



LOUISE BONNET

PISSING IN THE WIND

Interview BILL POWERS
Portraits MAGNUS UNNAR
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What would Sigmund Freud say about the figures in Louise Bonnet's paintings? Pink, flesh-toned bodies levitate and gravitate, in a demented dreamscape like sleep paralysis demons with blond bobs. Bodies urinate, lactate, and spill blood from hidden arteries of the unconscious, submerged in the blue waters of psychosexual and libidinous tableaux, and erogenous zones are pushed to the physiological limits. Born in Geneva where she attended the Haute école d'art et de design, she moved to Los Angeles in 1994 and never left. Borrowing from the Old Masters and Surrealists, Bonnet has created a painterly vernacular that is entirely her own. On the day of our interview, Bonnet was announced as one of the 213 artists included in the 2022 Venice Biennale, curated by Cecilia Alemani, which will explore the connection between bodies and the Earth.

BILL POWERS In an interview with Josh Smith, he once lamented to me how disappointing it is that you can't just be an artist anymore. You have to be an entertainer, too. You need the personality to go along with your paintings.

LOUISE BONNET I don't know about being an entertainer. I was never very good at articulating what I was doing. When I started, in fact, I couldn't do it at all. But I didn't feel like I owed that

moral or lesson that she had to learn, or even linear exposition.

POWERS Why did that movie resonate so deeply with you?

BONNET To see a woman depicted in this way is rare. Especially in a movie from the '80s. When dealing with a "bad" woman, the narrative is usually pretty paternalistic.

POWERS I don't want to analyze you, but is the appeal that you can be

"I'm very interested in shame and the body in my paintings, and bodily functions bring extra shame and embarrassment."

to anyone, either. Over time, I got better at explaining what I was thinking, even to myself, and where the ideas in the work came from beyond the obvious of *oh, that's a foot*, and realized that it was actually important.

POWERS Remind me the name of the movie that inspired your last show in Los Angeles.

BONNET *Vagabond* by Agnes Varda, which I saw when I was fifteen years old and then again after the filmmaker died in 2019. As a teenager, the movie floored me. I didn't really understand why it had such an impact. When you're fifteen, you get caught up in the drama of the narrative. The main character is someone who was close to my own age and was not reacting to the way things happen to her in the way I'd imagine. She is a young, homeless girl who is walking around the South of France in the off-season—it's kind of bleak and cold. The character is not trying to be likable and isn't trading off of any of the tricks young girls sometimes feel like they have to do. The first thing you see in the movie is that she has died. Then the movie is flashbacks, more like ellipses that don't try to explain or justify what happened. When I saw it again, being older, the fact that the director is not trying to justify her behavior or decisions, however unlikeable, I found quite liberating. It's not a way that women are usually portrayed in films. There's no

unlikeable, and never explain yourself, and still have these main character moments?

BONNET She's only the main character because the movie is about her. There's none of the trappings of the focus being on her. If anything, she's more elusive and enigmatic as the movie unfolds. I was raised in an era when you always had to apologize, and be polite, and be careful of hierarchies. It's compelling to watch someone drop those societal conventions.

POWERS When you have some blue bodies, or blue body parts underwater in your paintings, are you thinking about Picasso?

BONNET Actually, I try to not think about Picasso. Or really anyone that is already embedded in my psyche.

POWERS I ask because a few years ago you did cite Picasso's *The Weeping Woman* as a reference point for your figures with tears.

BONNET The blue bodies were me responding to more hidden aspects, like the part of the iceberg that you can't see from the surface. I guess I was also thinking of dead Christ paintings too, with the sores and discoloration, the "othering" of the body.

POWERS Is the distancing from Picasso because you don't want to be too influenced by him?

BONNET It's not just Picasso. I really try to not compare what I am doing to

anyone else, at least in my own head. You become paralyzed if you do. But obviously, there's a lot of influences ingrained in my psyche.

POWERS Do you feel more comfortable in your universe creation at this point?

BONNET It's like I hit a vein because I kept poking around for so long. Now I can access it because it's there.

POWERS I see an ancient Egyptian influence recurring in your paintings the last few years. Am I making that up?

BONNET I like the idea of something so old that it becomes a receptacle for something I don't understand, that I don't know the meaning of, something that feels eternal. Like a mummy holding its mysteries in a terrifying but somehow relatable way. Recently they found one where the fetus was still in its womb, pickled.

POWERS The last time I visited your studio, I saw a painting in progress, where it appeared like a woman was peeing golden light. Is there some art historical precedent for such a scene?

BONNET Urine is used in interesting ways in art. There's a painting by Lorenzo Lotto at The Met of Cupid peeing on Venus [*Venus and Cupid*, 1520s], which I believe was given as a wedding gift for good luck getting pregnant. I guess they couldn't depict semen, but the default is to replace it with urine. In a way, we are much more prudish now than people were in the 1500s about certain things. There's a fresco of an angel peeing on a crucified Christ in the Basilica of St Francis of Assisi in Assisi, for example, so that must be a good thing, I assume. I'm very interested in shame and the body in my paintings, and bodily functions bring extra shame and embarrassment.

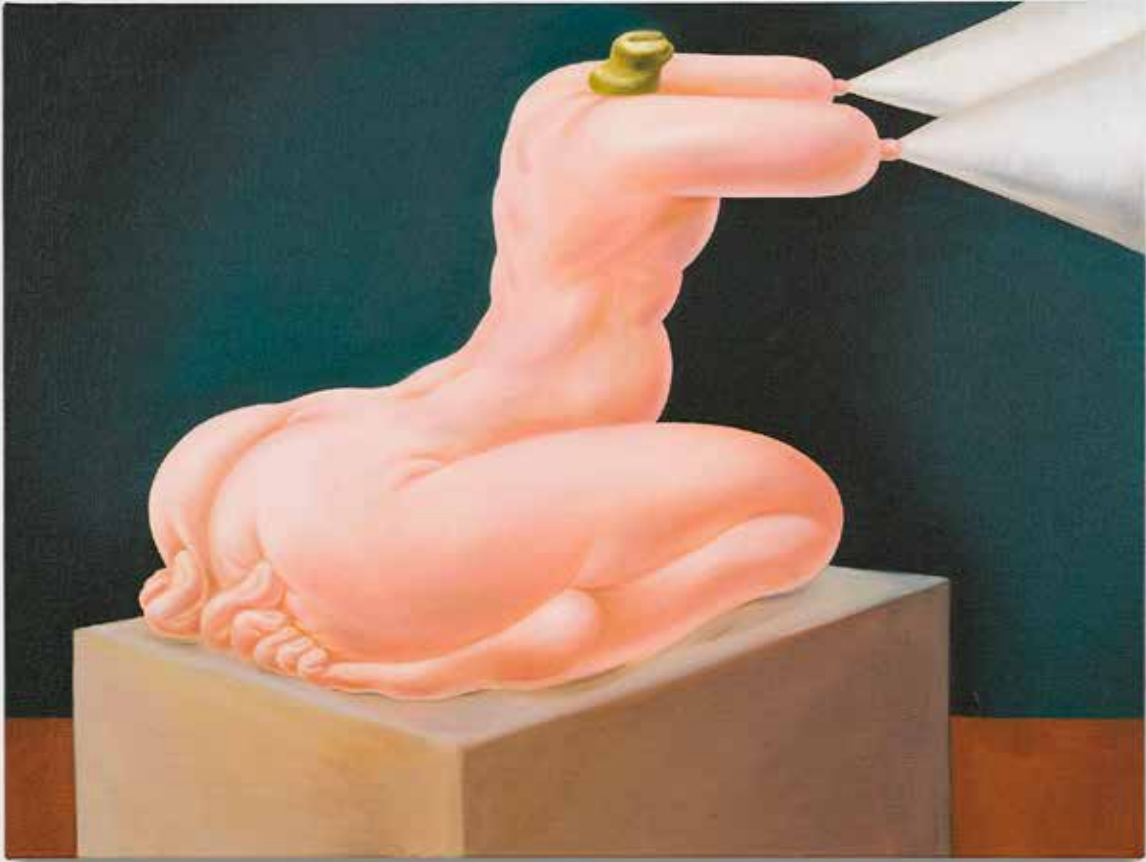
POWERS Do you see that as a sexist thing, or that we all have embarrassment about our bodily fluids.

BONNET Both. I paint these characters that are sometimes empowered and in charge of it, and sometimes not. I have this whole thing with control and constraint.

POWERS Are there mythological forces at work in your paintings?



Louise Bonnet, *Veiled Nude, Bloated Belly*, 2019, oil on linen, 66 x 56 inches, courtesy of the artist and Galerie Max Hetzler/Gagosian



THIS PAGE Louise Bonnet, *Kneeling Sphinx 2*, 2021, oil on linen, 30 x 40 in, courtesy of the artist and Gagosian, photo by Jeff McLane, courtesy Gagosian OPPOSITE PAGE Louise Bonnet, *Pissing Gorgon*, 2021, oil on canvas, 72 x 60 1/8 in, courtesy of the artist and Galerie Max Hetzler, photo by Charles White





BONNET When I read the myth of the Gorgons, I was struck by the part where once Perseus cut off her [Medusa] head, he threw her body in the water, and her blood created coral, because coral is alive and colorful when hidden under water, but petrifies above it, where it can be seen. There was a painting in my Paris show at Max Hetzler that hints at the scene.

POWERS Today it was announced that you are included in the 59th Venice Biennale. How did you react when you got the news?

BONNET Just incredible. It was fantastic meeting Cecilia Alemani who curated the Biennale, she really made me feel like we understood each other. I think I heard Nathaniel Mary Quinn say this once, too, that as an artist you are basically alone in your studio, constantly terrified. You spend your time feeling as if you are about to jump off the high board. So, when something happens where you feel that it is being rewarded, that you are doing something right and you can just keep doing the work, then that's a big relief.

POWERS Why do you have to panic at all?

BONNET I don't think you can make good work that is advancing what you are trying to communicate without being scared. I really would like to know who can make art without being scared. And then, I have some questions for them. Feeling accepted removes a huge weight. It means a lot.

POWERS Is it hard being married to an artist? Everyone has egos, and I would imagine that you being in the Venice Biennale could make things complicated at home, the competitive aspect...

BONNET Adam [Silverman] is a ceramic artist with a very different practice. We don't really compete in the same arenas. I am the one, in any case, who would get very upset, he's much more zen than I am. But he has work and a project at LACMA—a ceramic project using clay, ash, and water from all fifty states and the territories. He is ambitious and super accomplished, it's not really something that figures in our lives.

POWERS The only painting of yours I saw hanging in your house in Silver Lake is an older work that has a face with eyes. Why did you end up reducing facial features from your figures?

BONNET I started painting more faces lately, actually, because I started feeling that whenever it's a bit ambivalent, whether the woman I am painting is doing something or something is being done to her, she might need more agency; an identity or something. Otherwise, eyes

BONNET I wonder what she would think of this term! She was more into full psychoanalysis and really drew from that, but I think our work draws from a similar well.

POWERS Famously, any time you see a spider in Louise Bourgeois' work, it's a stand-in for her mother. So, are the sentries in your paintings your children?

BONNET Yes, they could be, metaphorically. But also, why would your kids need to be sentries? I haven't explored



Lorenzo Lotto, *Venus and Cupid*, 1520s, oil on canvas, 36 3/8 x 43 7/8 in. Purchase, Mrs. Charles Wrightsman Gift, in honor of Marietta Tree, 1986, Courtesy the The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

or faces suck up too much attention from the rest of the painting. You try to read too much into their expressions. There's a Matisse painting with three women and a little turtle, their faces are done very quickly and are mysterious, abstract, and sculptural. I wanted that kind of energy.

POWERS You seem to be working at a bigger scale these days.

BONNET I think women should take up more physical space, if they want. Especially in the art world. I always liked that Louise Bourgeois made huge things. You can be in the world and take space.

POWERS Louise Bourgeois almost feels like your spirit animal.

all those layers yet. Maybe they act as a buffer against the oblivion, protecting you against your own mortality. They are also very much a team. We are a team.

POWERS Do you ever pose in front of a mirror for a certain angle of an elbow? The loose skin around your elbow that I believe is called your "weenus."

BONNET I just listened to that book *Alive* about the Uruguayan rugby team who crashed in the Andes and resorted to cannibalism. In one part, they make socks out of the skin from a dead teammates' elbows. In the end, you could wind up being someone else's socks.