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‘I Don’t Mind Being Repulsive’: Swiss Painter Louise Bonnet on the Lure of Ugliness and How Horror Films Inspire Her Work

We spoke with the artist about Iron Maiden, voyeurism, and the trickery of Alfred Hitchcock.

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Louise Bonnet. Photo: Jeff McLane. Courtesy Gagosian.

On the corner of 75th Street and Park Avenue in New York, inside Gagosian’s smallest gallery, are five large-scale paintings by the Swiss-born, Los Angeles-based painter Louise Bonnet. The space is closed entirely to visitors, but there is a silver lining: its large windows look directly onto the street, allowing passerby to peer inside.

Bonnet’s exhibition, titled “The Hours” (through November 7), wasn’t originally intended to be viewable only through glass. “From the street, it’s really hard to see,” she admits, noting that the glare of the sun can be especially punishing. “I think at night, it probably looks its best,” she says. But even then, Bonnet feels the paintings need to be seen up close to be understood. “I

know every artist says that, that their work is really different in person. But I really think mine is. It really doesn't translate very much in pictures."

Still, there is a distinctly graphic quality to Bonnet's work; it pops even through a window pane. And her dark yet plainly humorous sensibility comes through in any reproduction. But the artist's interests run deeper. In her newest works, there is a sense of suspended narrative, a religious subtext, and a feeling that the darkness and confusion of 2020 has morphed into monstrosity.

The artist spoke with Artnet News about the mysteries that haunt her paintings, the influence of filmmaker David Cronenberg, and the importance of treating her figures with a measure of dignity.

Louise Bonnet, Dawn *(2020). © Louise Bonnet. Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian.*

Let's start with your newest paintings and the show at Gagosian. The works refer to medieval illuminated manuscripts, including the *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* (circa 1412–16) Book of Hours. Some of the paintings, such as Dawn, also refer to particular times of the day. What interested you in those themes?

I like medieval painting because it's actually very utilitarian; it's not about the person who painted it, usually. It's really in the service of an idea, and it's trying to tell a story to people who probably couldn't read. It's not about who made it or how. I'm interested in the subject and how it makes me feel. I don't want to start thinking about how it was made.

With the Book of Hours, specifically, it was a way of structuring time. I felt I really needed that during the first period of quarantine. I have a very structured way of working. As a Swiss person, I have a really hard time not having a plan. So when the lockdown started, everyone was home and there was no structure, and that was a bad feeling for me. I needed to make the paintings into a day.

There's an essay on your earlier work by the art historian Flavia Frigeri in which she says your art is suspended in time, that it's timeless in a way. So are the new works a change in direction?

What changed is that I started being interested in the narrative. Things are set up in a way that could be a movie, or a movie still. [Something has] happened before and after [each painting]. You just happen to be there in the middle.

Do you have a story in mind when you're painting? Do you think a lot about narrative?

Yes, yes. I mean, sometimes it's very unclear. I've been thinking a lot about the [1985 drama] movie *Vagabond* by Agnès Varda. It's great because you are shown these scenes that she never explains. There's no judgment at all. No one needs to explain themselves or to justify anything. My paintings are funny, so you are supposed to have an opinion. I mean, you can have an opinion about the movie too. But I think it's important that I'm never mean to [my subjects]. I don't make fun of them. I think it's dignified.

Is there some moral there for you?

I just think that if you don't [treat the figures with dignity] it removes all the other layers of meaning that are there. So if we agree that we're not making fun of something, that we're not cruel about something, then we can feel and look at everything else. That's much more interesting.

Louise Bonnet, Visitation *(2020). © Louise Bonnet. Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian.*

What about ugliness? You've mentioned before that you're interested in it. What's appealing about it?

I haven't asked my shrink exactly, but I find it extremely calming. I'm interested in the way you can depict shame and rage and death and freeze them, so you're able to look at them from the outside.

You've said that you want viewers to be a little detached from the works, like voyeurs.

Yes, you're not challenged by the figure or the character looking back at you. There are no eyes [in my work] because that sucks up all the attention. I could never look at someone being shamed if I had to deal with their feelings of me looking at them. I could never get used to these cringey TV shows, like *The Real Housewives*, where they perform for someone looking at them. That's different than seeing something you're maybe not allowed to see.

Is it fair to say there's a dark undertone to the new works?

They're pretty dark. They're in a world that's very… heavy. There are a lot of secrets and mysteries, which I think reflects the mood right now. Have you seen the [2018 horror] movie *Mandy*?

Yes, I have.

I really feel like I relate to that sort of mood right now. I'm not dramatic that way, but I think this sort of end-of-the world, dark… but also very funny—

I was going to say, that movie is very funny.

Yes, yes. That over-the-top drama is not really in my painting, but you know those Iron Maiden t-shirts? Not that I would want to make work like that, but I don't know, suddenly that feels right—an angry, heavy-metal aesthetic.

Louise Bonnet, Calvary 2 (Potatoes Again) *(2020). © Louise Bonnet. Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian.*

That Iron Maiden aesthetic is also slightly cartoonish.

Yeah. And that's why it's good, that's why it's interesting. I'm not looking to go into that direction, but the feeling underneath [my new work] was going in that direction a bit. Or like [the 1979 horror movie] *The Brood*. Do you know that [David] Cronenberg film?

Yes, it's a good one. And it's interesting that you brought up three films, unprompted. Have you just been watching lots of movies lately, or is this a long-standing interest?

It's really how I see the world. Or, it's the way I process the world, since always. I grew up without a TV. We didn't really go to the movies. So when we did, it was this huge event. When I got older, I could see [more] movies. I just love movies.

Has anything you've seen recently worked its way into your new work?

There's also [the 2013 science fiction film] *Under the Skin*. That's really, really amazing. It's about displacement and being out of control, or sort of losing your grip. The director stays out of things, it's very hands off. You're just seeing these things. You're trusted to understand [them] without being told. And it's very calm, even though these crazy horrible things happen. It's a movie that, in many ways, I feel very close to. [In my work], my sensibility has to be there. I just think it should trust the viewer to have their own ideas. I'm trying to think of an example where a work doesn't trust the viewer…

Maybe *Real Housewives*? It's not subtle.

Yes. When I saw that a couple of times I thought, "Well, maybe that could be a version of some sort of art, like a terrible [version]." But it just made me sick.

Louise Bonnet, Calvary with Potato *(2020). © Louise Bonnet. Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian.*

There are a lot of repulsive elements in your work, too. In *Calvary with Potato* (2020), there's blood and the strangeness of this figure that has hair, but maybe no head—it's a little unclear what's going on. Do you hope people are repulsed by your work in a different way than you're repulsed by the *Real Housewives*?

Oh yes. I really hope that! I don't mind being repulsive, in the way that *Mandy* is repulsive, because that's different. It's not craven; it's trying to convey something. It's not *just* disgusting.

It's interesting that you brought up David Cronenberg because his movies have a lot of repulsive elements, but they're always in the service of sorting out some deeper psychological problem. I think his movies prove that your mind is never separate from

your body, so that when something terrible happens to your body, your mind is involved too. There's no clear distinction between the mind and the body.

I could not have put it better. If someone says that about my work, that's exactly right. What happens to the body is completely connected to what happens in your head. It turns out that [in my work] the bodies [have openings] that look like penises and vaginas, and I don't really set out for that to happen. But I think the openings in the body are where shame happens, but you always cover it. There are all these rules about all the openings in the body, right? Like, things leaking out—that can't happen. That's really interesting to me, just the body out of control, or things happening to the body and how you would react to it.

Let me ask you about the way you juxtapose beauty with pain or humor. What can we see if we put beauty next to pain or humor that's otherwise invisible?

I think it makes the pain easier to see. In Vagabond, there is this homeless girl walking around the South of France and it's really terrible conditions. It's dirty and she's dirty. But it's shot in such a beautiful way that you can see it better.

I could also imagine a scenario where something is dressed up to be made more beautiful, and therefore falsified.

You could be right in certain circumstances. But to me, it makes it so I can feel the core feeling rather than get stuck on details. The beauty is a tool to get to the real thing. Or maybe it's an entryway. In a way, it's a trick. In [Alfred] Hitchcock, for example, everything is really beautiful, right? The hair, and the color, and everyone looks great. And that sort of tricks you into trusting where he's leading you. And then he just collapses that. It's kind of like magic. You can be so much more horrified if you're led into something thinking you can trust it.

Louise Bonnet, Dusk (2020). © Louise Bonnet. Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian.

Let's talk a little about materials. How did you learn to paint in oil? I think it's only been since 2013 that you've been working in that medium.

Yeah, that's when I started it.

What did you study in school?

In Geneva, I studied illustration and graphic design and I always drew, [partly] to replace TV. So [in school] I wasn't thinking about painting, really. I was always aligned [with] the line. I'm not sure how it's engineered in the rest of Europe, but in Geneva, to be a real artist, like a painter, you have to write a thesis. It's very serious. The way I felt about it, and maybe this wasn't true exactly, was that it was like being a doctor or something. And all I wanted to do was make stuff.

So what drew you to oil paint in the past decade?

I was really trying to manipulate light, and I didn't realize that I needed oil to do that. One day, I tried it and right away I realized how unbelievable it was.

So you taught yourself to paint in oil?

Yes. And I'm really insecure about the fact that I didn't go to real art school. But I did watch hours of YouTube videos. But sometimes I feel like [oil] does its own thing by itself. I think, "Oh, it would be great if that happened," and it kind of does happen.

The paintings at Gagosian are really quite big. Do you work with assistants?

No, no. I'm old enough to know what kind of life I want, and I really protect that. And having someone in my studio with me is definitely not the way I want my life to go.

What would having somebody in the studio make complicated?

Oh I would just wonder, "What are they thinking?" And I don't even know what I would tell them to do because when I make a painting, there's no way I know the result. A painting changes so many times.