

GAGOSIAN

The New York Times

Her Clothes? Fabulous. Her Face? A Fungus.

Ewa Juszkiewicz's paintings depict well-dressed women whose faces are hidden by mushrooms, textiles and wild hairdos.

Chantel Tattoli



Ewa Juszkiewicz, a Polish painter, at her studio in Warsaw in October. Credit...Anna Liminowicz for The New York Times

Ewa Juszkiewicz was staring at a portrait of Katarzyna Starzenska, a Polish aristocrat and social fixture, completed in 1804.

“She had many romances,” Ms. Juszkiewicz said. “She was partying a lot. She was basically an influencer.”

“Other women all wanted to dress like her,” she said.

The small painting by François Gérard, which presents Starzenska in a black dress and red shawl, was displayed at the Royal Castle in Warsaw, a museum that was once the home of Polish monarchs.

“I think her black dress is velvet,” Ms. Juszkiewicz said. “The red shawl — probably cashmere? Cashmere had become popular at that time.”

Ms. Juskiewicz, 39, a surrealist painter, had come to the museum on a morning in late September to get another look at the likeness of Starzenska, whose life Ms. Juskiewicz had studied before painting her own version of the portrait, though not exactly.

At almost 10 feet tall, Ms. Juskiewicz's version is much larger than the original. And in it, Starzenska's head is wrapped entirely in white, black and red fabrics, with a sprig of leaves sticking out of the top.



The 1804 portrait of Katarzyna Starzenska, a Polish aristocrat and social fixture, by François Gérard. Credit...François Gérard



In Ms. Juskiewicz's piece inspired by the portrait, the subject's head is wrapped in white, black and red fabrics, with a sprig of leaves sticking out of the top. Credit...Anna Liminowicz for The New York Times

The piece, “In a Shady Valley, Near a Running Water (after François Gérard),” is one of nine new oil paintings by Ms. Juskiewicz in a solo exhibition opening on Nov. 3 at the Gagosian Gallery in Beverly Hills, Calif. Most are re-creations of specific paintings of women from the 18th and 19th centuries.

While Ms. Juskiewicz has faithfully reproduced many aspects of the older paintings, including their subjects’ clothes, she has obscured the faces of the women in her portraits. Some appear swathed in fabrics, while others are covered by plants or phantasmagoric hairdos that are inspired by the elaborate hairstyles and wigs worn in the eras when her source material was originally produced.

The paintings Ms. Juskiewicz is showing at Gagosian are part of a series of portraits she has made. Some, like “Ginger Locks” (2021), which shows a woman in a teal dress with a Gordian-knot-like mass of copper hair covering her face, are not based on specific paintings.

In October, Louis Vuitton started selling a \$10,500 bag bearing a print of “Ginger Locks.” The original painting was bought by the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami. (Louis Vuitton declined to provide the terms of its contract with Ms. Juskiewicz for the bag.)

Ms. Juskiewicz said her approach is meant to heighten what she called “the absurdity” of period portraiture of women, particularly the way in which female subjects were often depicted with similar features, like polite eyes, pink cheeks, porcelain complexions and perfect coifs.

Ms. Juskiewicz described those features as a sort of “mask” that brought uniformity, not individuality, to period portraits. She said that by covering the heads of subjects in her paintings with textiles and hair — or sometimes with fungi, fruit or bugs — she is asking viewers to consider women as individuals and as more than pretty faces.

Derek Blasberg, 41, the executive editor of Gagosian Quarterly, a magazine published by the gallery, said Ms. Juskiewicz’s paintings are “saturated in style.” Their owners include Giancarlo Giametti, a founder of Valentino.

Mr. Blasberg, a regular at fashion events, compared her portraits to other stylized historical reinterpretations, like Sofia Coppola’s film “Marie Antoinette” and the Netflix series “Bridgerton.”

“They are both sort of celebrating and also critiquing that era and definitely that moment in fashion,” he said of Ms. Juskiewicz’s paintings and of “Bridgerton.”

Ms. Juskiewicz said her work has required her to study fashion across periods of time. Occasionally, she has incorporated contemporary clothing and accessories into paintings, like a pair of goldtone hoop earrings that she bought secondhand.



The recently released Louis Vuitton bag bearing a print of Ms. Juskiewicz's painting "Ginger Locks." Credit...Louis Vuitton



A 1923 copy of "The History of French Women's Costume: Fashions of the Middle Ages" at Ms. Juskiewicz's studio. Credit...Anna Liminowicz for The New York Times



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In her studio in Warsaw, she uses reference materials including a 100-year-old copy of “The History of French Women’s Costume: Fashions of the Middle Ages,” the catalog from the Brooklyn Museum’s 2014 exhibit “Killer Heels: The Art of the High-Heeled Shoe,” and books on Frida Kahlo, Annie Leibovitz and Cindy Sherman.

Ms. Juskiewicz also studies the runway. “I look at details,” she said. “The fabrics, their textures, the silhouettes.” A pink dress embellished with a flowing red ribbon from Simone Rocha’s spring 2024 collection recently caught her eye, as did the inverted tulle gowns from Viktor & Rolf’s couture show in January.

She also cited the designers Alexander McQueen, Iris van Herpen and Rei Kawakubo as inspirations, all of whom, Ms. Juskiewicz said, had a knack for “deconstructing classics.” Two of Ms. Kawakubo’s dresses for a recent Comme des Garçons collection, she noted, were made with fabric printed with period portraits of women and girls, including “Portrait of a Girl Dressed in Blue,” a painting by the Dutch artist Johannes Cornelisz Verspronck. That work was the basis for Ms. Juskiewicz’s 2013 painting “Girl in Blue,” in which she hid the young female subject’s face behind a cluster of grayish mushrooms.

Ms. Juskiewicz said that as a young girl she felt sure she would become a painter. She was born in Gdansk, Poland, a city about four hours by car from Warsaw, and has a master’s degree in painting from the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdansk, as well as a Ph.D. in painting from the Jan Matejko Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow.

While pursuing her doctorate she became fascinated by the career of Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun, a French portrait artist in the 1700s and 1800s who was the official court painter for Marie Antoinette.

As a female artist in a field then dominated by men, Vigée Le Brun was far from the norm, Ms. Juskiewicz said, adding that her portraits, which mostly featured women, showed their subjects' personalities through facial expressions as well as clothes and accessories.

A self-portrait of Vigée Le Brun, which shows the artist holding paint brushes and a palette dotted with paints, inspired what would become the first portrait, in 2012, in Ms. Juskiewicz's series of paintings based on previous works.

That painting, "Straw Hat (after Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun)," shows Vigée Le Brun with her face replaced by two sections of hair divided by a scarlike part. Last year, it sold at auction for about \$1 million. (The Gagosian Gallery would not provide prices for the current show.)

"I knew I'd begun something," said Ms. Juskiewicz, who has since produced about 70 paintings for the series.

The author Regan Penaluna used one of her pieces on the cover of her recent book, "How to Think Like a Woman," about female philosophers. The portrait, "Untitled (after Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun)," shows a woman whose head is enveloped in a sumptuous fabric. She is wearing a white dress with a blue bow at the waist and is sitting on a plush sofa with an open book.

Ms. Penaluna said she chose the painting in part because she thought some of the philosophers featured in her book would have appreciated what she called "the big mystery" inherent in Ms. Juskiewicz's portraits.

She described that mystery this way: "What is a woman when she is no longer presented to us as an object of beauty?"