

Kate Groobey's Pure Pleasure

At Mizuma Art Gallery. Text by Yuki Harada. Translation by Jason James.

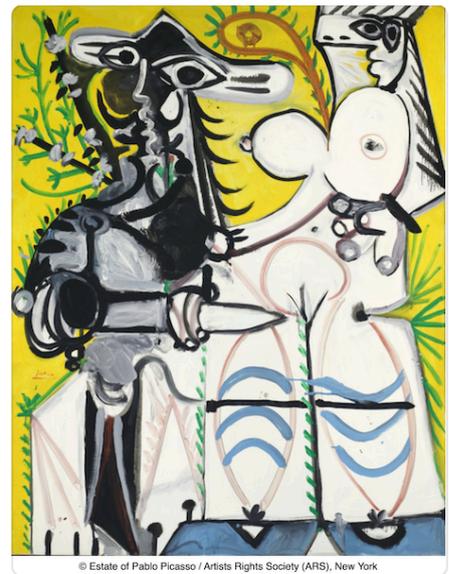
Based in Yorkshire, in the UK, and the South of France, Kate Groobey works while travelling around the world with her partner. Themed on her encounters and relationships with people, her paintings are at first sight strongly reminiscent of the style of Picasso or Matisse, but are also closely bound up with her performances. During her visit to Japan to put on a solo exhibition after winning the Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation Art Prize, we spoke to her about her lifestyle and the work she makes out of it.

The female figures are not there for the viewer to look at, but to indicate what the viewer should look at

"In the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) there is a work by Picasso called "Man and Woman". In this picture, the man is pointing a dagger at the woman's vagina. One day when I was looking at it, a male security guard came up and jokingly said to me "Picasso was a pig!" This got me thinking. I wondered whether if I were to depict my (female) lover, I too would become a pig like Picasso."

Painting the female figure with a "female gaze"

Mizuma Art Gallery recently held the first solo exhibition in Asia of work by Kate Groobey, winner of the 2018 Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation Art Prize. Her words above not only describe the episode that led her to make the new series of work in this exhibition, entitled "Pure Pleasure", but also introduce two themes that are important in understanding her work: Picasso and femininity.



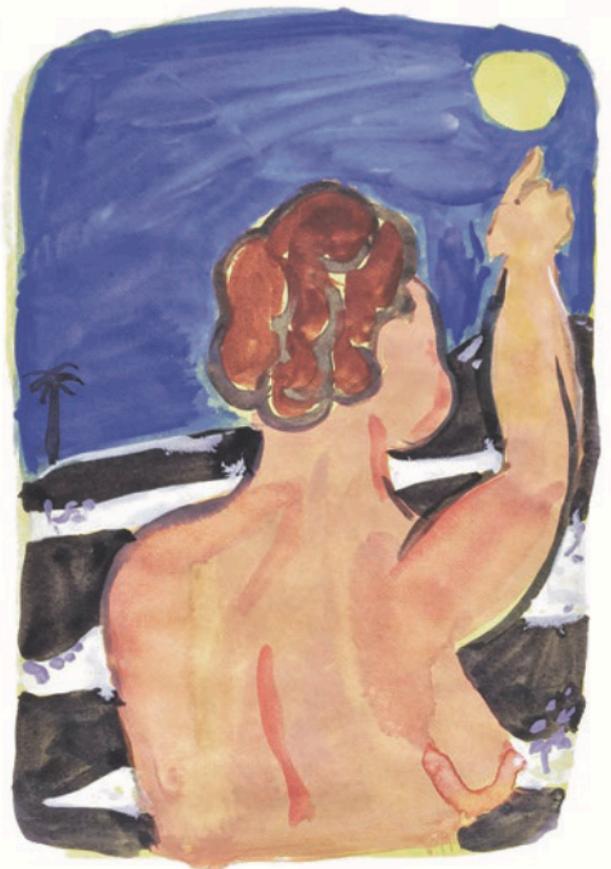
© Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
Pablo Picasso, Man and Woman,
1969, oil on canvas, 162 X 130CM, LACMA

As one can immediately see, Groobey's work is influenced by modern masters including Picasso and Matisse. Her approach, moreover, is not to produce simulations of their work from an elevated perspective in which they are seen as painters of the past, but to set the perspective at the same level as them, and show her own identity in the same space as Picasso or Matisse. What do I mean by that? Let's start with what she herself says about her viewpoint.

"Picasso, Matisse and Cezanne are my heroes. It is no exaggeration to say that I started painting because of my love for them. But of course I'm different from them, and the most important difference is that they painted women from a male viewpoint. So in contrast to that, I wondered what it would be like to paint women from a female viewpoint."

Relevant to this statement from Groobey is that the female model painted by her in "Pure Pleasure" is her lover, the writer, Jina Khayyer. Of course, making works from a female point of view, per se, is not a completely new direction in the history of art. So what aspects does Groobey herself draw attention to in her works?

"In works using the "male gaze", like Picasso's paintings, the woman is painted as a passive figure. But the women I have painted in this new series are different. For instance, one of the works in this series, entitled "Bright Side of the Moon," shows a woman pointing at the moon. The woman in this picture is telling the viewer not to look at her herself, but instead she is showing us what to look at.



Kate Groobey, Bright side of the moon, A4 watercolour on paper, 2017

There is also a video work entitled "Give Me What I Want". In that work the performer urges the viewer to "Give me what I want". Then, "I'll give you what you want." She doesn't let the

viewer project their desires onto the work, but instead is trying to express her own desires within the work itself. With that move she blocks the “male gaze”, and in that respect, it’s different from Picasso.

Stepping into the picture

Many of Groobey’s works similarly block the “male gaze” by using videos in which she herself gets into the painting. I think the most important part of the message that emerges is that “(the performer) expresses her own desires”, and within it the viewer (whatever their gender) “is shown what they should be looking at”.



Kate Groobey, Pure Pleasure performance still, 2017

To put it another way, when we look at Groobey’s works (for instance in the work showing a woman pointing at the moon), our gaze is deflected from the woman to the moon. And when we are gazing at the moon depicted in the painting, we realise that the woman pointing to the moon is lingering in the same space as ourselves. This experience is just like “stepping into the picture”, and Groobey, who was interested in this idea even in her two-dimensional paintings, chose performance and video as methods to produce this sort of experience more effectively.

“My works started with small-scale watercolours, and then I moved on to large oil paintings, the size of a human being, putting them on the floor and painting using my whole body. The small works I just painted with my hands, but when you produce large works it becomes a physical approach using your whole body. The video works take this process a step further and allow me to step into the works with my whole body, as

it were. By drawing attention to the physical nature of the production process I am trying to create a world in which the viewer is able to step into the picture."

Jumping out of the picture

Listening to Groobey, I feel it is highly significant that her videos, in which one feels as though one is stepping into the picture, have their origins in the daily life of the artist herself. That is, when she talks about the distance between herself and Picasso and Matisse, as though she herself had stepped into the picture (or into art history) and is speaking from there, her voice feels as though it is coming from a place very close to them. And that's probably the case. Groobey seems really, or in fact physically, to be in a place close to Picasso and Matisse. "Previously I was based in Yorkshire and Paris, but the house I was living in with my partner, Jina Khayyer, was near to the location of the terrorist attacks on Paris, and I was very distressed by those. Also with my studio very far from where I was living, and with problems with the pollution and noise and the like, we decided to make a change of life style and move to the South of France. And there we found a bright light spreading across everything, completely different from Yorkshire or Paris. The light in the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region in particular is beautifully white, and this was where Matisse, Picasso and Cezanne lived."

When Groobey found her identity in neighbouring territory to Matisse and Picasso, I think that rather than "stepping into the picture", she must have felt a sensation of "reality melting into the picture", or the "picture jumping out into reality".

Also, the reason why she started doing performance work, before she started living in the South of France, was that she "lost her studio". "There was a period of a year when I didn't have a studio. I couldn't paint pictures, so I started doing performances. Having said that, the first time I met Jina was when I was at an artist-in-residence at Villa Lena, in Tuscany, Italy. I went back to London, packed my bags and headed to Paris to live with Jina. As a result I couldn't get a studio at the start, so when I wanted to make some work, what I could do, at home in the living room, was performances."

Out of these performances, born from everyday life, and the changes resulting from the move to France, came the video works we see in "Pure Pleasure", in which a woman, who seems to have burst out through the screen, dances to express her own desires.

A person both near and far

Inasmuch as on this occasion I had the opportunity to meet the artist in person and interview her, I felt that her interest was not so much to place herself "in" art history as to produce work that engages "with" art history.

"I like to feel close to history. We can't change history, so rather than denying it, we need to come up with some sort of new ways forward."

Her works have repaid her efforts by coming up with a new method of close engagement "with" art history.

Through her physical production process, she is trying to create the kind of world in which the viewer can enter the picture.

So far Groobey has converted her daily life and her travel experiences into art works. I asked her what kind of influence her experiences in Japan were having on her. She told me that as research for her next project she had been to see noh, kabuki and sumo. Of these, noh seems to have left a particularly deep impression on her, and she excitedly told me about her experiences on that occasion.

"For the first hour and a half I was asleep" (she says laughingly), "but when I woke up part of the way through, and was in a semi-dreamlike state, I saw the figure of an actor wearing a mask playing a lovesick young prostitute. And then I suddenly felt that the mask was alive. I felt an energy as if from an actual soul, rather than a living human being. Being held in



Noh Theatre, Japan.

a kind of trance by the sound of the taiko drum, I cried for over 30 minutes (unusually for me), until the actor left the stage. I was overwhelmed by the power with which the emotion was transmitted. The mask was so vivid and beautiful, and I got lots of ideas for my own dances.”

This episode in which of all the aspects of noh, her interest was attracted by the mask and the performer’s body, is not really a surprise but rather seems entirely appropriate if we look at Groobey’s works to date. I think that the “young prostitute” communicating with Groobey through the noh mask was somebody both close and distant, in the same way as Picasso and Matisse. And perhaps what’s important to her is not “history of art” but to have a type of “distance” and “relationship” with the person she is interested in at any given time. So I think this is the reason why what she has repeatedly tried to do in her works so far is to find ways of communicating with “others”.