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"THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"

## Janice Nowinski at Thomas Erben Gallery



*Woman on a Bench, 2023, Janice Nowinski at Thomas Erben Gallery.*

By **SUCHI PRITCHARD**, May 2023

On a Tuesday evening, on my way to drop in life painting, I happened to glance through the open doors of gallerist Thomas Erben (<http://www.thomaserben.com>)'s space to see Janice Nowinski's current paintings being installed.

I had to enter. The draw to get close to these paintings was immediate. That these are mostly small works encourages one to peer into intimate scenes where gaze is met and challenged.

One might be challenged by the historical weight of the female nude, Odalisque's and standing posed— here rendered such as to give the figures an actuality I often find missing in canonical nudes where in I see more of the painter's bravado and gaze, not the figure as an autonomous being.

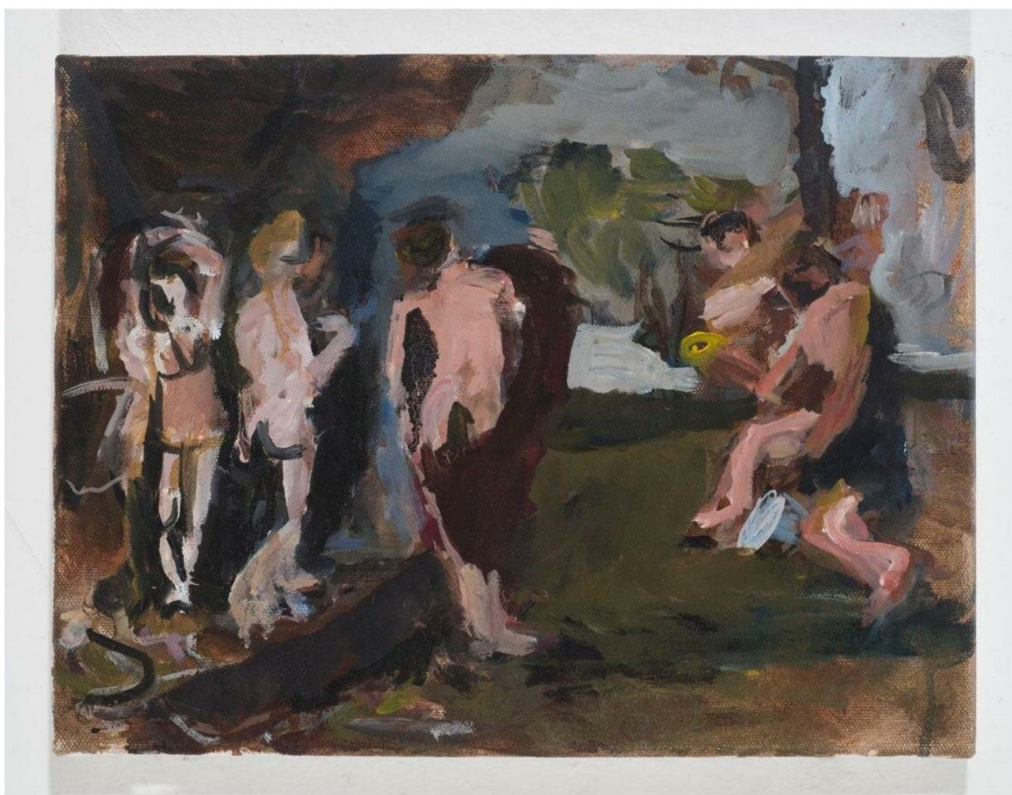
There is in Janice Nowinski's dusk-hued, or 'crepuscular,' (as John Yau, in *Hyperallergic*, wrote of this Nowinski) oil paintings, a spectral quality. As if the image hovers between ethereality and materiality just in front of the pictorial frame, and completed by the viewers' encounter through psyche and sensibility

Later in the week I was lucky to visit Janice at her studio (currently in residence at The Sharpe-Walentas Studio Program in Dumbo), our conversation touched on process, origin and predecessors to the thirty paintings currently at Thomas Erben until May 27<sup>th</sup>. Arriving at her studio— amidst the usual welcome small talk at the entrance, I could feel the motive of the works pulling me.

Compared with my occasional aim at descriptive/representational painting, I was immediately struck by the actuality of the *flesh*, the figures arising from the suspended pictorial plane.

There is a contrasted vulnerability of the surface choices in palette and edge definitions blurring features (at times hidden) with the boldness of the gesture. We get to see the painter's hand. This is a skilled hand and eye turned out from the technical virtuosity of many years practice— of prior still life with composed set-ups.

Here-now there is complete riddance of the necessity to 'model' form instead; Janice shared, "I am not modeling form— the mark making structures the pictorial plane."



*Judgment of Paris after Rubens, 2015.*

Nowinski works surprisingly from mostly vintage postcards of nudes in various states of repose. Working with repetition and multiples, the studio visit showed *works in progress*, the walls filled with variations in different stages of completion, the mastery being when Janice decides a painting is finished, what to leave alone, what to return to.

At Thomas Erben, that Tuesday night the aspect of the multiple, three small nudes, clearly, of the same figure, were what I misperceived to be a triptych. These three figures are what compelled me to want to attend the opening night so I could ask the artist what propels their practice of working in multiples.

My eye kept moving between the three female standing figures and brought about queries on the unknowable aspects of representation any artist must make decisions about, both consciously and unconsciously. The questions of realism vs., embellishments vs., redaction vs., depiction—the images almost as screen memories here create auras of dark vibrancy. The repeat efforts to capture—create a dialogue of return, and indeed the viewer I propose is compelled to return due to the fleeting quality.

Despite the use of source figures culled from vintage postcards, Janice and I dialogued around the possibility of these paintings having aspects of psychological self-portraiture and, again, not being self-portraits. These paintings next dismantle the very notion of a separate notional self due to shifting states that arise in a painter during the hours that encompass each work's creation.

During the rainy subway ride and rainier walk to Janice's studio Dumbo, I mulled over hypothetical ideas of influence in Janice's work. I was pleased when Janice confirmed my instinctual reach toward Willem de Kooning, and Manet as predecessors; she mentioned more recent influences being Joan Brown and Bob Thompson. The Thompson connection made a lot of sense to me as I had felt there was in Nowinski's free brushwork and gestures an Ab|Ex meets baroque feel.

That Rubens is also an influence did not surprise. A second visit to Thomas Erben had me encounter the compositional aspects of a figurative group, in a riff on grand historical paintings such as former greats in Dutch-Flemish tradition were commissioned to complete.

All in all the Janice Nowinski paintings at Thomas Erben offer a comprehensive and varied show of an accomplished painter at home in both the landscape, and the figurative, or one could say, at home in the world. **WM**



#### SUCHI J PRITCHARD

West Coast and NYC poet and painter Suchi J Pritchard decided to take the biggest possible bite from the big apple — so is currently an MFA candidate and adjunct professor in Brooklyn. You can find her scribbling & reading at The Cleveland Review of Books, The Brooklyn Review, Ghost City, Prompt Press, Trestle Ties, Killjoy, The Warren, The Brooklyn Rail, and WHITEHOT magazine. Contact her through IG [suchi\\_j\\_pritchard](#).

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