



Apocalypse Now

Maya Weishof interviewed by Jérôme Sans, September 2022

JS: How would you define your work in general?

MW: The first definition that I can think about is that I'm a painter. No matter how I work, even when I go toward installations or drawings, I'm always thinking as a painter. It is at the core of my work because not only is it the medium that I bring images on a canvas with, but also because it's deeply connected with my own life and my research. Painting is the spectrum that covers it all.

JS: Your paintings and drawings display many characters. It's really one person or just a landscape. In the weird, I would say Burlesque ambiance at the crossroad of cabaret, dance and theater. What kind of spectacles or scenes is it about?

MW: It's about Allegories. It automatically brings movement to an image but it's mainly about the characters. I am very attracted by figure that come from other images, from the history of art or, even from a bigger spectrum of the history of images. I research cartoons as well as old manuscripts. It's the weirdness that attracts me in those faces and connects with the « cabaret ambiance » you mentioned. I look for the trashy atmospheres and weird expressions mixing the idea of pleasure and happiness in the same face. Mostly I also discover or meet those characters in the process of making them.

JS: What kind of allegories are they?

MW: The idea of allegory is always connected with an atmosphere or a feeling. I am currently working on the allegory of fear. I look for a lot of images and manuscripts of the apocalypse because I'm interested about the bodies in the situations of fear and also the connection between the images that church put it in our mind. It's like making a universe out of allegories.

JS: The fear you mentioned is the fear of your generation towards the world you are facing?

MW: I think it's impossible to disconnect the fact that I'm working with images of fear and apocalypse from the idea of hell built in our mind in times like the ones we're living now. I was researching upon this before but it met the contemporaneity when I started to build the paintings. Since the Pandemic I lived much closer to my work. I developed a close relationship between me and the images, even in a physical way. Many times, I slept in the same place that I painted. It's like developing a subconscious imagery.

JS: Your paintings play on the aesthetic of excess? What does this excess mean to you? Where does it come from?

MW: I cannot exclude the way my brain works. You wouldn't believe the amount of times that I started painting, thinking of doing only one or two things and ending up changing everything. I build images by making mistakes and adding again and again. The excess is connected with that. When I create a hand, I learn how to do it and I will do a lot of mistakes to get there. Eventually, I end up with three of them instead of one. There is also a connection between the themes. If I'm talking about apocalypse, fear or hell, it's not simple, it's not clean. Therefore, I end up doing dirty images in terms of the plasticity of image. It's a lot.

JS: This excess, comes almost in a baroque way with all over figures, forms and matter covering the surface of the canvases to its very sides and corners. What is your relationship to Baroque?

MW: I connect with the drama that Baroque brings. I connect with frescoes in Renaissance churches for example. I'm attracted by the simultaneity of images and a lot of things happening. That's how I get also attracted by an image. In Baroque I cannot exclude the research that I do about light and the drama of it. As an artist there are a lot of things printed in my eyes and waiting to reappear transformed.

JS: What do you think of the way you handle the space in a canvas? What is your relation with the "all over" history and action painting?

MW: I see the idea of all over not connected with an abstract way of thinking but a kind of greed inside the canvas that goes beyond the frame. Now that I think and talk about it, it might be the reason of the excess. There is a feeling that I need to put at the same level of intensity in every part and corner of the canvas. That's why I end up with such sugary-acid images with a lot of strength and colors. In action painting, I'm also very attracted by the size of the works. I'm a painter comfortable with big canvases. There is a matter of feeling that the body is smaller than the painting in terms of scales but also in terms of feeling. I find it more comfortable to work in a big painting than a small one. That's partly where I look for this greed that animates my work.

JS: It looks like your paintings are kind of performances where you confront your own body to those you represent.

MW: Yes, connected with that is the idea of the gesture. Like a choreography. Many times, I used both hands to achieve a painting or find some strange lines.

JS: You paint to the very edge, as far as you can go. Why?

MW: Sometimes I do set myself a framework but then I break it. My process of adding frames whilst painting is a way to realize an extra image that I couldn't achieve in the space of the canvas. I'm attracted to the idea of an extra canvas or a canvas being almost like a mirror for the viewer. If I can paint progressively more all the way to the wall, it has to do with anxiety in a good way. Not exactly me, but my work needs to spread around, like smoke.

JS: Your relationship to space goes beyond the canvas itself and also extends to less conventional supports and formats such as pillows and curtains. There are even some knitted parts in your paintings sometimes. Why such a wide range of registers and sometimes strange combinations?

MW: There is something connected to the themes that I work with. When it comes to paintings, I feel that I set up scenes. I'm also attracted to humor in paintings. I did the pillows because something was missing in the paintings and I wanted to break them. I work with images that can be super idiomatic in terms of ideas. Classical history of art can be very dangerous in that way. It's one of the ways to transgress and avoid contemporary judgements upon a young artist dealing with those types of images.

JS: You are quite irreverent, almost punk?

MW: Yes, I can be. I like the combination almost classic images and twisted ways to treat them such as transforming them into a pillow. I'm not an artist that is only seeking for technical resolution in my work, neither am I looking for an image that is only a mirror of reality. I'm also keen on investing things that doesn't exist.

JS: Your work is clearly conveying Alberti's idea of painting as a window on the world. A hint towards our digital world, where we have an eye to the world and the world has an eye on ourselves. With my phone, I can see the world, but the world can look back at me at the same time. It's a kind of a double window. Is your work a reference to that new obsession of seeing everything?

MW: The way you describe it is also the way that I think about mirrors, mirror as an eye that you look at and that looks at you back. A painting is not only a mirror, but almost a third eye. I like when people see in my works things that I don't, possibly thanks to the excess that we were mentioning earlier. The window connects with the body, the size and proportions of paintings. Many times, I realized paintings that literally were windows because I wanted something that involve the viewer's body. I was recently reading a very good text about Manet. He built, almost like a joke, a frame inside the painting.

JS: All those windows are open at the same time. We all always have between ten and 20 different windows open on our computer. Same with our mobile devices. It shows this excess of information we can reach and that is coming to us all the time. Nonstop information. Do you think the excess connects with the excess of our computer times?

MW: When you look at a painting, there are a lot of information, a lot of confusion. You can see, you cannot see. But for me, it's interesting that in the end of the day, it's only oil and color powders. It's a grounding atmosphere of creation and that's also why I'm a painter.

Your work also fills the traditional idea of perspective as a key element in Alberti's theory with so many figures that it creates a sort of schizophrenic effect both pulling us and blocking the way. It almost seems like a raw projection of one's mind and flaws.

MW: I don't think I could build in a "normal" way. I know how to do it but, even when I try, I create space through bodies and not true perspective. It's as if all the images were trying to get out of the canvas because they deny perspective. The materials that I use like pastels and oil bars are also quite bad in creating illusion and perspective because they are opaque and they don't shine. It brings everything in front of you and create the schizophrenic perspective you mention, I agree.

JS: Do you paint through chaos or composition? How do you build things?

MW: There's several ways for me to start painting, but there is always a chaos moment in my production. I do a big mistake and then everything starts to happen. It's very hard for me to do a rehearsal so usually I prepare myself to war. I leave the mess in my studio with a lot of drawings around me, a lot of images, so that when the war starts, I have my weapons around me. All the guns I need. I usually start with a drawing I did before. Not a sketch, but the core of what's to come. Then it starts to transform until they almost don't have any connections anymore.

JS: What about when your drawings become a painting or even a wall painting itself?

MW: Drawings in the scale of paintings were important to me to bring all the power of drawing to its full value. I'm very attached to drawing. Two years ago, I did an exhibition where I wanted everything to be drawing. I had to reprogram my brain and did like a big drawing straight on the wall, which was connected with a lot of references like frescos and the primal desire for humanity to put things straight on the wall connected with architecture. It also connects with the idea of the work that spreads. That's how I came to sewing. I started seeing works very close to each other and then I had this desire to actually connect them. Last year I made a portal that was a combination of many paintings. It was incredible to see those elements that came from different times or mindset coming together. That's also why I would really like to produce a scenario for theater developing this idea of continuity.

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