, "You have one of the front. I am sending you one of the back now, and with it, you can imagine the front. It's going to be titillating to imagine what you can't see." I enjoyed reading that. Whatever the reasons are for painting, we also have our own reasons when we look at the work, and why we enjoy it.

I think paint is sensuous, so having a really sensuous subject matter works. When I made my series of paintings of the ex-boyfriend, I thought he was very sensuous, even in the goofy outfit I depicted him wearing. He wasn't a young guy, but there was something about him. The paintings changed as my feelings changed toward him. But I think that was the original inspiration.

JS: *I was thinking about the relationship between your often rough, impasto surfaces and the sensuous qualities of the subject. There's a humor and naïve, unrefined quality that connects to how you describe the Rockaway of your youth, merging with this sophisticated art history that interests you.*

JN: Yes, my surfaces are often very rough, and this goes against the lushness of the paint. I have been thinking about Albert York and his simplicity and directness. The work is very unadorned. I relate, because I'm not into flourishes. I also like his imagery: the cans and the flowers can be very unexpected. He saw something in the ordinary that nobody else saw.

I think about the impasto surfaces of Gandy Brodie's work. His surfaces look very good, and that's not an accident. I don't know that they were purely intuitive; I think he planned and crafted it, to get the kind of light he wanted reflecting off of the surfaces.



Janice Nowinski, "Nude Holding a Wine Glass" (2020), oil on canvas, 14 x 11 inches

There is a Gandy Brodie figure painting which I relate to. It has an element of naïveté. I have come to understand why some painters made a decision to work in a simplified style, even if they didn't start out that way. The painter Louis Eilshemius made this transition. His early paintings are related to John Henry Twachtman, and are more academic. Then, he switched his style. This gave him freedom to do certain things. I really like that.

William Johnson's work changed a lot. He started out working in an expressionist style, but his work became more original and simplified. It was completely intentional. I couldn't relate to a lot of William Johnson's late paintings, because I thought he went too far. But I have come to realize that it gave him freedom to express certain things. And I'm all for freedom.

JS: *Can you tell me about why you've chosen a small scale for most of the recent work?*

JN: I happened to have these little boards. It wasn't very intentional. I bought them when they were on sale at Jerry's art supply, and I really like them. They are oil-primed linen on wood. It is a luscious surface.

Painting small also is connected to the subject matter. The size I'm using right now is the best

size for me. It goes back to the Cézanne idea about a direct connection from myself, my mind, straight to the canvas. I am trying to keep the immediacy of my emotional experience while I'm painting. I paint very intuitively. I don't come up with an idea. The more I have an idea, the worse the painting comes out. I see something that I want to do and then I just do it. It is almost unconscious.



Janice Nowinski, "Bather" (2021), oil on linen, 13 x 16 inches

I realize more now how paintings can be a lot of different things, and don't have to be resolved in the same way. I am working on a painting of a woman — a nude in the mirror. I feel like it is close to being finished, but there's something really wrong with it too. However, on some level, if I work on it more, it's going to be a different painting. Now I leave paintings for a while and make multiple versions, as opposed to the still life that I worked on for three years. There is often something to save that we don't recognize at first.

A lot of paintings that I love might not have looked resolved at the time that they were made, but we are used to them now. I relate to Jackson Pollock asking Lee Krasner, "Is it a painting?" Sometimes work and territory are unfamiliar. I want to keep that edge in my work where it could almost not be a painting. They should be a little bit annoying. I worked for a while at the Courant Institute of Mathematical Sciences at NYU and I remember one of the mathematicians said, "You're only as good as the mistake in your last paper." There should be something a little bit wrong with all paintings — and that makes them good.