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# Chantal Joffe: 'I don't find men very interesting to look at'



Chantal Joffe: "I'm after an honest, almost brutal quality. That's why I love to paint myself"



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By **Alastair Sooke**, ART CRITIC

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'I paint fast, in a kind of frenzy,' says the 46-year-old British artist Chantal Joffe. "It's such a great state. I've never taken heroin but I imagine that's what drugs are like. You feel so..." She searches for the right words. "It's a sort of ecstasy. But it's also sad, because you know it's going to end."

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Abruptly she gets up from her paint-spattered chair and scuttles across her large warehouse studio beside a canal in north London. She moved here six months ago, after 10 years in a smaller, adjoining space. "To begin with I felt like a rat in a field," she says.


She wants to show me a series of pastels that will be seen in her new solo exhibition at the Victoria Miro Gallery in Mayfair. Diminutive oil paintings honouring the American "confessional" poets Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell, whom she has read all her life, will also be on display.

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Blonde Girl Sitting on a Picnic Table, 2007 CREDIT: CHANTAL JOFFE



her ferociously bright pastels depicting women and young girls. It is relatively rare to come across images of men in Joffe's work.

"Truthfully, I don't find them interesting to look at," she tells me, "which isn't to say I don't think they're attractive."

"Pastel is such a pure form," she continues. "It's just raw, intense pigment. I couldn't stop. Sometimes I would make 10 in a day. Then, just like that, I came in [to the studio] and I couldn't make another one. They were dead. And now I've got to hit my head against a wall for another few weeks to find some other way through."

She smiles wistfully, then looks subdued. Gone is the quiet but vehement passion with which she described the rapture of inspiration. Her eyes flicker across the floor. "I'm very shy," she says softly, her whisper almost inaudible.

This is the conundrum presented by Chantal Joffe. In person she is friendly and amusing, but bashful. It is plain that she would feel more comfortable if she were by herself. Yet when she is working, her self-consciousness recedes, replaced by something much wilder, more fluid and free.

This is immediately apparent in her charismatic style, a loose, gestural, spontaneous form of expression, summoned by manipulating paint with confidence and speed. At first glance, her paintings, which sell for up to £50,000, may appear naive, but they shine with a glowing elegance reminiscent of late Matisse.



Self-Portrait in Red Dress and Orange Cardigan. 2014 CREDIT:

Joffe was born in 1969 in St Albans in Vermont, where her father worked as a psychologist. Her “eccentric” mother, an amateur artist, encouraged her children to be creative, and Joffe recalls a happy childhood eating Popsicles and making paper dolls of their neighbours.

When she was 13, the family relocated to London, where she attended “a rough comprehensive girls’ school, totally different from anything I had known. So it was hard. But it had a good art teacher.”

This mentor spurred Joffe’s interest in painting, though she didn’t need much encouragement: “I never thought of doing anything else, really,” she says.

*I still get obsessed [with artists] and try to inhabit them. Recently it was Vuillard.*



After a foundation course at Camberwell, she spent three years at Glasgow School of Art, where her peers included the artist David Shrigley, who was nominated for the Turner Prize in 2013. By the early Nineties she was studying at the Royal College.

Yet she graduated “in despair”, uncertain about how to make her mark as an artist. At the time, she felt capable only of pastiche, aping the styles of her heroes Giacometti and Matisse. “I still get obsessed [with artists],” she says, “and try to inhabit them. Recently it was Vuillard.”



Self-Portrait with Esme, 2009 CREDIT: CHANTAL JOFFE

Her breakthrough came in 1996, when her tiny, luminous paintings of women posing in pornographic magazines were selected for the New Contemporaries exhibition at the Tate Gallery. They were an unforgettable fusion of the radiant quattrocento Italian paintings that she had been studying in the National Gallery and the brash sensationalism, then in vogue, of Young British Artists such as Sarah Lucas, whose work she “loved”.

“They were really clean and pure and bright,” Joffe says of her pictures. “And people responded to them. I must have made around 100 in the end. They were a contemporary way of painting the nude. [Charles] Saatchi bought 50 or 60.”

Soon afterwards, Joffe was picked up by Victoria Miro, who has represented her ever since. She stopped painting porn – “I couldn’t do it anymore. At that age, I was quite interested in sex in a way that I’m not now” – and started using glossy fashion photographs as her principal source. Her paintings also grew dramatically in size.

Then she became pregnant by fellow artist Dan Coombs – their daughter, Esme, is now 11 – and motherhood and self-portraiture became prominent themes. “I can only paint what I’m interested in,” she explains.



Esme and Vita, 2008 CREDIT: CHANTAL JOFFE



Leafing through the catalogue for an exhibition of self-portraits shown in New York earlier this year, she lingers over the plate of a massive painting, 8ft high, in which she appears naked beside Esme, who wears a pink nightshirt. “I look like an old banana in a fruit bowl beside a ripe peach,” she says.

*People think painting must be a lovely thing, but it's hard. If you are trying to be truthful then you expose yourself a lot.*



She laughs. “I don’t care what I look like. I don’t want to make pretty paintings. I’m after an honest, almost brutal quality. That’s why I love to paint myself.

I enjoy it because it’s free.”

Joffe once said that when she was young she considered being an artist “the luckiest, best thing to be”. Does she still feel that way now, in her mid-40s? “It’s up and down,” she says. “People think painting must be a lovely thing, but it’s hard. If you are trying to be truthful then you expose yourself a lot.”

At the same time, she says, “I do feel lucky that I get to paint every day.” Her eyes sparkle with passion once again. “When you are painting, that is the most alive, the most present tense, you are ever going to be. There’s nothing else.”