

TWO COATS OF PAINT

March 27, 2019

Interview: Delphine Hennelly at Carvalho Park



Contributed by Sangram Majumdar / A few weeks ago, on a crisp Sunday afternoon, I met Delphine Hennelly at Carvalho Park where her paintings are on display in “History Lessons,” a two-person show that includes woven pieces by Mimi Jung. We talked about the performative nature of painting, the importance of open narratives, and how, sometimes, escaping ourselves as artists is impossible. The exhibition runs through March 31, 2019.

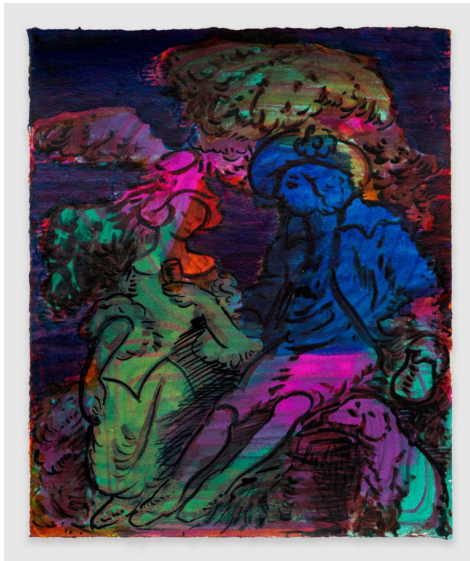
Sangram Majumdar: At first glance, the paintings *Country Matters* and *Oh Wilderness Were Paradise Enough* seem to echo each other. But quickly it becomes obvious that they are quite different. This reminds me of that game in Sunday newspapers in which you have to figure out what's different about each of the drawings.

Delphine Hennelly: Yes! Spot the difference! I think this gets to the crux of the issue of how my paintings develop. In many ways this is sort of the basis for the system from which I work out my imagery serially. There is a kind of mechanization that comes about through repetition. The drawing is done free-style, so there remains a kind of organic quality in the remaking of an image.

SM: Speaking of drawing, it is everywhere in your work. What shifts for you when you move between the works on paper and your paintings?

DH: I think of my drawings as being somewhat a private practice, even though this is by no means true. There is something I find very precious about them and I mean this in a figurative and literal sense. There is an intimacy with drawings in their hand-held accessibility. The paintings take on a grander space and therefore become distilled gesturally.

In the paintings, the anomalies and idiosyncrasies that happen while working direct the painting process. I strive for a kind of movement in my forms, and stretch the drawing in a behest for recognizability, which in itself becomes a kind of game for me. There can be a completely different line in the rendering of that same image that can change the meaning entirely. These subtle shifts and changes are like a door opening up to the next move. That's how the language develops in a painting.



SM:Your painting hand is fastidious, confident, and open. The canvases are seductive, their facture and color calibrated to draw in the viewer. I'm curious how this relationship evolved in your work.

DH: I like to flip-flop around ideas of seduction and repulsion and oil paint can carry both qualities. The caker a painting gets, the more troublesome it becomes, but there is also a point when the image that begins to happen conveys information through its tactility. This physical feeling of the painting is very important. Often this is driven by a desire to make the paint itself look like something other than paint, such as a print or the surface of paper.

I would say color is in tandem with how a surface develops in the way that I like to play with consonant or dissonant color combinations. As in music, consonance is associated with sweetness, pleasantness, and acceptability, and dissonance with harshness, unpleasantness, and unacceptability. I equate color in much the same way and really feel those vibrations when a painting is working.



SM: Your paintings right now seem to be split along two motifs, figure paintings and flowers. Between both categories however, I was immediately struck by the color palette in Immortelle. Is this a new direction?

DH: The beauty of the flower paintings is that they offer me possibilities that I didn't perhaps consider before because I was preoccupied with aspects of the figurative element which is often so demanding, such as the gesture.

Once cut, a flower has a very short moment in time, calling to mind the concept that death is innate to its presence. I often work toward a kind of clownish, cartoony color. The idea of making something about darkness in a cheerful painting is something that I find really interesting. There's a certain kind of mordancy.

In previous flower paintings I had a lot of harsh or bright blue, an artificial flower color. The color palette in Immortelle stemmed from this wish to push the color away from a preconceived color of flowers, to denature the look of the flowers. It really felt like a black and white painting compared to the others.

SM: The people, their wardrobe and even the settings in your recent paintings all seem like actors in a play, with each painting being a slightly different performance from one to the other.

DH: I don't intend for the figuration in my paintings to be taken literally. The characters are fully acknowledging that they are painted and that they live in a painted world.

For these paintings I was looking at a lot of work from the French pre-revolution period. With the ubiquitous image of couple and dog I have been eager to pin down a certain feeling of unrest and sociopolitical anxiety. The costume would be a nod to the notion or warning, whichever way you want to look at it, "History here repeating itself" in a domestic scene in its most benign form. I choose the banality of the subject as a ploy to remain in a liminal space where I can toy with meaning, make it malleable to my desire for a non-linear narrative.

In *Oh Wilderness Were Paradise Enough* it's intentionally unclear whether the man in the painting is holding money in a bag or a bottle. I was thinking of a couple, maybe they're dating, but perhaps the courtship is happening in a climate of duress that they may be oblivious to. I was interested in the conundrum of how to depict a moment in time that could be pivotal, a turning point.

SM: So who are these people, the dead sheep or the seemingly obedient dog?

DH: This is something I've questioned in my approach. I'm not trying to tell a story about my life, and there's no real person that this represents in my mind. But then they also become weirdly real because it does enter my thinking. It's unavoidable. I feel you can't get away from yourself or your histories.

This might sound silly, but I saw all of a sudden the guy in *Country Matters* kind of looks like my son Leo. He has the look of a grown-up toddler. In a way, this was my son growing bigger than me, and that would be me, and I'm mourning the loss of his childhood. Also in the same painting, I didn't realize the sheep appeared dead until the painting was up on the wall, out of the studio and everyone was talking about it being dead.

Meanwhile, the dog in the other paintings is not the same as the sheep. It's about fidelity, partnership, companionship. The sheep is something else and I am OK with it appearing as though it's on its way out, so to speak. I think *Country Matters* is ultimately about loss of innocence. There is a bit of a sadness in that painting. The sheep is the harbinger of that feeling. More importantly, the fact that the sheep's "death" is ambiguous, lends a kind of farcical bend to the narrative. And that would be where my intentionality would lie.

SM: Repetition is a key factor in your work, within a painting, between paintings, and also in the act of painting itself. But nothing ever feels false or the same, which is remarkable. Gilles Deleuze's thoughts on how in every repetition there occurs something specific, and therefore new seems apt in your work. It is this difference in repetition that accounts for newness.

DH: Yes, I do think about this, and it ties in with my earlier comment about being an intuitive painter. To say I was solely intuitive would probably be a false statement. By practicing anything repetitively one is merely creating a system where one can digest or internalize and memorize information. This is obvious to the musician who practices scales and the actor who rehearses lines. I also grew up playing the violin so had to practice my scales too.

SM: And then there is your background, growing up around the world of theatre, in which acting itself and putting on shows from one night to the next is also a form of repetition.

DH: I did grow up watching my parents put on performances and more importantly witnessed behind the scenes, rehearsals and so forth. It never became boring watching the performances over and over again because every night would always have a slightly different energy.

It would be a lot of fun to spot when lines would be said out of place or how the actors would gather in their collective way to save the scene when an actor or stagehand missed a line or their task. It was always exciting to watch how a performance would unfold night after night, even after seeing all the rehearsal that went into it.



SM: You have mentioned before that you'd like to be able to complete a painting in one session, get in and get out so to speak. Why is that, and what happens when that doesn't or can't happen?

DH: Interestingly enough as I get older and develop more as a painter I feel less and less compelled to have the quick fix. These days I am more interested in the care that I can give to a painting. Or rather, the care I can give to an idea. Ultimately I just want to paint.

"History Lessons: Delphine Hennelly and Mimi Jung," Carvalho Park, 112 Waterbury St., East Bushwick, Brooklyn, NY. Through March 31, 2019. NOTE: Hennelly also has work in upcoming group shows at: Orgy Park curated by Steve Mykietyn, opening April 12; at Underdonk Space curated by Sam Bornstein opening April 5, and at Lisa Kandlhofer Gallery curated by James English Leary opening May 15.

Artist's bio: Delphine Hennelly (Born Vancouver B.C. 1979) Received a BFA from Cooper Union (2002) and an MFA from Mason Gross School of Visual Arts, Rutgers (2017). Hennelly has exhibited in several group shows in the past two years, including, a group show titled "Parallel Lines," at Pt.2 gallery in Oakland last Spring as well as a three person show, "Between the Acts," with Ken Tisa and Sophie Larrimore at Mother Gallery in Beacon, NY, last Fall. Her work is currently on view in "Puppies and Flowers" curated by Katie Hector at the RSOAA artist run space and "Regarding the Wild" curated by Basia Goszczynska at Chashama Space to Present, both through March 31.

About the author: Born in Kolkata, India, Sangram Majumdar is a Professor of Painting at the Maryland Institute College of Art. His solo exhibition "once, and twice" is on view at Geary Contemporary in NYC through April 12, 2019.