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UNDER THE INFLUENCE

CHANTAL JOFFE ON GOING BACKSTAGE

portrait: CLARE SHILLARD



MY RECENT SERIES OF PAINTINGS was developed from photographs taken backstage at catwalk shows. I had thought this environment would give me a modern-day equivalent of Degas's ballerinas. I had been thinking about what and how he painted, and his obsession with colour - and what a contemporary version of the ballerinas would be. I think they were closer to prostitutes at that point in time, so today going backstage at the Royal Ballet isn't going to be any kind of equivalent. I've previously used a lot of images from fashion magazines as source material in my paintings, and I thought that looking at what actually goes on during a fashion show would be a way of exerting control and also finding something new behind the fashion images.

Of course, what you imagine things to be and what they actually are is often very different. In Degas you get an extreme physicality: bending backs and drooped legs. In one sense, what I saw backstage was like that, perhaps, but it was also something completely other. You are plunged into thinking about the sort of girls who model and what was happening to them socially.

The models are very powerful in that backstage environment. They have a funny shyness and arrogance: they're surrounded by people who are fawning on them, but at the same time the power is so transitory. Everybody who is taking their image and looking at them is stealing something from them, in a way. They're too young to know that that's happening. Someone said, "Next season, you know, they're nineteen and suddenly they've got hips and an arse, and they're useless." They're so sold about it, though of course the girls are a commodity. I had been told I could photograph them as they changed, when photographers are usually shooed out, but when I was actually there, I couldn't, it was too terrible, they were trying to cover themselves up, it was hideous. Suddenly they are these big gawky girls, very exposed and very, very vulnerable. That was fascinating, but perhaps more in a novelistic way than for painting.

It made me think about Diane Arbus's work. I realised photography takes courage, even if you're photographing models. My images are quite oblique in a way: they're backs of heads, side views, noses, cheeks and hair. Previously I've used a lot of very frontal images and painted women very directly. These paintings are more like a glimpse, giving a sense of something voyeuristic.

CHANTAL JOFFE IS AN ARTIST WHO LIVES AND WORKS IN LONDON.
HER SOLO SHOW AT VICTORIA MIND GALLERY, LONDON, IS ON VIEW 24 JUNE - 2 AUGUST