

Siri Hustvedt in conversation with Hanneline Røgeberg

Siri Hustvedt: When I think about your work, I have two questions. How has the idea of technical mastery become complicated in your work by the gesture that messes it up? And, what does the body mean in your representations? They are both pregnant questions – to use a loaded but good word.

Hanneline Røgeberg: I take technical mastery or fluency to mean that something performs well in a learned idiom. For a while I scrambled to be able to talk in any language, and borrowed formulations were good enough. Most of all I wanted to be persuasive, I wanted to quiet all doubt and brook no argument. This was an internal squabble, the one needing persuasion was me, of course, and painting was absorbing busywork to keep at bay an inherited narrative I found irresistible and terrifying. But rather than tidy the threads of this narrative and still the doubts, the paintings found themselves knotting them up, polluting the assigned categories and deferring any clean conclusions. I would want to revisit some conflict – a tidy, self-righteous version of it – and explain it to myself, hoping that a masterful rhetoric would carry me over the gnarly existential parts. They didn't, and the slow, private manifestation of various bodies close up against me made the clinical assignments impossible to maintain. Instead it implicated me in every conflict, joint and crease. The subject happened where technique failed.

Siri: I find it interesting that you use linguistic metaphors – idiom, language, talk, squabble, argument, rhetoric. You are referring to an internal conflict in yourself about *how to paint* that probably is, at least in part, verbal – an internal dialogue – but also to the history of visual images as a learned “language”. Is this your inherited narrative, the story of art?

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Hanneline: I don't know which comes first: a compulsion to shape one's story, or the awareness of an ongoing story of art you'd like to participate in. My pantheon of greats are those where I forget how they are made when I am with them, where I experience their sum as greater than the parts I can account for. Works I admire are different, and can sometimes be deciphered and pocketed for my own use. But early Munch, late Titian, Carolee Schneemann's and Paul McCarthy's videos from the 1970s, the Avignon Pietà, Beuys explaining pictures to the dead hare, a rocking Giacometti groove in a plaster cage, any Goya, the Hammond dreadlock tree, Oppenheim's fur cup – I can go on: my encounters with these were felt as a system reboot, and still are, even if revisiting some of them now can be embarrassing.

The narrative that my work mulls over is the imprint of inherited behaviours you inflict on the world – the parallel imperatives you obey along with the ones you are aware of. Certain events, whether personal or geopolitical, will make you return to their terms over and over, and even when the polarities have shifted, now you are on top instead of bottom, or now acting in opposition to – you are still rolling around on the same cycle. If choice played a part in it, I think my painting happened when I became aware of repeating what I was trying to avoid. This isn't limited to language, but applies to any system put in place to keep chaos at bay, the way any tool-set you inherit and try to master will come with its suggested uses built-in – see this here Vaseline'd ice-pick? I think it was the double bind of noticing, while trying to be coherent in some, any, form, that the language I spoke predisposed the narrative outcomes I was struggling against. Painting began to point out these blind spots and find new ways of being at a loss for words, outside the systemic predeterminism.

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Siri: Well, narrative can also be told in images. And we inherit stories in our various cultures. I also think narrative has a physiological basis that is present in human development before language, and that it is rooted in the connection between self and other – a motor-sensory, visual back and forth we all experience even before we can speak.

I just want to stress that words and images are different. This is obvious, but I have noticed that the distinction drowns in a lot of art writing that was influenced by late twentieth century French theory that was about texts, not pictures. The urge to represent the “out there” pictorially is ancient. The image I saw of a bison deep inside a cave at Niaux in France struck me as blazingly alive, and it was painted at least 12,000 years ago. Whatever word those people used for bison would conjure the idea of the animal and a generalised mental picture of it in my mind, but the visual and the verbal experiences are not the same. I am not saying that words don't also shape our perceptions. I think they do, and yet, it is fair to point out that my immense distance in time from that bison did not prevent my recognition of it as that animal.

Your extraordinary gifts to create such “recognition” in the viewer began to annoy you because you were looking for something else. What exactly are the “gnarly existential parts”?

Hanneline: My gifts annoy me when they just confirm what I am prepared to see. Recognising while never having seen it before is the prize, the proof. Sometimes it is also frightening, because it means I somehow have a consciousness in me that has

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no idiom yet, but is insistent, like madness. And realising you are implicated in all the assignments, both victim and perpetrator in your universe, is equal parts megalomaniacal and humbling.

Siri: I think writing for me has always involved fear. The closer I get to my fear, the more forceful the language becomes that attempts to articulate it. When I look at a paragraph or you look at a canvas, I think we are hoping that in that external “thing”, we will find an answering presence, one that holds in it an emotional, but not necessarily a literal truth (with a small t). The question becomes one I have asked before in a not yet published essay: Why one story and not another? Why one painting and not another? Every possibility is open theoretically, but every artist feels what is right and what is wrong. We are both engaged in making fictions, and yet some fictions are “true” and others are “false”.

Hanneline: Yes, I look for an answering presence. But also a corrective one. It says “yes, but...” and I must stretch to include more, expand my categories. Is this truth? It is a rebuttal to choosing generalised order over messy specificity. Sometimes the compass needle can be nudged, and part of the urge to work is fuelled by never being 100% sure of my instincts. The formal language I am bound by is so provisional, has so many liabilities and sins already, and I know this, yet the mind needs it to make sense of itself anyway.

Painting will reliably complicate everything it touches. I remember reacting to the 2003 portrait of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, squalid and mussed up in a blasted T-shirt, with a double consciousness: one which fluently read the rhetoric of the photo,

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and another which recognised a baseline fellowship and felt embarrassed, thinking; quick, someone, lick his fur down.

I am still thinking of this in painting. If anything, I trust the subjectivity of senses, the privacy of our individual biology. If something threatens to become too rehearsed as sight, I think it helps to feed the visual input through one's nose. Or skin. I was thinking about the difference talking with the painter Robert Bordo; he distinguishes between representation and figuration, where the first is a code that changes its meaning in relation to context but remains visibly recognisable, and the second, as a language of form referring to subjects and narrative that rely on the context to persuade you to recognise, or not.

Siri: According to Bordo's distinction, figuration allows the artist greater freedom to leave representation but hold onto a story. As for recognition, I think we seek someone or something in images. We want them in a painting, and even when there are only hints of those bodies, finding them brings us satisfaction. When there is a human body in a picture, it always becomes a mirror for the spectator, the other that is like me. For the time I am looking at a painting, the face or body in that painting supplants my own. I find myself in the eyes of that other.

Hanneline: And sometimes being seen by that other can be unnerving. Much of my painting is an alibi for engaging in surreptitious intimacies or quarrels I am too scared to have in real life. The canvas itself is a stand-in, a subject developing its own reservations or objections to my intentions for it.

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You say the finding of a body brings a kind of satisfaction. Is the recognition of the other ever shocking or disarming, in your writing? I ask because I wonder if there is a parallel in fiction to my feeling vaguely reproached or rebuked by my painting as a measure of their resolution. But perhaps what I think of as resolution in a painting is just what presence looks like, something sentient staring back at me. It will be there, or not. This is what is hopeful about painting. There is always something unaccounted for, something in excess of your careful equation, an impurity fucking up your empirical ambition, whether your coordinates are psychological or formal.

Siri: I heartily agree. Every theory, every word, every image is vulnerable at its boundaries, the place we decide to cut one thing away from the other. This seems particularly prescient in your work. I am constantly seeking ambiguity in my work – the places (note my visual metaphor) in which everything becomes murky and distinctly uncomfortable. When I speak of an answering presence on the page, I do not mean a presence that is necessarily nice or pleasant. I am often surprised by my own work. Where did that come from? It's so horrible but at the same time, necessary.

Hanneline: I found *The Shaking Woman's* search for a discipline elastic enough to hold and tolerate the variables she represents intensely moving to read about for this reason.

Siri: Hallelujah! You are among the few people outside of the disciplines I address directly – neuroscience, neurology, medical history, philosophy, psychoanalysis – who seems to have understood my search. No single model can contain the

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ambiguities of being alive. And, since I agree with Louise Bourgeois, who said, “Art is not about art. Art is about life”, I feel positively vindicated by your reading.

Hanneline: Yes to Louise. A while back I was finding these poetic names in brain anatomy, like Pia Mater (mother’s skin), which is the innermost membrane next to the brain, while struggling to transfer the way the subject is explained in psychoanalysis into some layman thought models for myself. We know that the young brain favours that which is stimulated, and organises the growing neurons accordingly.

I thought about how the brain becomes hard – wired to a given sensory vocabulary this way. If outside stimulus is vital for sentience, sentience means being able to see some things you were stimulated to grow the neurons to distinguish, and not others; hear only certain sounds and not others; smell only certain smells and not others, etc. Would it be possible to see, hear, smell or emit anything that lay outside those imprinted vocabularies? In embryology, skin and touch is the earliest sense stimulus the brain can distinguish. In this way, mother’s skin is the first “thought” to reach your brain. I get hung up on gestures between people that I can’t read clearly: bodily signals that appear to be one thing, but are just as often their camouflaged opposite, helpful to harmful, loving to violent. An example is the nurturing lick in *Tongue Audit*, which may be a caress, but is just as much an act of colonising your sense potential.

So, how possible is it to escape inherited narratives, if behaviours thought to be subject to will can only express themselves in those predetermined formats?

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Siri: Our brains – through dynamic synaptic connectivity and pruning (the shedding of systems that are not used) – develop in relation to the environment, as you point out. There is growing evidence that all infants process stimuli in an amodal way. This means the senses are not distinguished from one another. Sight, sound, touch, smell and taste overlap. Every infant, according to this view, is a synesthete. Some people, for reasons that are unclear, retain a multi-sensory ability. For me, sight and touch overlap. This has recently been named “mirror-touch synesthesia”. The question of leaping beyond the biological reality of what you call “the imprinted vocabularies” might be reframed. Despite the fact that there are periods in early life of particularly robust brain development, the plasticity of our brains – the ability of the brain to change – does not stop. It is not unlimited, as people who suffer from brain damage clearly show, but learning goes on, and physiological brain alterations with it.

It's also important to make a distinction between wakeful awareness, something we share with all animals, and self-consciousness, which allows us to recognise ourselves in the mirror and to use language, to become others to ourselves in autobiographical memories and our fantasies about the future – through our imaginations. Making visual art, writing books, creating a work of music are all the products of self-consciousness. This is a huge step beyond our just being awake and moving around in the world. It is self-reflective, a way of being beyond the pre-reflective, where a lot of our living takes place. So what I think of as full-blown narrative – telling a story to another person – is dependent on a pre-reflective motor-sensory reality that is also learning dependent. Narrative: I tell you about my day or I illustrate something to you visually that implies a story, a story that happens in a definable time and space. The underlying narrative structure is pre-reflective – bodily sequences of motion, a kind of corporeal timing, which is learned through interactions

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with objects, people and things. I learned how to ride a bicycle and now I do not think about *how* I do it.

It is important to stress that the frames of our understanding also create it. I know we have leapt into theoretical ground here, and because we have, we run into the same issues that haunt every abstract discussion. What do we mean when we say narrative? What do we mean by inherited? The question of what, if anything is innate in human beings is not known. There is an organism. It has potential, but parsing inherent from learned turns out to be horribly difficult and perhaps silly. Constructing a model for how the brain works is up for grabs. There are many models. The more one knows about the brain, the more camps emerge with radically different thoughts about how to see the mind.

Let us say this: making art is not about finding a theoretical model. Making art is about finding something beyond the self – on the canvas or the page – that seems true. That truth is found between the artist and the image or text. Much of that trueness, that rightness, is available to us as a feeling only. I am terribly interested in that feeling because I think it's the root of all meaning.

Hanneline: I think we agree all organising systems must be provisional. Finding my subject mostly on the outside of intention means that I need to identify the known first and account for its parts, before I find the limitations. And since the grammar gets steadily more complex, I rely on paint trip-ups to pull the rug out from under my slowly acquired readiness for the subject. Marks may morph from being spatial into walls of matter. It may remain inert – just stuff, or the shock of spatial collapse may

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restore an intimacy with the subject that repeated iterations have blunted – it is right up against me! It might also change the sensory register I filter it through, so that I identify it in paint via movement or tactility, rather than sight. While looking at a pelt painting, I see a tremble of curlicues in the fur in my peripheral vision, which starts up a quiver inside me, a shift in frequency, as if I am transmitting and receiving on a different wavelength than usual. The closer and longer I can be with a not-yet-spoken encounter – Robert Irwin's forgetting the name of the thing one sees – the more undefended my recognition of a subject will be.

Siri: Irwin's comment is straight out of phenomenology – Husserl and Merleau-Ponty especially. In an essay on Morandi that I delivered at the Metropolitan Museum here in New York, I talked about how when one looks carefully at a thing – any thing – the first part of it to vanish is its name. I used a Perrier bottle sitting on my desk as an example. Looking closely at it for a couple of minutes banished the word *bottle* from my mind. And when I drew the bottle, I forgot entirely what it was called. I looked at it, moved my hand as if I were touching it and more and more came into view – light, shadow, colour, and their movements. This is the project of phenomenology, to be undefended, as you put it. It is not that we can escape our embodied minds that shape perception or reach the actual things in themselves (Kant's *das Ding an sich*), but rather that we can move away from the received, the clichéd, the ready-made concept towards a less burdened sense of ourselves in the world and then invent the strangeness of this experience in art. In your work, I feel the motion from high exact articulation (the latter word used not only for words) towards a shifting ambiguity. I find this personally exciting and, I have to admit, resonant with my own work.

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Hanneline: Talking about this reminds me of Mr Morning in your book *The Blindfold* who hires Iris to describe a series of unassuming objects, used cotton balls, if I remember, and other toiletries from an extinguished life, in order for him to see them anew, and become undefended again to the subject they restore to him. Iris is the sensory filter he borrows and manipulates. I have always thought this short story must be responsible for lots of projects in studios around the world.

Siri: Well, here we have the job of looking at the Perrier bottle but without that bottle's neutrality. Because the objects Iris describes in *The Blindfold* belonged to a young woman who was murdered, the things are steeped in a mysterious story and Iris's fears and suspicions. The context for her task is laden with dread. The things are just things – absurd and banal – but we, artists, spectators and readers animate those objects with context, with story.

Your paintings of furs, the skins of animals that have been flattened out (almost as flat as a canvas), fascinate me because they seem to reside somewhere between the living and the dead. They are beast-like and human. We have common mammalian traits – we and the beasts. They exude an uncanny sexual feeling, too. Also, I love your images of balls – testicles – there is much to be said about them, not only about their curious erotic beauty, but about how they “figure” in art history, which is also a history of men and women: mostly, men as artists and women as subjects of art. Your balls feel joyfully subversive to me.

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Hanneline: They are strange to sit and look at for any length of time, moving around below the skin like clouds. I look until I forget what they are and am longer defended against them.

The Pelt paintings are a way to be up against the canvas as a skin, too, where I can stroke something into being alive again. I try to articulate hair(fur) with hair(brush) and fail, with a presence staring back that is discreet enough to let me work unselfconsciously at something absurd. A way to chase down all possible metaphors and pull the taxidermy hay out of them. We groom each other, with me giving a parental mussing up or smoothing down of their hair with a wet finger before sending them out into the world. In both cases much of the point is to be made speechless in the scramble for articulation.

The paintings of balls began as a response to four small Gerhard Richter's paintings, made from photos of his wife with their young baby. They were variously scraped out and squeegeed in the usual way, but they were hotter, registering frustration and inadequacy rather than nonchalance – I loved them. And it pissed me off that he could access a painting trope that I couldn't. I had just had a child myself, and it could never feel sufficiently removed and metaphoric again. I needed to find an equivalent piece of masculine biology, something resistant to being a stand-in for anything but itself. Balls seem to me where all metaphors go to die; they are never seen, but are inferred everywhere, from Twin Towers to Holofernes – we must not speak their name. They have that embryonic scar still visible, from the time your body could still turn this way or that, a structural ambivalence that is good to look at. They are like sleeping faces, and make me feel like Constable painting clouds as fast as he can.

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Furs have those seams along the midline, too. They are there to remind me that many flat surfaces peered into for divination were once split open by force.

Siri: I wrote a catalogue essay for Richter's painted-over photographs and you are right, the Madonna and Child images are suffused with frustration, because of their resemblance to that old theme in art history. It's interesting that having a child made it impossible for you to use the theme. Maybe you are still searching. I love your sensuous painting of your daughter's hair, but that is child, or part of the child, as object. Maybe becoming a mother creates a relation to a child that is not objective, but subjective. I certainly have never had any notion of myself as "Madonna", despite the fact that I luxuriated (at least part of the time) in my daughter's infancy.

Hanneline: The reality of her and the imperatives in the studio I answer to are almost impossible to think of in the same sentence. My sister, who is a midwife, tried to collect examples of childbirth in art, but gave up. Beyond stone Sheela-na-gigs and the odd Frida Kahlo I couldn't help her, either. I thought it was a great project: find that thing that can never be a stand-in for something else. Language stops there.

Siri: Birth seems to be the event art history has excised, blanked out. There is a lot of copulation art. There is Courbet's *Origin of the World*. There are male nudes, the homoeroticism of the Greeks later reincarnated in the Renaissance and, of course, endless depictions of female nudes, but balls have no real place in art history. John Coetzee once referred to male genitalia as "extruded viscera", a term I find at once accurate and hilarious. For women the goods are mostly on the inside and for men mostly on the outside. But balls are terribly vulnerable and have never been isolated

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as objects of visual interest before, so I congratulate you warmly. If balls are included (in male nudes in painting and sculpture), they are rarely isolated from the penis. Of course you are right that phallic imagery is everywhere: the tower, the sword, the knife, the gun, the missile, but this of course is a mode of seeing, a fantasy about masculine power that hides a great deal of anxiety. Your gonad reference is very moving to me. We all begin the same in the womb. In my latest novel, *The Summer Without Men*, I dwell on the biology, as well as the ideology, of sexual difference. The neat binary divisions we like to make for man and woman are far more complex than is generally acknowledged, especially in biology, which is regarded as a kind of bottom line of the real and the natural. But sexual ambiguity also exists at that level because bodies don't always cooperate with the cultural love for binaries – for either/or.

Your interest in “the seam” is also one I have thought about a lot. I am fascinated by the lines, the incisions, the clefts in our perception of the world – they are zones of closing, but also of potential opening. The very idea of a seam, a border, is poignant to me.

I know there are artists in every field who don't give a damn about presence or being, but for me, it is everything. Great works of art allow the viewer/reader/listener to recognise something about being, about being alive that she couldn't have recognised without that work of art.