







# JULIE HEFFERNAN

INTERVIEW BY GREG ESCALANTE AND NATHAN SPOOR / PORTRAIT BY BRYAN DERBALLA



UPON MEETING ENIGMATIC POWERHOUSE JULIE HEFFERNAN, ONE IS IMMEDIATELY SWEEPED INTO A DAZZLING MOMENT OF INSPIRED WONDER. QUITE SIMPLY, THE ARTIST IS ROUSED BY HER APPETITE FOR INFORMATION AND ITS IMPACT UPON HUMANITY AT LARGE. AS A FINE ARTIST SOUGHT THE WORLD OVER FOR LARGE-SCALE ALLEGORICAL PORTRAITS DEPICTING LUSH SCENES THAT HARKEN BACK TO EARLY RENAISSANCE AND BAROQUE TIMES, JULIE COMMANDS A GIFT FOR DEPICTING THE REALM OF INQUISITIVE DISPLAYS—MIXED WITH A STRONG INSISTENCE ON MAGIC REALISM. IN SHORT, HERS IS AN ART THAT NEVER TIRES OF ENGAGING THE VIEWER IN A GAME OF INTELLECTUAL FOREPLAY.

- 1 In the past twenty years almost every painting Julie Heffernan has done has been made in a basement.
- 2 Her favorite film is Lars Von Trier's *Breaking the Waves*.
- 3 When she gave the commencement address at Pennsylvania Academy, she made everyone dance to a Beach Boys song.

When not engrossed in the visual mazes that populate her lavish canvases, Julie spends her time enriching student minds as a professor of art at Montclair State University in Upper Montclair, New Jersey.

We caught up with Julie during an artist residency in New Hampshire following her exhilarating trip to Paris. She treated us to an historical vista into her work, resulting in a portrait of an artist truly as fascinating as her impressive paintings. Join us for a special interlude as we spend time with this visual enchantress—the enlightening and captivating Julie Heffernan. —Greg Escalante

*Greg Escalante:* Julie, thanks for taking some time out from your residency to talk to us.

I hear you just returned from a trip to Paris. What all is going on?

*Julie Heffernan:* I've been in a stew of exciting visuals—just got back from two weeks in Paris where I soaked up as much great art and food as I could, and right now I'm sitting in my studio at the MacDowell Colony, looking out at the woods of New Hampshire. I'm here with the likes of Ruth Reichel the food critic, and Lucy Puls the sculptor—lots of fine minds all together under one tent.

Right now I'm one week into a three-week residency, trying to make sense of things I've been thinking about lately. Paris is full of amazing nooks and crannies of art from the Delacroix ceiling painting in the Louis XIV

room at the Louvre, to the Musée National Gustav Moreau, which feels like he just stepped out of the house and is coming right back. I found myself weirdly fascinated by all the overdone, melodramatic 19th Century Academy paintings. They tell huge operatic stories that are fantastic and obnoxious at the same time—the Steven Spielbergs of their day; then Monet comes along and puts them all to shame with his scribbled water lilies. What happened to our sense of taste? Why did we lose interest in all those grand themes? Well, we can only be lied to for so long, Freud taught us; all those paintings were lies about little men like Louis XIV and Napoleon, who were made to seem like gods, when in fact all they were doing was stealing and plundering for their own glory. The paintings are gorgeous







**Skyscraper**

Oil on canvas

60" x 68" // 2008-12

Courtesy of Mark Moore Gallery and the artist





but they're lies, in the same way that action movies are lies. I guess we realized finally that we prefer the intimacy of an artist like Van Gogh's personal experience over the bombast of a Bougureau.

What I'm working on now at the MacDowell Residency comes out of thinking about those grand themes and the lies and hubris it takes to think that way. I started out imagining a series of paintings that would show the horrors of climate change and oil spills from the likes of Exxon Mobil, BP, etc. It's an overly ambitious endeavor, I know, but that's what I'm obsessing about, so why not paint it? And thrumming in the background on NPR while I was working the first day was Bill McGibbon feeding me devastating news about what's happening to our environment, all of it throwing me into a frenzy. But the more I work on them, the paintings are turning into their own selves, and the original idea is morphing into something else, something about our own foolishness, how we're implicated in this predicament.

How often do you take art trips?

I know how to feed myself in a lot of different ways. We went to India a few years ago and that was like being in a surreal dream, yet it's 1.22 billion people's reality. Everything is unbelievably vivid there, from the women in the fields wearing multicolored saris to little shrines on the street corners made out of tin foil.

I first noticed your paintings at Catherine Clark Gallery a couple of years ago.

I did three shows with her, and the latest show was last Fall. I'm sure you saw the one with the figurative work and women with bulging skirts.

What do you call the brand of art that you subscribe or belong to? Is it one of these existing terms of pop, or surrealism, or modern, etc?

I think surrealism got a bad name early on,

around the time when Dalí sold out to Gala. There were roughly three different tributaries to Modernism, if you don't mind me getting teacherly here: Dada, which morphed into performance and conceptual art; Cubism, which evolved into Abstraction, Minimalism, and Formalism; and Surrealism, which came out of Freud and associative thinking—stream of consciousness. Surrealism is the most ungainly of the three because imaginative work can so quickly get self-indulgent. Most Surrealism I avoid, but I love a good story, told well with rich coloring and that seems to be the domain of Surrealism for want of a better word. I don't think we've given imagination enough credit or developed a rigorous enough vocabulary for parsing its products. Imagination is what we crave in fiction, film and visual arts and I know because the students I teach all want to work from their imaginations, but it usually results in pretty bad work because they haven't learned how to bring rigor to their associative thinking processes yet.

I grew up in the 1960s when high modernism had given way to pop and conceptual art, and for years I was hungry for a kind of art that could give me a glimpse into another person's psyche. It's not about strategies, isms or antics, but about going into a gallery and having a feeling of encountering someone's humanness. So many shows make me feel shut out, like there's a brick wall between the artist and me. I see their strategies for making art before I see the art itself.

As a teacher at Montclair State, what do your students think of your work?

I think they appreciate that I teach them real skills. I tell them that I teach the rules so they can learn how to break them. I want to help them figure out all the possible ways to communicate their ideas, whether through photography or performance art; whatever technique, it doesn't matter. The materials follow the ideas. (And sometimes the materials

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inspire the idea, which is always fun.)

How do you find time while teaching to make your own art?

I don't waste time. I actually love being really efficient in every non-essential aspect of my life so I can idle about when I get into the studio, knowing I've earned hours of laziness for myself. I then can dream my way into paintings.

I watch *Breaking Bad* on television, and nothing else. I don't let small electronic devices eat up my day. I rarely shop. And I love teaching. Being around the energy of people just starting out making art is good for me. But I love making work too, so I choose my jobs very carefully. My schedule affords me the time I need in the studio and I'm very grateful for that.

Where did you study?

I attended UC Santa Cruz and got my MFA from Yale. I was born in Peoria and grew up in the East Bay, in Hayward (or Hayweird as it was called). There was no art in my home and my parents were very Catholic, so going to Yale was both a big and small thing: big because it's Yale and small because hardly anyone I knew had heard of it.





So how did you find your way to Yale?

I did twelve years of Catholic School in a butthole suburb where the idea of freedom was OD'ing on Quaaludes. I found myself in Santa Cruz working for a woman from New York City, the first person I'd ever met with an intellectual bent. She suggested I apply to Yale for grad school, and I said, "Where's Yale?" I applied and got in and it changed my life. For the entire first half of my life I'd had a brilliant education in physical thrills living in California—going to Esalen at midnight to the hot tubs, finding waterfalls in Big Sur, white water rafting on the Stanislaus River, hiking up Mt. Whitney and Half Dome—things like that; but it was on the east coast that my brain came alive.

What do you think of Mark Tansey's work?

Oh, I admire it for the powerful imagery and smarts, and yet wish he'd let himself be more of a painter than just an image-maker. He's brilliant at his wiping technique but sometimes I wish he'd just let the paint be gooshy. There are paintings made to be talked about and paintings made to be looked at, and his I think fall into the former category. I guess I want both.

Great answer! What contemporary artists inspire you?

I love the work of Erica Svec, who throws the paint around beautifully and also finds weird visual tropes, gooey icky paint for oil slicks

and the like. I love Angelica Horvath's complex webwork and Catherine Howe's splashes of paint that become gorgeous still lifes. I love Dana Schutz and Chris Martin with whom I have absolutely nothing in common with painting-wise but love their crazy decisions that somehow feel rich and complicated even if seemingly slackerish, in the case of Martin.

What historic artists inspire you the most?

Well, I do love Rubens for all that great flesh and his vertiginous compositions. I love Ingres for his silky perfections, and Tintoretto for his protomodernist shapey-ness. But my greatest love is Bonnard, who was really the biggest weirdo of them all. He painted himself looking at his wife's sanitary napkin rag. Nobody has



**Self-Portrait in Red Tent**

Oil on canvas  
76" x 68" // 2012  
Courtesy of Mark Moore Gallery and the artist

**Self-Portrait of the Thief Who Was Saved**

Oil on canvas  
112" x 84" // 2011-12  
Courtesy of Mark Moore Gallery and the artist



ever done that. The way he hides the figures in his paintings, so they look like part of the woodwork is such a great way of imaging in the repressiveness of bourgeois life. He was a radical in drab.

Bonnard, I learn something new every day. Excellent! Which other creatives do you admire, like philosophers, poets, writers, and musicians?

I'm crazy about film and fiction. Lars von Trier blows my mind. *Breaking the Waves* made sainthood make sense to me for the first time. As for writers, everything Jonathan Lethem has written is what I want in painting and art in general, a deep sense of inner emotional life punctuated by psychic release. Anne

Landsam's got that too, in spades. Don DeLillo, Peter Carey, love their epic roller coaster rides. I will always thank Dave Hickey for *Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* because he brought beauty back into the conversation of art: "Beauty provides the pathos to recommend the logos," love it! As for music, my son is a great budding musician, Bellows, check him out! Love Sufjan Stevens, Laura Marling, and Björk. I have to include Radio Lab on NPR, which blows my mind every time I listen to one of its episodes.

How about your five favorite books and your five favorite films of all time?

Films: Von Trier's *Antichrist* and *Breaking the Waves*, Yorgos Lanthimos' *Dogtooth*,

Jane Campion's *Piano*, Martin Provost's *Serafina de Senlis*; I could go on and on.

Books: the first ones that come to mind are Jonathan Lethem's *Fortress of Solitude*, Edmund de Waal's *Hare with the Amber Eye*, which I just read and loved, Peter Cary's *Oscar and Lucinda*, Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, Anne Landsman's *Devil's Chimney*. AS Byatt's short stories: *The Thing in the Forest* and *Stone Woman*, and Anne Michael's *Fugitive Pieces*.

In talking about all these things the might be referred to as influences, are there any we missed that didn't fit in these categories?

Cheek by Jowl theater group did a production of John Ford's *Tis Pity She's a Whore* at BAM















that was outstanding and thrilled me with how it transformed a classic into punchy physical intimacy.

A big question would be about what you are saying in your paintings. Is there a main theme?

If I had to choose a main theme it would have to have something to do with transformation, whether it be the transformation of the individual through her environments and accoutrements (bulging skirts suggesting fecundity) or in the virtual journey the viewer takes through a landscape space, full of impediments and obstructions, but with passages that allow for release and transcendence. Basically I work by getting an idea in my head and throwing it loosely up on the canvas; then I wait for images to well up from somewhere inside. I guess you'd call it the mind's eye, which hopefully, takes the original idea to a deeper place. I used to do this thing called image streaming which I've talked about a lot in other interviews.

Just before passing out after a long session of painting I would notice detailed pictures coming into my head that weren't daydreams or memories but seemed like from someone else's film. I would then use them as thought bubbles in my paintings, images within

images, stemming from that process. What I do now is similar but more directed. I guess it's a lot like what writers talk about when at a point they can hear their characters speaking to them. There's a point when the painting tells me what to do and I follow. So I might be starting from the standpoint of wanting to do a painting on climate change and the depredations of Exxon Mobil on the environment, and I'll start working from that place. But there's a point when the painting takes over and makes it about what it wants to be, and that might involve Exxon Mobil and it might not. So I follow along, knowing the painting is smarter than I am and will take me someplace I haven't been before.

*Juxtapoz* has a huge audience of young artists around the world. As an art teacher, what advice could you give, where they might learn some important concept or valuable information to inspire them and go forward in their career?

They should do 15 cartwheels a day. And dance. I would tell them that the most important qualities they need to have for a successful career in the arts are:  
1) curiosity, the ability to wonder and wander,  
2) a compulsion for accomplishment; the more

THERE ARE  
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you accomplish the more your brain needs that serotonin rush, so you get to the point where you are compelled to accomplish, and 3) the ability to see yourself as a fool at one point and a genius at the next, so you overstep yourself and always know to be grateful to the art gods for speaking through, all the while exulting in the thrill of having pulled off something astonishing.

*Julie's next show runs through December 15, 2012 at Mark Moore Gallery, Culver City*  
[Markmooregallery.com/gallery](http://Markmooregallery.com/gallery)