

Elizabeth Malaska: The ancient within the modern

An interview with painter Elizabeth Malaska must be wide-ranging, because that's the way she approaches her work

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BY PAUL MAZIAR

When I got the chance to sit down with painter Elizabeth Malaska to discuss some of what I see in her new exhibition, *Heavenly Bodies*, at Russo Lee Gallery, I was moved by her intensity and congeniality. It's an unlikely pairing, maybe, and that's consistent with her work. Her canvases bear the historical past and the immediate present, and a wide-ranging research of art history and contemporary art grounds her subjects—it also frees them.

I was also astonished to find that her answers kept covering questions that I had yet to ask. Her practice of art-making addresses her own life, the outside world, social and political concerns, and again, art history.



Elizabeth Malaska, *Reflections (1)*, charcoal, Flashe on paper/Courtesy Russo Lee Gallery

“I don’t believe in the Modern world: It’s such a thin veneer,” Malaska insists. “We’re trying to protect ourselves from the vulnerability of Being, basically, and we’re making so many concessions to do that. Any time I have a chance to point to how the ancient lives within the modern, to widen those rips within the fabric of our modern ego, I want to do that.”

Her work addresses the problem of being attentive to and open-minded about the contemporary world, while rejecting its narrowness, which is the cause of so many of its ills.

One thing I’m reminded of, having talked with Malaska, is that it seems that we always have—as creative and engaged thinkers with creative and engaged bodies—an entire history to draw upon. To reduce our concerns and attentions to the temporal only would be a mistake. Likewise, it’s just as grave an error to avoid the present.

Looking at Malaska’s paintings, I’m aware of the fact of my male form, of the power (as ever) and the sensibility of women, of the need for change in our society, the fragility of life in all forms. The handling of paint throughout this show mirrors these and other ideas, as much as it entertains, going from lush, wild and otherworldly—as in the strange, heartbreaking/heartbroken being in the foreground of *Wake to Weep*—to totally refined, unified, exacting. A walk through *Heavenly Bodies* is really a timeless walk.

I have restitched our conversation to group her thoughts on several specific topics.

Knowing place

The formative years of my youth and my years as an adult parent have continuity. I feel rooted in this place, and I feel that I will always be of this place. Something about that has allowed me into a practice, or a kind of relationship with my practice, that feels very deep.

As far as my life here in Portland, I have a few little pathways that I run over and over. We have a four-year-old and that keeps my life sort of small in a way, but I try to spend as much time outside as possible. Growing up, I was taught to garden by my dad, who has a green thumb. I feel like my consciousness of this place is very infused with the kind of horticulture of this climate and its seasons, which I see changing. When I was growing up, the experience of the seasons was very different: The rainy season was a lot longer; there was more cold; there was less heat in the summer; and the spring came later. I feel really aware of those things because I’ve known this place for 40 years. This is my experience.

I think these things show up obliquely in my work. I can’t point to something in my painting and say, ‘This is my experience as a native Portlander.’ I’ve been all over: to the Willows and the Steens, and to Central Oregon. Oregon is so diverse and such an amazing state in terms of geology. My interests, in terms of my art and my practice, are really diverse. I pull in a variety of symbols, human and non-human forms. There’s something about rootedness and knowing a place for a very long time that allows for a depth of exploration.



Elizabeth Malaska, *Lament*, oil, Flashe, charcoal, pencil on canvas/Courtesy Russo Lee Gallery

Time and focus

Robin Wall Kimmerer is a biologist who is also deeply immersed in the history and culture of her people. She writes a lot about how Native consciousness and Western White consciousness can learn from each other. In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, she writes about becoming Indigenous, and how it requires time.

I feel like a painting practice is a very slow process that requires a lot of, well, cooking really. I'm fighting for time and focus. This world that we live in is always trying to pull you out. People are five minutes by themselves and their focus goes elsewhere [looking down at cellphone]. Time and focus. I feel like they are things I'm beginning to achieve in a way that makes me happy. It's a subtle quality in my work, but subtlety can be very powerful. There's also a quality of heaviness in this new work, and I think that having grown up in the Northwest, I've had to be OK with a lot of grayness. I'm of German origin partly, and there's something about being comfortable in having gloom as your bedfellow. Being from this place has cultivated that in me.

Art history, naked women

I grew up going to the Portland Art Museum, and the European wing is small, but had a really big influence on me—seeing the Albert Bierstadt and François Boucher works. These are A-List painters of the Neoclassical period, and that influence raises the bar. I was in second grade when my teacher started teaching us about art history in a kind of mature way. I just took right to it. I just loved it; I loved the images. For some reason, I was always obsessed with drawing naked women, and there were naked women there and it somehow validated that interest. It gave me a place to put my inclinations and start to understand them. The intellectualism, the aesthetics of the whole thing, really appealed to me, and I already had formed an identity as a creative person.



François Boucher, *Portrait of a Lady*, oil on canvas/Courtesy of Portland Art Museum

Unknown forces

Portrait of a Lady by François Boucher (1760/1770) is such a strange painting. The political and social implications around such a painting are strange—the position of the mistress in the French monarchy in that period of time. She was glamorous, powerful, and worthy of being depicted. There's power and sexuality in that figure. Those two things being very evident, there's also her glamour—she's not overtly sexualized like other Boucher works. She's in control of that power and sexuality. My mom also loved that painting in particular. The over-the-top-ness, the decorative aspect, is part of it. It's one of many art historical paintings of women that I fell in love with as a child.

Decorative, bodies

These newest paintings are maybe not as decorative as I would like them to be. I love the decorative. My mom is also a fiber artist—she sews and crochets—and a lot of the blankets in these paintings remind me of some of the quilts that she’s made. The handmade textiles also refer to women’s work, the anonymous creators. But in this body of work, it’s the bodies that are in the foreground.

The way that I wanted to paint the bodies was to push and challenge myself to be loose and expressive with the paint. In my studio practice, I’ll often flip-flop between being very meticulous, which I love. But that alone isn’t satisfying enough for me, visually, in my work. So I’ll go from that to being emotive, brash, careless. The balance of those qualities in my older work, *We Dead Awaken*, leaned more heavily on the meticulousness. So here, I wanted to push that balance to have more uncontrolled paint application.

I have a lot further to go there, too, as far as releasing control. It’s hard to figure out, because I have really strong needs in terms of how I want the object to look. The surface needs to be a certain way—I’m controlling in terms of how the object should look. Intentional. It takes a lot of planning, which can make spontaneity hard to come by.

Cool, distant

There’s a coolness in my last body of work [*We Dead Awaken II*, September-October, 2016 at Nationale], but now doesn’t seem like the time for distance. It feels like time to say whatever is on your mind. This work began before the election; it seems topical. After Trump was elected, I was crying all the time. It’s terrible, awful.



Elizabeth Malaska, *Volatile Bodies #4*, charcoal, chalk pastel on paper/Courtesy Russo Lee Gallery

It's not only about that. This work was also about other things: motherhood and how things that are associated with it are compartmentalized. It's about how emotionality is shoved into the category of the feminine. I was thinking about binary gender enforcement, and I was also thinking about Picasso and all the violence that he'd performed on the female body, over and over. That feels really violent to me—it's like the woman's body is, to him, an object that he's just slicing and then shoving back together. I've always been interested in the reclamation of certain movements in art history, and wonder, can I take this thing that Picasso was doing, and turn it around so that it's not violence against the body that's being depicted, but instead, make the body that's looking at the image relate to the female body in a different way.

Doom

I just finished Louise Erdrich's new novel, *Future Home of the Living God*. She's part Indigenous, Chippewa, and also happens to be a mother. Her new book is a work of fiction, totally dystopian. It's about the world falling apart. The women are kidnapped by the government because evolution is going backwards, and the women must be forcibly impregnated.

Things seem really gloomy right now, and with the changing climate and everything else, I would never call myself a "happy" person. I'm very Eastern-European in my makeup. I'm not happy-go-lucky, and I see a lot of value in that. For me it's honest.



Elizabeth Malaska, *Wake to Weep*, oil, Flashe, charcoal, pencil on canvas/Courtesy Russo Lee Gallery

Power, vulnerability

Another thing that I've been thinking about is the compartmentalization of emotions as well—it's the intense emotions like sadness. Being emotional is disallowed. Men are even more disallowed to be emotional, and there are different ways that plays out for different genders. But it's the fact that, in general, we're not supposed to express sadness, that gets in the way of healing. You can't move past something until you allow yourself to experience it. And that experience in terms of intense emotions, happens in and through the body.

I was talking to my physical therapist, and he was talking about the autonomic nervous system, which controls muscles that we don't have conscious control over, like the sphincter muscle, muscles that are involved in orgasm, and muscles for digestion. If you're in an intense stage of holding on, the autonomic nervous system actually inhibits the flow of energy (blood, fluids) throughout your body. The fear of actually experiencing emotions has to do with, I think, the fear of losing or giving up control over to something else. It inhibits people in our culture from moving through grief.

In this country especially, there's so much grief from, namely, slavery and genocide, that it's ongoing. If we can't allow ourselves to experience that grief, then we're stuck. I rage against this stuff; all I've known my whole life is heteronormative patriarchal capitalism. This stuff strangles all of us, every day.

Mother, center-stage

Another thing that I've been thinking about, in terms of motherhood, is THE mother in terms of Western art history, the Virgin Mary and her relationship to her child. That was supposedly, you know, a divine child that she still carried in her body and gave birth to. I'm not religious at all, but my ancestry is Catholic, and I've always been fascinated with it. But I look at religion as a mythological system that has intense influence over the culture. God's experience of Jesus was, 'the incarnation of myself,' but Mary's experience of that child was through her body. Maybe he was a divine child, but she carried and gave birth to him.

It's like the mental versus the physical experience. Her experience as a mother is occluded: She is present in many of the paintings, but when he's a baby, she's more like furniture for him to sit on! Or if she's at the crucifixion, she's way down in the corner. And then at the moment of birth, forget about it, there was no mess, no blood, no vagina. It was just, 'a baby!' Mary was present, but invisible. So, I think of the women in my paintings as different versions of that kind of archetypal mother. It's claiming her space—she's present, and you can't get away from that body (a post-natal body, with rolls, and a stomach, and nipples) and she gets center-stage.

Dailiness, magic

A painting can seem so archetypal, but when you put something in like a cell-phone, that makes it something more like a magazine ad. This makes me think of a time I was on mushrooms, walking through a beautiful forest. I looked around, and I was like, 'This is the FOREST, where the DINOSAURS walked.' And yet, there was really nothing different.

We are so in our egos about the idea that this is the present, and that the archaic time is only in the past. We're Modern; we're removed from all the messiness [we think]. I love how visual art can be ancient, timeless, and can insert itself into our daily life. And that's magic right there. It links you to the world in a totally different way, but it's the same world.



Elizabeth Malaska, *Apocrypha*, oil, Flashe, charcoal, pencil, glitter on canvas/Courtesy of Russo Lee Gallery

An agenda

I work in bodies of work. When figuring out what my next body of work will be, I set parameters, but I'm not creating a fortress. Rather, like when searching for North, South, East, or West, I leave a lot of space in between. I'll always be working with history—art history, and the history of painting; it's a given for me. And I'll always be focused on working to centralize the female body. It's forever been the central figure in Western art history, but there's a big difference between the body and a subject. What has to happen for that body to become a subject?

The body that's in this new series of work, one could call it a non-beautiful body. They're beautiful to me, but not in the way that we're taught: skinny, young. We're taught to have expectations of the centralized female figure, so when this figure doesn't fulfill those expectations, I want to force an all-new way of relating. A different rubric for understanding the valorization of that figure. Putting something into an image is a valorization of it, especially paintings in a gallery. That's art with a capital A. It carries a lot of weight and I'm very cognizant of that. I have an agenda.

Manet's OLYMPIA, low art measures

In Olympia's direct gaze is a challenge, but then she's also totally available, recumbent, in a vulnerable position. She exists solely for the pleasure of the viewer: Maybe her feet are dirty but her nipples aren't; she's got jewelry on, etc. And then there's the body of color that's barely visible or readable, and it's vibing with the cat. Cats are often related to the idea of feminine evil.

Putting my cats in my paintings—that's something that my teacher in undergrad would have told me not to do. I love to paint cats, and my daughter loves them. Just like the dogs in my last body of work—the German shepherd would actually allow people to engage with that part of the painting. I want my work to exist in a fine-art context, but I'm not opposed to low-art measures to get people to engage with it.

In the studio, influence

In response to Rainer Maria Rilke's question—"How would you describe the creative process, from the inception of a project?"—Auguste Rodin said: "First, I experience an intense feeling, which gradually becomes more concrete and urges me to give it plastic shape. Then I proceed to plan and design. At last, when it comes to execution, I once more abandon myself to feeling, which may prompt me to modify the plan." I try to cast a wide net.

I set some parameters initially, and I do a lot of image-gathering: images from both high and low sources, and a lot of screen-shotting. I like using books, and I don't find Google very helpful in terms of searching for material—it's way too controlled. I like what happens when I go to look at a book on, say, mid-century modern homes, and there'll be some weird daily scene that will bring in some other narrative.

A lot of analog research tools are much more open-ended to me. I'll start out with intuitive points that I'll want to hit, and I'll use those to create parameters. From those, the associations begin to merge. When doing research for this body of work, I came across Wallace Berman. He had taken these beautiful photos of [Bay Area artist associated with the Beats] Jay DeFeo, with all this glitter pouring down her body. It got me onto a track of thinking about second-wave feminist artists like Carolee Schneemann for example. A number of these poses are sourced from performances or photographs of people like that.



Elizabeth Malaska, *Event Horizon*, oil, Flashe, charcoal, pencil, glitter on canvas/Courtesy Russo Lee Gallery

Dissolution

This may be the most hopeful of the recent paintings. It's the only one with an exit. In all the other paintings, there's no way out—you try to go away but you just slide back into this monstrous female body. Berman's Jay Defeo photograph is where the idea for this painting came from. It's maybe the fourth painting that I had done, and the last of the smaller medium-size works. The first was *Apocrypha*, the one with the fence. In those four paintings, I was working through how I wanted to use the paint, to convey a dissolution of form—even while form is present. Form and its dissolution at the same time.

In New York, I saw an Edvard Munch painting at the Met Breuer. It's a painting of a man by a window (*Night*, 1890); it's so beautiful. The figure and ground are merged, and because you project yourself into the image, you feel the form although you can't fully see it. It's just a kind of psychic involvement with the screen of the image that I love, and am always searching for. In the painting that happened just before *Event Horizon*, titled *Wake to Weep*, the paint is very heavy on her body but the brushstrokes are starting to break up. In *Event Horizon*, the paint is very light and minimal; it's more about shadow. Her body is spread out in front of you and her crotch is this black hole. It's a way to have her body there but unconsumable. It's there, but it's not vulnerable.

Event horizon

This whole body of work arose from the idea of the heavens, the universe and its planets and stars. The term event horizon refers to that line as you approach a black hole: if you cross the line you can't get out of the force-field of the black hole. I think of her whole body as the black hole that draws you in and won't let you escape. But, there's also an escape hatch in the back, which is a naked reference to Munch's *Sunset*, (1909). It could also be a nuclear bomb going off; it's unclear whether it's an escape or a death-knell.

José Muñoz, a queer theorist from the '90s, wrote a book called *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, about queerness as being a future event that we're always approaching. Queerness in this sense is that which is in opposition to the heteronormative. I like that idea. And I think about the fact that these things exist, yet we still drive our cars around and read the newspaper. If you could look at someone going into a black hole, you'd see them stretching and stretching until they're one atom thin. But your experience of being in a black hole might be totally different than that. The grid of the floor is warping, the sideboard's feet are warping. I'm not creating a linear narrative but a collage of ideas.



Elizabeth Malaska, *Star Gazers*, oil, Flashe, charcoal, pencil on canvas/Courtesy Russo Lee Gallery

I'm always trying to invoke those unknown forces. That seems like a real way to interact, being a human, than what we're given today. I was so excited when I landed on the title of *Star Gazers*. There's the girl looking at her phone, and I'm imagining that she's looking at TMZ or something. And then there's the stargazer lily, which is also a reference to the Virgin Mary as well. I struggled with that painting for a while: I knew I wanted this group of four women, and I knew I wanted the moths and the quilt. But where are they? Then it came to me: They're lying down looking up at the stars.

I really don't believe in the Modern world. It's such a thin veneer. But we're trying to protect ourselves from the vulnerability of Being, basically, and we're making so many concessions to do that. Any time I have a chance to point to how the ancient lives within the modern, to widen those rips within the fabric of our modern ego, I want to do that.

Visitations

Drawing is a huge part of my work. I'll go into the studio and make like three or so drawings. They just start naturally becoming portraits. The drawings in this show are a record of my studio practice. It felt like a natural extension of the paintings.

The two large drawings were really strange. Once in a while when I'm working, I'll get a very strong desire to do a very specific thing. I'll do it, and then it will go away. Those two large drawings happened halfway through the process, and it was a physical need, like a craving for food or something. That's happened during the last few bodies of work — it's like a night-blooming flower that comes and then goes away. It's very rare that I'll have a clear image that I want to make, it's more like a visceral impulse. How to express a sensation. It feels more like a visitation.

Elizabeth Malaska's "Heavenly Bodies" continues through February 24 at the Russo Lee Gallery, 805 NW 21st Avenue.