

GAGOSIAN

ARTnews

Painter Ewa Juszkiewicz Wants to Shatter Conservative Ideas About Beauty

Claire Selvin



Ewa Juszkiewicz, EWA JUSZKIEWICZ

For nearly 10 years, the Warsaw-based artist Ewa Juszkiewicz has created paintings in style of 18th- and 19th-century European portraiture with a twist—her subjects’ faces are obscured. The faces of the women she paints are always covered, whether by arrangements of plants or fungi, intricate hairstyles, tightly wrapped fabric, or other means. On the occasion of the artist’s exhibition of new works at Gagosian’s Park & 75 space on New York’s Upper East Side, which runs through January 4 and is viewable through the gallery’s front windows, *ARTnews* interviewed Juszkiewicz about how she engages with and upends art historical conventions, the role contemporary fashion plays in her oeuvre, and more.

ARTnews: What first drew you to take portraiture—specifically historical European portraiture—as the inspiration for your own work?

Juszkiewicz: I have been interested in portraiture since starting out on my artistic path. And because of this, going back into history and exploring how portrait painting has evolved over the centuries was something that felt completely natural and essential to me. While looking at classic examples of portraiture from the past, I felt a kind of dissonance in the way I perceived them. On the one hand, those paintings attracted me and fascinated me because of their artistry and technique. On the other hand, I noticed that many of them present women according to a

particular formula or convention. For example, in 18th- and 19th-century European painting, women were very often portrayed in a uniform way. Their poses, gestures, and facial expressions were very similar and showed no deep emotion or individuality. As a result, I developed a strong need to reference those portraits, and to establish a dialogue with them. I was driven by a desire to revitalize history, or rather to create my own story on the basis of it.

Are there any specific artists, works, or historical periods that have been especially impactful on your practice?

Besides 18th- and 19th-century European painting, to which I refer directly in my works, early Netherlandish painters, like Jan van Eyck, Petrus Christus, and Robert Campin have had a significant influence on my practice. I am always impressed by their technique, approach to color, and especially their unbelievable precision in capturing the texture and features of objects and human figures. Every time I have an opportunity to see the *Portrait of a Young Girl* by Petrus Christus at the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin it is a very intense and emotional experience for me. Other important influences have included Cindy Sherman's works, especially her "History Portraits." Apart from painting, I have been inspired by contemporary fashion designers, such as Rei Kawakubo and Iris van Herpen. In the fashion world, I am particularly fascinated by projects that disrupt stereotypical canons of beauty and show the female figure in an innovative way, reshaping its form and image.



Ewa Juszkiewicz, Untitled (after Jan Adam Kruseman), 2020, oil on canvas, 86 5/8 x 63 in. © EWA JUSZKIEWICZ/COURTESY GAGOSIAN

There are disquieting, surreal aspects to your portraits. When did obscuring the faces of figures in your works become central to your practice, and what are some of the desired effects of this approach?

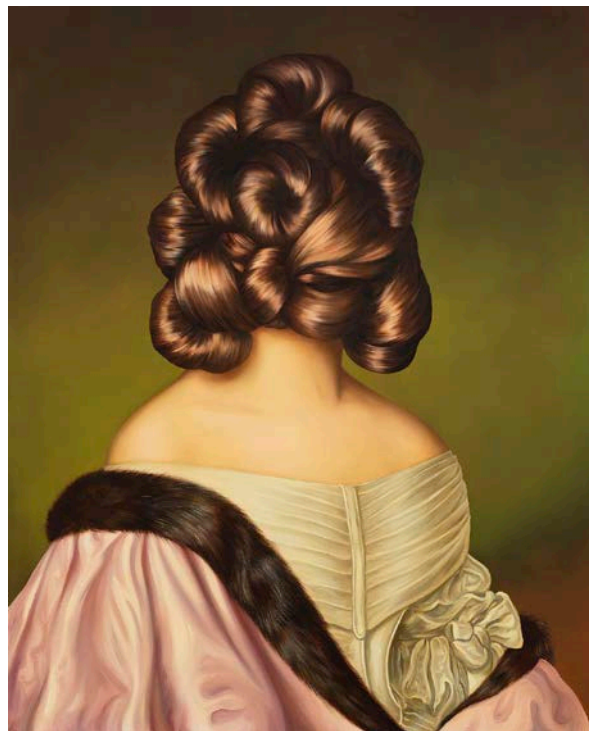
I started this series of paintings in 2011, but before then I had already experimented and subjected the traditional portrait to various deformations. I had examined where the boundaries of the portrait were and what effects I could achieve by means of deformation and distortion.

In these paintings, by covering or modifying a portrait, I want to disrupt the known order and shatter the uniform and conservative image of female beauty. Through a metamorphosis of classical paintings, I change their interpretation and provoke new, alternative associations. In my paintings, by juxtaposing seemingly incompatible elements, I create new, surreal images, which are hybrid characters that evoke ambiguous, often disturbing or grotesque associations. By interweaving elements relating to the canon and tradition with elements derived from nature and the senses, I want to release the expression, emotion, and vitality previously hidden by convention.

What is the origin of the Gagosian show's title, "In vain her feet in sparkling laces glow?"

The title of the exhibition is taken from 18th-century poetry. It is a quote from a poem *Dorinda at her Glass* by the English poet Mary Leapor. I discovered Leapor's work quite recently. In her poetry, she touches upon subjects like social expectations with regard to female appearance. She also describes the female body in a very natural way. I think her poetry is universal and still speaks to us today.

The paintings presented at Gagosian Park & 75 were prepared specially for this exhibition and with this particular space in mind. In this show I paraphrase artworks by Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, Jan Adam Kruseman, Joseph Karl Stieler, and Adolf Ulrik Wertmüller. Despite the fact that I draw inspiration from different sources, this set of paintings constitutes a harmonious whole, that becomes my own personal collection.



Ewa Juszkiewicz, Untitled (after Joseph Karl Stieler), 2020, oil on canvas, 31 1/2 x 25 5/8 in. © EWA JUSZKIEWICZ/COURTESY GAGOSIAN

All of your portraits are idiosyncratic and full of fascinating poses and details. Have you become more experimental with those works since you started creating them?

Definitely, my portraits have evolved over the past years. It is a constant process. In the newest paintings, I have experimented even more with color and painting texture. Working on them has given me a lot of pleasure and satisfaction. I also have a feeling that my latest paintings have even greater dynamism, and that they have a kind of wildness that I have really wanted to show in recent times.

What can we expect from you next, and how do you continue to find new ways to riff on a centuries-old genre?

I am very curious to see where my future research will lead me. The history of art is an infinite source of inspiration. Mixing various genres and redefining conventional representations is my great passion. This fascination and curiosity have always driven me and pushed me forward.