

## The Ever-Changing Dialogue Between Paint and Body

Through the medium of paint, Nowinski seeks to connect the inner and outer states of her subjects.



by John Yau  
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Janice Nowinski, "Grandma Jean #2" (2021), oil on primed linen panel, 5 x 7 inches (all images courtesy Thomas Erben Gallery)

I first learned about Janice Nowinski on Facebook, where she posted images of her work. As I was a latecomer to FB, I had no idea how long she had been doing this, but it was soon clear to me that she was part of a community that included artists I had reviewed. It also seemed to me that FB was Nowinski's go-to outlet, as she did not show her work in New York and only occasionally outside the city. The reasons were apparent: there is something non-commercial about her work, starting with its scale, which can be as small as 7 by 5 inches. Her palette is crepuscular and wintery, not bright. Her subjects — often nudes — are neither hip nor charming. She does not paint portraits of individuals but of anonymous figures and archetypes. From her posts I learned that her touchstones include Chardin, Manet, Cézanne, Soutine, and David Park.

**Janice Nowinski: Recent Paintings**, at Thomas Erben Gallery (September 9–October 23, 2021), is her debut with this gallery and her first exhibition in New York in nearly a decade. From what I can tell — based on seeing a few images of her earlier work online — Nowinski (who has been out of art school for more than 30

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Janice Nowinski, “Two Women on a Couch” (2021), oil on board, 12 x 9 inches

Of the exhibition’s 22 paintings, the largest is 16 by 12 inches, and many are 7 by 5 inches. In each work the artist focuses on one or more figures in generic settings. It

seems to me that Nowinski is trying to meld together two seemingly incommensurable traditions — the classical, going back to Massacio's fresco "Expulsion from the Garden of Eden" (1425); and the expressionist, beginning with Manet's "Olympia" (1863) and encompassing the work of David Park, Willem de Kooning, and Leon Kossoff — without being ironic. She wants volume, skin, and light to become palpable presences, while having the paint remain recognizable as paint. The questions she has posed for herself start with these: Can you draw in paint without becoming mannered? Can you resist settling into the reassurances offered to you by a style?

Of all the painters trying to establish a space for themselves, while honoring de Kooning's observation, "flesh is the reason oil paint was invented," Nowinski has attained a singular position. By working on a painting that she can always see in its entirety, she equates her field of concentration with that of the painting's surface. On this scale, each move is magnified. And yet, the viewer is likely to associate this scale, approaching the miniature, with control and perfection, neither of which seems on Nowinski's mind. While other writers have pointed out that she can work on a painting for years, the surfaces are not dense or built up. She is like a poet who keeps private all the drafts it took to arrive at something that seems to have spilled out of her. She is not interested in proving that she worked hard on a painting.



Janice Nowinski, "Nude in Front of Mirror" (2021), oil on canvas, 14 x 11 inches

Although the paintings are intimate in scale, the form of the figures is always strong

enough to be read from a considerable distance, partly because of the contrast between the color of the figure and that of the surroundings, which range from tonal contrasts to light and dark. The subjects in this show include the personal and the art historical, from “Grandma Jean #1” (oil on panel, 7 by 5 inches, 2021) to “Bathers after Cézanne” (oil on canvas, 11 by 14 inches, 2015).

The crepuscular light can convey a state of isolation, gloom, and vulnerability, even when the figure’s face is not visible. In “Nude in Front of Mirror” (oil on canvas, 14 by 11 inches, 2021), a featureless woman of indeterminate age is bending down slightly in front of a large mirror, and pulling on something grayish-white and hard to define.

The frame of the square mirror is defined by a semi-solid orange-umber brushstroke on the left, with the other edges marked by less solid brushstrokes making up the contour. Two vertical lines, each extending from one of the mirror’s sides and intersecting at the painting’s top edge, introduce the possibility that the mirror is also a window. The tension between the transparency of a window and solid plane of mirrored glass can be read formally and narratively.



Janice Nowinski, “Bathers after Cézanne” (2015), oil on canvas, 11 x 14 inches

Is the figure standing before a mirror or a window? Why is she featureless, while her breasts have been partially outlined? It is hard to live in that moment of painting when it is easy to overthink everything and feel the need to put in more information and tell the viewer more. Is it possible to let go of a work at that moment, when you



are unsure of what you are getting at, when finished and unfinished overlap?

The size of the figure in the painting's rectangle, which is nighttime blue and gray, accentuates the emotions the work conveys. The sense that the room is large, rather than intimate, adds to the feelings it stirs up. An inexplicable light blue triangular shape, which extends diagonally down from the painting's upper right edge, elevates it into something fresh. What is this shape? By introducing an element that is not instantly readable, but is immediately believable, Nowinski slows down our looking, invites us to consider the scale relationships within the painting.



Janice Nowinski, "Nude on Gray Cloth" (2020), oil on board, 14 x 11 inches

If this triangle is a curtain, isn't the window rather small and high on the wall? If the wind is blowing that hard, why was the window left open? Is the disarray of the paint a reflection of the woman's interior state? It seems to me that one of Nowinski's preoccupations is to evoke the subject's interior weather without turning this joining of inner and outer into an anecdote or sinking into the maudlin. Is it possible to suggest everyday melancholia without becoming overtly dramatic, as in Edvard Munch?

To point out that there is something awkward about the way Nowinski paints is to miss seeing what she does with paint, which changes. Through this medium, she seeks to connect the inner and outer states of her subjects. She also takes a generic subject, such as a woman leaning against a railing in front of a landscape, and makes it

unsentimental and fresh.

Nowinski's work can be disarming. Is she a figurative painter who knows a lot about abstraction? Are some of her nudes on the verge of uncontrollable sobbing or am I reading into the expression, pose, and merging of body and paint?



Janice Nowinski, "Nude on a Piano" (2021), oil on panel, 5 x 7 inches

"Nude on a Piano" (oil on a panel, 5 by 7 inches, 2021) is unsettling because, even as we can see the upward thrust of the woman's breasts and the thickness of her pubic hair, she remains remote. We can see her eyes, nose, and mouth, but we cannot read them. Lying, with her hands clasped behind her head, on the front of a piano, \ her left leg crossing over her right, at an angle that evokes a masculine pose, Nowinski's nude can be understood as a response to the male gaze — one that is both direct and nuanced, which is true of the strongest paintings in the exhibition. They take time to see, but the pleasures they offer and the questions they raise are substantial.

**Janice Nowinski: Recent Paintings** *continues at Thomas Erben Gallery (526 West 26th Street, 4th floor, Chelsea, Manhattan) through October 23.*