

Purple Magazine

George Rouy

By Olivier Zahm, 2022

At a time of renewed interest in figurative painting, young british artist george rouy explores body mutations and transformations of identity, moving toward a baconesque sexuality.

OLIVIER ZAHM — I love your paintings. They are mysterious, sensual, and abstract, but also figurative. They're not easy to describe. What's your starting point for a painting?

GEORGE ROUY — I normally have a collection of photos, of found images, stuff found on the Internet — poses or just certain types, like a tone — from which a work or a series of works can come.

OLIVIER ZAHM — And it always starts with a figure?

GEORGE ROUY — Not always. When I go into a studio, I have all the canvases set up, and then I attack them with paint. The start of it is quite impulsive and abstract — just to express myself within that frame of the canvas.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Inspired by the picture...

GEORGE ROUY — Yes. So, it's pure abstraction, almost, just marks and gestures and movements. From there, I'll photograph it and think about the layouts and whether there are any bits that I want to keep. Then I start to base the figures and scenes around that. Or I think about whether there's an arrangement of a hand or a head that I've seen, and I place that in and see if that works.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Then you start to define the characters and positions?

GEORGE ROUY — It's really important to build that surface up before the figure becomes too definite, so you have a clear decision of composition. Then it's a matter of production, adding, reducing, until you get that right amount.

OLIVIER ZAHM — And you reduce it right down to nudity.

GEORGE ROUY — It's always about reduction, for me. Reducing it down to purely the figure. It's always about keeping the viewer focused on the bits you want them to see. Because it changes the way you perceive the work, and it places the figures within an area in time.

OLIVIER ZAHM — It could be the 18th century.

GEORGE ROUY — Exactly, or it could be in 200 years' time. They should be able to have the same relationship. My main concern with all the works is that it's about an impulsive or an intuitive experience when viewers are looking at them: how they feel, the aura or the presence those works can have. And the process in the studio is establishing at what moment that becomes the right set of moves, rather than the wrong ones.

OLIVIER ZAHM — For me, you're a mix of Francis Bacon and Tony Oursler, a video artist from the '90s — between the grotesque and the weirdness of Oursler and the human torture of Bacon. But you're not painting existential crisis or mental torture — there's a humanity or sensuality to your work.

GEORGE ROUY — There's a sensuality, but as with everything, the work has to have that friction all the time, whether it comes across as sensual or sexual or the complete opposite. It's similar with the figures themselves and the faces: are they incredibly beautiful or are they very ugly? Is it dark or euphoric? In some ways, I've realized that

Purple Magazine
George Rouy

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is when it has those vibrations and frictions and trails of thought.

OLIVIER ZAHM — These figures are always very anonymous. Enigmatic. It's like some sort of genetic modification is taking place.

GEORGE ROUY — For me, it's less about the physicality of the figures and more about approaching the work from the inside out, in terms of how one perceives their own body. How they understand their existence on Earth. For instance, when your hand feels heavy or bigger than it is in reality. Like, the actual experience of being in your own anatomy.

OLIVIER ZAHM — From inside?

GEORGE ROUY — Yeah, from inside out, rather than from the outside perceiving in. Whenever I think about my own anatomy, and when I shut my eyes and think about my body, things feel larger or smaller. When I perceive myself in a mirror or in a photograph, the reality is different, and this all has a part to play in that feeding of our own existence. One of the works is called Shit Mirror, and it's something that I think about.

OLIVIER ZAHM — The one with the deformed body?

GEORGE ROUY — Yes. It was more about looking at your own ego, sections of yourself.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Would you say it's a genderless population? It's hard to define whether they're women or men, old or babies...

GEORGE ROUY — Yes, I like that openness. You can allow them to exist just as they are, and others are clearly defined as female or male. But in the time we're living in, what do these things really mean anymore? The gender aspect exists within this world, but I think how one should experience the paintings is very different from how the painting exists within the greater reality. What I'm interested in is how one person can sit or stand and look at the work, and what they feel. And that's the completion of the circle.

OLIVIER ZAHM — This could be a man here...

GEORGE ROUY — Yeah, it's just switched up. And also with these — kind of blowing out of the pubic hair, overdoing it and blowing it out, it removes it almost...

OLIVIER ZAHM — Exactly.

GEORGE ROUY — But that's why I enjoy it. This area here is like a black hole. Everyone understands the figure like that, the sexual parts of the figure. And sometimes, I almost don't even see them as nude.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Because you see them as pure painting.

GEORGE ROUY — I just see the body as the body — and how you can approach the figure, how you can destroy a figure or create a figure, overaccentuate the ideas of figures. It's like shutting your eyes and imagining these things rather than the pure, cold, hard truth of reality.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Exactly. But in doing that, you're also redefining or deconstructing the canon of beauty. It's very heterotopic — the body is transformed, mutating, changing, and there are no rules.

GEORGE ROUY — Yes.

OLIVIER ZAHM — And it becomes a sort of human form, but it's also very animalistic.

GEORGE ROUY — I also think of things as bleeding — this feeling of the frame or the canvas and the dispersion of the figures into a void. Or a feeling of weightlessness, or parts of you feel like they're removed. It goes back to those pressure points in your brain when you're looking at the work or making it.

OLIVIER ZAHM — But do you think we'll be able, with DNA engineering, to change our own physicality?

Purple Magazine
George Rouy

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2022

GEORGE ROUY — It's a hard one. In some ways, I'm very much into science fiction, imagining what we could become in the future and also how we access that now and can represent that in a certain way. I'm thinking of musicians like Arca, just the way they exist or perceive themselves. Then you have the '90s Aphex Twin, fucking dark, kind of twisted, but it is all kind of...

OLIVIER ZAHM — Devilish.

GEORGE ROUY — Yeah, devilish. I feel like those kinds of things all link up, and you could link that back to Bacon, and then, before that, you could think about Paul Gauguin — that underlying darkness within the human mind. Whether it's genetically enhanced or picture-perfect bodies or whatever our ideas of beauty are, or how we want to exist from the outside, the constant is the thing that's going on in here the whole time: you still feel anxious. How do you remove anxiety? Can you remove empathy or love? When you start doing that, then you are a robot, more so than with the actual anatomy, and I find that more intriguing. Like with prescription drugs or illegal drugs — how you can enhance or deduct parts of yourself?

OLIVIER ZAHM — Going back to the idea of the devilish mind, the human landscapes that you create are, for me, more like a Garden of Eden. Pleasure in nature. An innocence that you rediscover.

GEORGE ROUY — Yes, it's verging on Surrealism. Again, it goes back to the psychological aspect.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, dreaming of possibilities on Earth. And how do you perceive the times we are living in?

GEORGE ROUY — Yeah, good question. I think I'm more and more confused.

OLIVIER ZAHM — But you feel positive to me.

GEORGE ROUY — I'm positive, yes. But with positivity, there are always levels of — not darkness, but lows as well. And it's a question of understanding the fluctuation of one's mood and perception of the world. Some days, you feel totally fine, and other days, totally not. But when it comes to the world and how it's going, I've felt like the world, culture, has jumped a few steps, and I'm trying to catch up.

OLIVIER ZAHM — And how does it feel to be a classical painter in a digital world? Your painting is really in connection with the history of painting. But you paint with acrylic, right?

GEORGE ROUY — Acrylic and oil, now. I think I'm in a lucky moment because, in terms of the way the world moves, I think there's a desire for the physicality of experiences.

OLIVIER ZAHM — And true emotions.

GEORGE ROUY — Yes, human expression in terms of the physical. The gestures or the closeness you can have...

OLIVIER ZAHM — The choice of color, too?

GEORGE ROUY — Yes. And with the computer or the lens or the box, there is a removal of that. Sometimes, there's an overaccentuation of certain things. When you're perceiving something face-to-face, that is a different experience completely: you're dealing with scale, you're dealing with your own anatomy. Something that I consider as well with the work is that when people look at it, they're thinking about the marks in relation to their own body.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Right. So, for you, people are thirsty for real, physical emotion?

GEORGE ROUY — Yeah, but not just in art — in everything. There's a desire to have good food... Or music, and it's all coming back a bit now. Living in the moment...

OLIVIER ZAHM — In what moment?

GEORGE ROUY — You're always living within this world that's on your phone or dis-

Purple Magazine
George Rouy

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tractions. It's addictive. Your brain doesn't want to...

OLIVIER ZAHM — Focus on things?

GEORGE ROUY — I find it hard at the moment to just sit in silence. I always have to have the radio on or music on or something. I never used to be like that. More and more, I've become so wired to have some kind of outsource.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Do you put your phone away when you work?

GEORGE ROUY — Yeah, I just listen to music. Although I do look at it: I use the camera to see the work through the camera. It helps you see the painting through the lens. It draws it together, tightens it up.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Interesting. It's your generation — screens...

GEORGE ROUY — Yes. Also, my laptop. I take photos of half-finished works, put it on the computer, and add the next parts as well.

OLIVIER ZAHM — How do you add them?

GEORGE ROUY — Photoshop, yeah. Add some color. I take parts out and overaccenuate parts, see how it looks compositionally.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, you go through this digital detour.

GEORGE ROUY — Yes, it really is part of the process. Sometimes, the works start on the computer, then they go onto the canvas, then back to computer, and it goes on like that until you get to the finished piece.

OLIVIER ZAHM — How do you see the future? When is the future for you? The next 50 years, 100 years?

GEORGE ROUY — It's quite hard to think too far in advance. Sometimes, you think you're not going to exist in the future. You're like, "I can't see myself in 20 years' time." It's like all this destruction is very much in the now. I don't know where the world will be then. I hope I'm still making work. That the world isn't at war or flooded.

OLIVIER ZAHM — And you're British, and the punks were the first to say, at the end of the hippie period, "No future."

GEORGE ROUY — No future. Yeah. My dad was saying that when he was growing up, you just lived in the moment or within this kind of nihilistic world. I think it's indulgent as well to live like that — because there's no consequence, because you're forever living...

OLIVIER ZAHM — In the moment.

GEORGE ROUY — Yeah. And I think that's maybe how the world shifted — now we're realizing the consequence of everything. Every action.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Everything has a consequence.

GEORGE ROUY — Yeah, so there's a shift in the way we — and especially young people — perceive our future. Now we think about everything a lot more, which creates anxiety.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Because you're not nihilistic.

GEORGE ROUY — No. It's all in the brain in terms of how you approach things or how you rationalize things and what your choices are. I spend all my time on my own in the studio, making my work. Within my own little world, there's an expectation that my works will exist in 50 years and in 100 years. It almost feels like you've conquered death: part of your ritual is knowing that you're leaving something behind. You're trying to make it so that if you were going to die tomorrow, you'd feel at peace.

OLIVIER ZAHM — I love this ambition — that your work should survive.

GEORGE ROUY — I do paint with the idea that hopefully, in 50 years, it will still feel

Purple Magazine
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relevant.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, painting is your way of fighting the destruction or the dissolution of time?

GEORGE ROUY — Absolutely.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Images, social media, the Internet — the digital world — are actually liquid time. Every picture replaces another.

GEORGE ROUY — But then it goes to the idea of the physical. Once you have that in a painting, in your creation, it's there — it exists.

OLIVIER ZAHM — And it's a form of resistance.

GEORGE ROUY — It has a location. The location isn't a storage file or anything like that. It's physical. It exists within the world.