

Broadly.vice.com: The Irish Artist Attacking the Female Figure with Pain, by Olivia Parkes, October 23rd 2015

ART

The Irish Artist Attacking the Female Figure with Paint

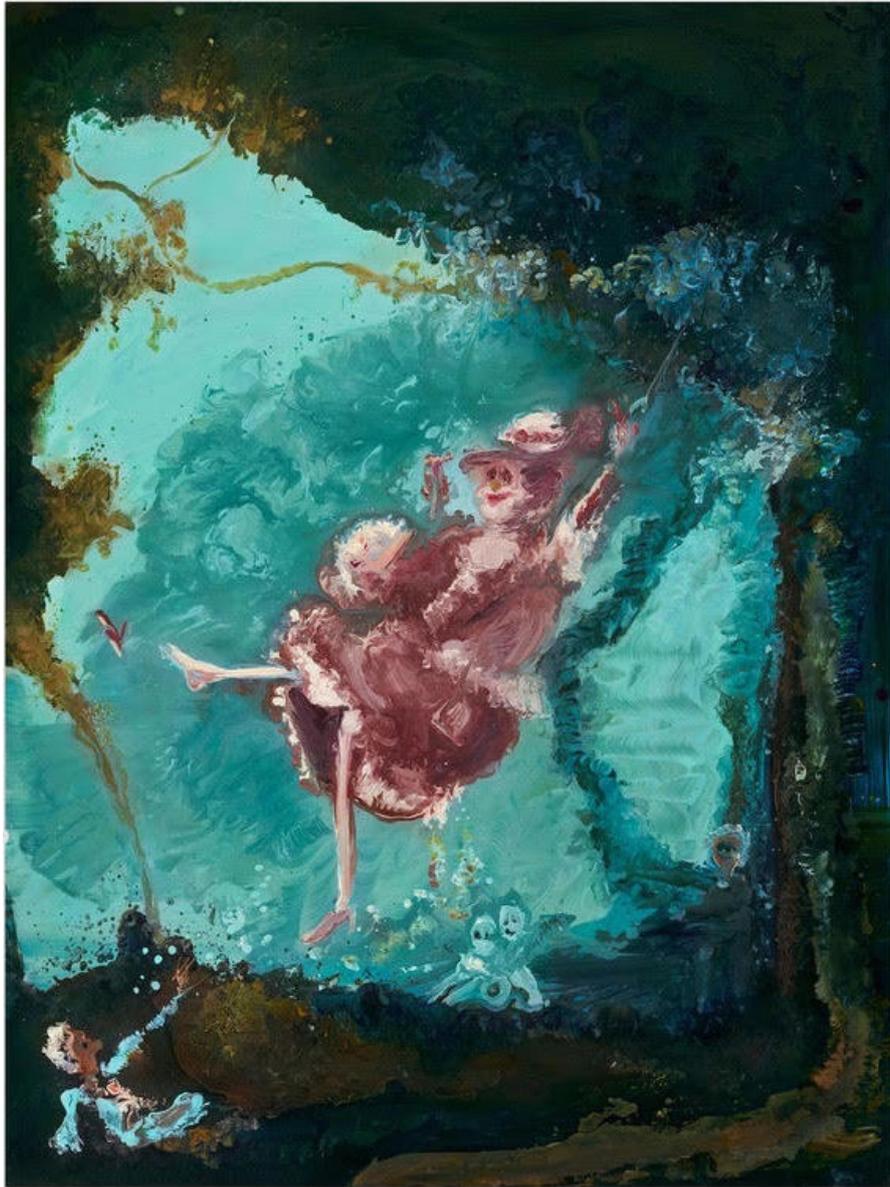


We talked with artist Genieve Figgis about why she always abandons plans, how social media changed her life, and why female painters have something powerful to say.

Genieve Figgis confesses to enjoy looking backward, to history and archaeology, but her career trajectory could only have happened today. Figgis was working out of a home-built studio in her native Dublin with few places to exhibit when pictures she posted on Twitter and Instagram were picked up by established figures like Richard Prince, and she was sucked to the heart of the New York art world. An unconventional rising art star, she started her family before she started art school, and received recognition for her work online before the gallery world caught up. It's the kind of story that makes you love the internet: for bringing us the good stuff, faster than we would have gotten it otherwise.

Known for her distorted depictions of the aristocrats and gentility historically favored by the figurative tradition, Figgis is aware of the use of portraiture over time to flatter big egos and prop up existing power structures. Her macabre, psychedelic paintings feel both funny and subversive. They're insouciant, delivered with a light touch. A painting like *The Swing After Fragonard* manages to both poke fun at and pay homage to the frippery of the Rococo.

Figgis' work strikes the balance between figuration and abstraction, horror and humor. Many of her characters seem to be straddling life and death, like zombies wearing the costumes of the 17th and 18th centuries. Her figures are formed of drips and swirls, strange incarnations dragged up out of the paint itself, a material Figgis values for its ability to surprise. We talked with the artist from her secluded studio on Ireland's Wicklow coast about online exposure, the pleasure of making a mess, and why female painters have the most to say about the figure.



BROADLY: Was the desire to be an artist, or the option, present in your early life?

Genieve Figgis: I knew I was an artist—it's all I've ever wanted to do. I enjoyed drawing at a very young age. My favorite subjects in school were art, history, engineering, drama—anything that allowed me to create. I was always making. I made my own clothes and bags. My family thought that I was going to become a fashion designer at one stage.

What was your art education like?

I started my own family at 21, so I was lucky to get the chance to go to art school. I was 30 when I began my degree. I just wanted the experience of everyday making. I loved painting because of its experimental nature, and the medium's long attachment to history and representation and to the figure. My work was always figurative. I was looking at people like Jenny Saville, Marlene Dumas, and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye.

It's interesting that all those painters are women. Why did their work speak so directly to you?

I was very much drawn to female artists. They had a voice when I had none. I liked what they were trying to do with paint. It wasn't traditional and boring. They were using the language in their own distinct way, and they were showing us how powerful they could be—I admired them. Down through the history of art, the "stars" were mostly men. Women artists are in the ring now.



Did you feel you got to work creatively when your kids were small?

When the kids were small, I was baking cakes, decorating their rooms, making costumes for the school plays and Halloween. I kept myself busy.

What draws you to the subject matter you're known for now—your own take on historical portraiture?

My interest in history is about the storytelling. Art, music, literature, architecture, and archeology all take you back in time. I use these as starting points and go from there. I became very interested in contemporary figurative painting because the figure is so present in the history of art. The idea of portraiture being used to flatter the ego seemed ancient.

What do you look at? What are your references?

When I was starting out, the kids were still young, and I couldn't travel to see the shows of the artists that I admired. I live in Ireland, and the only way to see the art I loved was online and in library books. My early contemporary influences, in addition to the ones I've mentioned, included Richard Prince, Cecily Brown, Dana Schutz, and John Currin. My tastes change day to day—in the studio I'm looking at books, online images, movies, magazines. I'm listening to anything from classical to thrash, jazz or rap.

Why do you paint?

Painting is about pleasure. If it weren't pleasurable, I wouldn't do it. For a long time I've been pouring paint—the medium's unpredictability is the addiction for me. Its ability to surprise and defy logic keeps me interested. It takes on a life of its own.



Your paintings look like they were made fast. Do you finish a painting in one sitting, or are they revised?

The paintings are mostly produced in one sitting. That can range from anything from two to eight hours. If the painting needs tweaking the next day or needs something, I'll work into it again.

Are you thinking about narrative when you paint?

I will always start out with some idea. In the process the ideas change due to the unpredictability of the material. You might begin with a plan, but at a certain point the work takes over. Shapes appear unplanned, and you work with them. You kind of get lost in the process and quite literally go with the flow.

What do you find to be the biggest challenge?

Starting a painting can be difficult if you're rattling around the studio making every excuse not to paint. I know when I start something it could take hours to finish.

It's funny because it's what I enjoy most: getting completely lost in it. But I'm not immune to procrastination.

You were sucked up into the American art scene quite suddenly by the internet. Can you tell me about that?

After my master's, I made work in a little studio in Dublin I had built out the back of my house. I had nowhere to show the work I was making, but I wanted people to see it. There was a lot of snobbery about posting art online, but I felt I had no other option.

I opened a Twitter account—I had no idea what I would say, but I started posting paintings. Richard Prince followed me back on Twitter and asked if he could buy some work. I was surprised, as no one had taken an interest in my work before.



What changed for you?

Social media opened a lot of doors for me, doors that were closed to me here in Ireland. I wasn't hidden away anymore. Suddenly I was showing in New York at Harper's Books and Half Gallery. Richard Prince's gallery, Fulton Ryder, published my first book, *Making Love with the Devil*. My life changed. I was given support that I never had experienced before. People have been very generous and open to my work, and I'm very grateful.

What's your relationship to social media now?

I work all day in the studio. Social media lets me see what other artists are doing and what shows are on. I still use it to show my work.

You moved out of your Dublin studio about six months ago and now work in County Wicklow. Do you prefer not working in a big city?

It's peaceful here, and I can work away undisturbed. There's history in the landscape—I feel surrounded by the past. The people are friendly, and I enjoy the company of strangers. The sound of the sea reminds me that no matter what costumes we choose to wear or what form of transportation we use, the waves keep crashing on the rocks. I can get lost in that.