



INTERVIEW WITH AMY BESSONE

BY TRONG GIA NGUYEN

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ArtSlant's City Editor in New York, Trong Gia Nguyen, met with **Amy Bessone** just after the opening of her concurrent solo exhibitions at **Salon 94** and **Salon 94 Freemans** (on view April 10 - May 23, 2008 in NYC). They discussed Amy's new work, her relationship to both painting and sculpture, and her journey from New York to Europe to Los Angeles.

Trong Gia Nguyen: Tell us a little bit about your background and how you made your way to Los Angeles, where you are living and working now.

Amy Bessone: I grew up in and around New York. I went to Paris and then in the early nineties went to the two-year program, De Ateliers in Amsterdam. It was very focused on the studio and not at all on real world practicalities. There was not even a phone to call out of the building. After that some friends and I -- a sort of splinter cell of Amsterdam -- moved to Brussels. Brussels was interesting for its location geographically as well as the people working there that you could meet informally. We used to go to this place called the Greenwich Bar where people played chess in the front room and we would get people to lecture there, such as Jon Thompson, who we were amazed to discover lived just up the street from us. Artists, art historians, critics,

collectors, curators would lecture over a beer, in the back of the bar behind a thick green velvet curtain under a leaky stained glass art nouveau roof. It was surreal, very Magritte. First we had to agree on what language we would debate in. Then, once that was settled, we would fight about art. I did some shows in Belgium and Holland, but our group was kind of freaks in a scene that was still very rooted in the aesthetic of Marcel Broodthaers. People didn't know what to do with us. After a while I started thinking about coming back to the States and did a residency at Yaddo as a means of testing the waters. That was a great experience. Meanwhile friends from Amsterdam had moved to LA, and encouraged us to come there, although I was a little afraid, having grown up watching Woody Allen movies which indoctrinated me with the belief that "the only cultural advantage to California is that you can turn right on red." On the way to LA I stopped in Iowa City for a temporary teaching job. I am now living in and loving Los Angeles, since 2004.



Amy Bessone, *The Narcissist*, 2007, oil on canvas; Courtesy the artist and Salon 94, New York

TGN: What is your relationship to the theater?

AB: My relationship to the theater and cinema is mostly in my mind. A number of years ago I did a bunch of paintings of poster designs for plays, films, and cabarets that I wanted to create and produce, but they were all fictitious. For lack of talent they never evolved beyond the poster designs.

In the show previous to this ("Body & Paint" at **David Kordansky Gallery**, Los Angeles, 2007), I was working with a pared down subject matter, nude female figurines. In this recent work I wanted to crank up the theatrical feeling and sense of character.

"The Narcissist" is the bridge from the LA show to this show. If the "Body & Paint" show had classical undertones, the new paintings draw perhaps more from mannerism and are expanded in terms of subject, format and palette. At Salon 94 uptown I have a bronze, a silver piece, a porcelain and "The Narcissist" could be read as porcelain, marble, or plaster.... Downtown the work is entirely based on porcelains, but with a larger repertoire of subjects.

TGN: Are the figurines all from one collection?

AB: They are all from different sources - internet, auction catalogs, art history books. Since I was a student I was drawn to the idea of a painting of a sculpture or a painting within a painting. It's the Shakespearean idea of the play within a play, finding truth through artifice. And it gives me a little distance from the human or emotional narrative.

TGN: Are you trying to capture the "essence" of these figures despite being several degrees removed from them?

AB: Ingres wanted his painting to be the work of a silent hand or invisible orchestra. If you think of his work it was so mannered and so extreme, yet he believed he was painting in a very straightforward neutral style. You bring so much that you are not aware of. Even when attempting a straightforward "non-style," the work is inevitably imbued and saturated with "you," your essence. When working in this scale there is also an element of performance to it. I am engaged with the material even though I paint in an almost economical, even laconic way -- the paint is very thin and I don't try to develop a style or use the material in an expressive way. It's funny when people talk about paintings they often make gestures with their hands as if to mimic what stroke they might have made with the brush or whatever. There is a very physical dimension.

TGN: What other connections do you have to the figures that you paint, seeing as how Faust or commedia dell arte characters have such an interesting history to them as it is?



Amy Bessone, Bluebird, 2008, oil and aluminum alkyd on canvas; Courtesy the artist and Salon 94, New York

AB: The subjects are pretty loaded with references but I don't think most of those figurines I'm working with have one fixed meaning or significance. They have all these multiple layers of meaning and references. "Bluebird" for example, possesses a level of fantasy which has always been a very motivational element for artists, such as van Gogh, who believed himself to be, in the south of France, like Hokusai at the base of Mount Fuji under a spell. Artists are very motivated by these utopian thoughts. Needless to say it often goes terribly wrong, but great work can be the byproduct of these fantasies.

The figures themselves are idealized to begin with. The original of "Bluebird" is a 1920s French sculpture in silver and black lacquer, though I'm guessing as I'm working from a black and white photo. I can see that the artist who made it was fantasizing about Asia, probably Japan in particular, with this robe that had this pattern, and the thick head of hair, adolescent geisha meets garçon. I love the idea of this French guy thinking about Japan, but maybe he or she wasn't even thinking about Japan but the post-impressionists who were influenced by the Japanese prints that objects were incidentally wrapped in when sent to the west. I love such transcontinental accidents and misinterpretations. Purity is so antithetical to creativity.

TGN: How do you relate to "purity," which ultimate gets reconnected to some measure of idealism?

AB: I think of myself as very impure! I was referring to the concept of cultural purity, more of a destructive than constructive concept, albeit also a fantasy. Obviously, it can be scary and dangerous to cling to that idea of cultural purity. When I was in Flanders there was quite a bit of right-wing sentiment, even outright fascist and xenophobic sentiments being expressed openly. This idea of pure cultural heritage can be played upon in very ugly ways. Driving to the studio I saw these big election posters of a blond haired, blue-eyed boy extending his arm in a rigid Hitler-like salute pointing to the sun, with the slogan "Our Own People First." It was so obvious and yet people were denying any such similarities to fascism. They would say "he's just pointing to the sun and represents the hope of youth and the future.... there is nothing wrong with that." That to me was frightening especially because I wasn't sure to what degree these people were being disingenuous or to what extent these images were working on a subliminal level.

TGN: "Bluebird" in particular feels more like a sculpture than a painting, despite the fact that it is hanging on a wall and painted on canvas.

AB: It wavers between drawing, painting, and sculpture. I painted it with a flat silver and then modeled parts with a blue brown tone. The original sculpture was detailed with incising tools, those incisions become like drawing. The bird itself is only linear and not modeled at all. A few strokes are almost calligraphic, a play on its faux-Asian roots, as are the large empty areas of background.

On another note, I usually surround myself with sculptors more than painters, and I never took painting as a given or an unbroken lineage, as if painting never died. I was prepared to give it up completely. So when I returned to it, it was a conscious decision, a deliberate act and something I worked through, not something unknowing. Even now when I decide to make paintings I look through a lot of images and ideas and eliminate a lot. Painters have a tendency to get fetishistic and self-indulgent but I try to be aware of this.

TGN: There is a book called "Utz," by Bruce Chatwin, that tells the story of a Czech porcelain collector during the Russian occupation and his relationship to his Meissen collection. It is a meditation on art, collections, and how one chooses to value, preserve, and prioritize heritage and other things even as "trivial" as art in times of repression and unwanted circumstances.

AB: That is interesting. Working with auction catalogs and objects that have been passed down from generation to generation and especially porcelain, which historically even made or broke the fortunes of kings, is to some extent a level of meditation on these objects, ownership and possession, and the desire of the object, those sort things.

TGN: Do you collect these porcelain figures as well?

AB: I've been tempted but I'm afraid I'd lose control, plus a lot of them are quite expensive.

TGN: The color palette adds a level of levity to your paintings, which is on an "epic scale" for its subject matter, and work of that sort tends to be more serious?

AB: When I first returned to the States, while snowbound in upstate New York, all the color drained from the work and I focused on value and form. When I arrived in LA people dressed so brightly, it seemed almost sacrilegious by northern European standards, it felt a little irreverent to start using bright colors again. I don't have a specific agenda in my work, and some people find the paintings funny. I find quite a bit of humor in it. In any case I like that people bring their own interpretation to it.

TGN: You have a child now... How old is she and how has that affected your work?

AB: It's a cliché, but becoming a mother made me work in a more focused, concentrated way. My daughter just turned two. They call this age "the love affair with the world", everything, every little twig and pebble is interesting to a two year old, the curiosity is contagious. Reading children's stories brings me back to all those illustrations that I loved as a child. And in those stories there is often a wonderful lack of distinction between human and animal, the real and metaphorical, which on some level probably gave me a green light to make a 9-foot tall raccoon to pair with a human dandy



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