

Jennifer Louise Martin

WORDS BY Nicola Manasseh

PHOTOGRAPH BY Sarah Louise Ramsay

It is not the accuracy of Jennifer Louise Martin's portrait paintings that make them remarkable, but her ability to evoke the personality and the mood of her subjects. Recently discovered by the model and writer Laura Bailey on Instagram, Jennifer was commissioned to do a series of thirty paintings of famous people, including Sophia Loren, Britt Eckland, Claudia Schiffer and Erin O'Connor. In her eleven-year career as an exhibiting artist, Jennifer has only ever done two male portraits (Michael Caine and David Hockney), because she is mainly interested in the psychology of the female. In many of her paintings she uses images from fashion photography to provide herself with figures and faces that are then transformed by paint (acrylic or oil), fabric and whatever material is calling to be collaged.

Critics of her work readily point out how Jennifer is curious about the contrast between the beauty and perfection of photographed models and actors and the reality, beyond filters: that nobody is perfect, that it is OK to be flawed. One of the questions that her work provokes is about how much women need to change their natural look (whether with make-up or the extreme of plastic surgery) in order to feel good or be socially acceptable. Jennifer may express the conflict between nature and nurture with female figures that are faceless, or others that have disproportionate features. Titles of her paintings include 'Beauty is an Affliction' and 'Through the Mist'. Her 2007 exhibition at the Milo Gallery in LA was aptly named 'Perfect Illusion' and her 2013 show at the Strand Gallery in London was called '(Re)Fashioning the Gaze'.

Despite her blessed life as an artist who has experienced international success, and despite her interest in fashion models and glossy magazines, Jennifer is a genuine and grounded person. "My work is about connecting with the viewer," she explains, "I want to communicate. Through painting I have a voice, and I really believe that it is good for the soul." She also describes painting as cathartic, and when in the past she suffered from anxiety, the canvas was her best friend with whom she could express her feelings, meditate and motivate herself. There is a whole range of emotions conveyed within her paintings. Though you may see sadness or dejectedness in a certain female subject, Jennifer's choice of colours will make such a painting also feel dynamic. She believes that every colour has its own properties, and says that at present she is being drawn to pink,



Through the Mist. 275 x 180cm acrylic, spray paint and velvet on canvas (2017)

which she feels is a calming colour. It is no surprise that with a degree in psychology and neuroscience from Leeds University, a Fine Art degree from Central St Martins, and being a qualified art teacher, she is now looking to train as an art therapist. "I feel like I express my interest in the subconscious mind by painting with a lot of layers. I also want my work to live in the now – like the way that I include paint drips."

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It was at the age of fifteen that Jennifer, with the encouragement of her art teacher, realised she had a talent and love for painting. As a young adult her parents urged her to get a 'real' job, but she went to America, took up residence in a dodgy part of downtown LA, and did her first eight big-sized portraits. To this day she remembers the advice of a friend who told her to go outside her comfort zone and be fearless. It was then in her first ever exhibition that she sold a painting for \$2,000. The cold winter months working in her parents' garage had paid off. These days Jennifer has a studio space in London Bridge, whilst living with her husband in Primrose Hill.

Energetic and creative as she is, Jennifer's work continues to evolve. Her latest interest is in knitting, and she has just started a free weekly group for aspiring knitters. "Knitting is fashionable now, and did you know that you can actually knit with your fingers?" She describes how the group meets in a local pub, and just last week an experienced knitter discovered them

and offered her help. Designing prints on knitted jumpers is one of Jennifer's artistic ambitions, and she says that her dream project would be to create her own knitwear range, selling in Liberty. Certainly the images and patterns in many of Jennifer's paintings seem wearable. She has a masterful use of colour, and she captures the glamour of the fashion world without glossing or varnishing over reality. Two of her artistic influences are Peter Pilotto and Marlene Dumas.

When it comes to giving advice to people who would like to be artistic or to see the spiritual value of painting, Jennifer insists that it is important to listen to your instinct. "If your work doesn't come from within or connect to yourself, it will feel meaningless." Just as she collects 1960s and 70s fabrics, patterns, wallpaper swatches and looks around vintage shops for inspiration, she says that the best way to get started on a canvas or piece of paper is to go to a shop and find one or two things that fill you with joy. It could be a florescent green chalk from an art store, or a second-hand picture frame that you want to decorate. Then it is all about enjoying the process of making and not judging the result. "Art is subjective," declares Jennifer, "you have to do it for yourself. And you can't give up, even if you don't like what you produce. I always prefer the work I haven't created yet."

As a qualified art teacher, Jennifer also runs Saturday and holiday art workshops for children. Do take a look at the children's art in the Gallery at the site www.art-buddies.com and be prepared to be amazed.

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