ALMINE RECH

Janet Werner
Hell and Happiness

Jun 12 — Jul 26, 2025 | Brussels

Almine Rech Brussels is pleased to present 'Hell and Happiness', Janet Werner's first solo show with the gallery, on view from June 12 to July 26, 2025.

Since the late 1980s, Janet Werner has focused her artistic practice exclusively on portraits. She paints women in all their conditions and assigned roles. Previously, she painted from her imagination, but since 2016 she has changed her approach by using photos from fashion magazines. These glossy images are then transposed to the canvas. Janet Werner's objective in painting from photos is to make the photos disappear. She says: "I've been wrestling with the photograph all along because I don't like what it signifies and I don't like how it makes forms."[1] The artist relentlessly strives to deconstruct the photographic image by merging it with painterly gestures and layers of paint. She adds: "I often have to destroy a portrait when it gets too photographic. I get angry and start undoing the portrait, removing or altering features, messing with the paint, in the process of which something else comes through. The closet expressionist in me comes out and I'm generally much more satisfied with the result." Like collages, her compositions are designed as hybrid forms where two sequences are brought together on the canvas. For instance, we see a swampy landscape and the portrait of a witch, or an indoor plant and half of a version of *Mademoiselle Rivière* (1805) by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres. Oblique or direct references to the history of Western painting—Picasso or Munch, Watteau or Gainsborough —find their way into her compositions. This profound relationship to the history of painting allows her to give a new role to another classical pictorial genre: the landscape. Werner explains: "In this show, the study of the landscape in relation to the figure is new. Introducing landscape spaces reflects a desire to address forces that are bigger than the individual figure, a preoccupation with the unknown, and with forms that are in some sense infinite and hard to grasp in concrete terms."[2]

The title *Hell and Happiness* refers to an existential condition. As Werner sees it, "there is a humorous and playful aspect in this work, but there is, as you can probably feel, a darker side, an underlying seriousness, a disorder within the idea of a unified image or narration. The title, like the paintings, embodies a contradiction: hell is generally not associated with happiness. Similarly, there is pleasure (happiness) in the paintings: the sensory materiality of the oil painting, the carefully calibrated color and composition, and the seduction of beauty associated with the female figure coopted from fashion magazines. But there is also a kind of destruction and violence. Most of the figures are cut, displaced, or shifted. In many works, the painting is divided and two images are assembled, horizontally or vertically; the two parts are 'sewn' with paint, but they don't always correspond or line up. The coming together of these two sides or distinct parts can suggest the idea of a before and an after, or of simultaneity. In some cases, the juxtaposition is quite simply absurd and defies any rational explanation. I hope that these paintings evoke the confounding mystery and layered complexity of experience."[3]

Hell and Happiness combines paradoxes to make visible a set of feminine archetypes in our collective imagination. Janet Werner paints figures including a dancer, an adventurer, a nymph, witches, a middle-class woman, a princess, a model, a madwoman, a woman-child, an object of desire, a tease, a Madonna, a femme fatale, a quiet, well-behaved woman, a dreamer, and a monster. Concerned with complexity, the artist alternates active bodies and passive ones. Within these portrait-landscapes, there is a gray area that comes through in the treatment of the eyes. Most of these women have their eyes wide open. They look at us in paradoxical ways: with wariness (a combination of intimidation and danger) or with immense melancholy. Other portraits depict them with their eyes closed or from behind. The look in their eyes escapes us because of their refusal. Janet Werner explains: "I still think of the portraits as being about subjectivity, though, and they are meant to recuperate an idea of interiority, the idea of an inner world or worlds being manifest through the representations of the body. [...] I identify the sense of violence or shock, the obliteration or folding, with metaphors about interior life, life history, trauma or some sort of narrative action that takes place within."

Within the panorama of painting, Janet Werner explores the Western representation of women. By establishing correlations between fashion photography, art history, and contemporary painting, she reveals both its oppressive and liberating aspects. "This can be considered a loss of power, but it can also be considered a source of autonomy—that a woman can be folded into herself and open herself up again." The paintings express a continuity of stereotypes and gender assignments: whatever their situation, position, or clothing, women are and will always be reduced to desirable and detestable archetypes. Let's not forget that we're talking about the condition of women, the condition of their lives (of *our* lives), and therefore by extension conditioned lives, subjected to tyrannical expectations, obsessions, laws, or fears. By deconstructing the referents of the images, considering the mental dimension of the subjects, and recontextualizing their bodies, Janet Werner tries to distort and unpack the representation of women, extracting a troubling and joyful plurality.

— Julie Crenn, Art historian and independent curator

1. Unless otherwise indicated, quotations from the artist are taken from Melissa E. Feldman, "Pictures of You: A Conversation with Janet Werner on the Shifting Grounds of Feminism, Fashion and Portraiture" in Canadian Art, December 12, 2019. Link: https://canadianart.ca/interviews/pictures-of-you/
2. Email from the artist, April 27, 2025.
3. Email, April 27, 2025.