



Jennifer Nehrbass's paintings convey a mythological narrative, symbolizing the complex relationship between iconic cultural symbols and personal philosophy. Her focus is on dismantling the roles and stereotypes of beauty and femininity, and the anxiety created when there is a divide between what women own and who they are. In essence, Nehrbass examines the psychology that leads women to go to extremes to maintain beauty and style.



THE ROLE OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Fashion photography represents fantasy that can never be attained, and has been an integral part of my work as a painter. I focus on style as a sublime element that has the power to create ugliness as well as beauty. To the fashion industry beauty is a commodity, but to the individual, style is a never-ending problem. In my paintings, I present this conflict. I explore tensions caused by the desires and obsessions that lead women to extremes. I translate the psychology into narratives that fuel my paintings. At a certain point, I realized the limitation of using only found imagery. I bought a camera during graduate school, which liberated me from mediated imagery so I could direct all aspects of content—including lighting, clothing, wigs, and environments. Digital photographs have become a documentation of a performance that becomes the basis for each painting.

INFLUENCES

Cindy Sherman—who has cemented her critique of women's representation in both culture and art history—is influential in my decision to put my own portrait or silhouette in my paintings, which are aspects of me that I see in others. Doing this reinforces the concept that I am everywoman in the paintings. My intent is to illustrate the complexities and contradictions of being a woman, and as an artist representing them in painting.

ICONIC SYMBOLS/PERSONAL PHILOSOPHY

Woman as Icon. What does it mean for a woman to paint another woman? Is there pleasure in a woman looking at another woman? These questions arose from reading Carol Ockman's book, *Ingres' Eroticized Bodies, Retracing the Serpentine Line*, which discusses women as patrons, often commissioning female nudes. Ockman reinforces this point with a painting—*Grande Odalisque*—by Ingres. In this painting we discover it was commissioned by Caroline Bonaparte Murat, the wife of the King of Naples. This pleasure in looking led me to question why women flip through fashion magazines. I wondered if they look to models as icons for beauty, or if they fixate on what the model is wearing. I came to the conclusion that, for some, clothing and environment are extensions of self.

DISMANTLING STEREOTYPES

Women are conditioned to formulate a self based on the categories created by advertising and by our culture. The idea of transcending class by the clothes one wears is imbedded in our culture. A publication such as *Vogue* sets a certain standard for a specific population to ascend to. My goal is to disarm this standard. In one painting, I placed a debutante in a situation where the viewer is not certain if the woman is dead or just passed out on a couch. In another work, I show the demise of a matron by witnessing either her exploitation or her suicide. In both paintings we see "tasteful" women in distasteful situations.

THE EROTIC AND FETISHISTIC

I am interested in pushing the limits of what is considered erotic or fetishistic by including elements of horror and humor. The women represented are often on display, but are aware of their position and confront the viewer. In my new work I emphasize life as theater. I am interested in asking questions such as: What if Esther Williams wrapped herself in Saran Wrap?

PHOTOGRAPH BY Guy Cross