

Jenna Gribbon

The Pleasure of Looking

Interview by Shaquille Heath Portrait by Bryan Derballa





All images: Courtesy of the Artist and Fredericks & Freiser, NY Above: Pollyanna Wrestlers, Oil on linen, 11" x 14", 2018

For the past year, with interactions among each other relegated to the digital realm, what we see is exactly as dictated. Even if there were 80 selfies taken wearing a torn T-shirt in front of apartment houseplants, the “authentic” becomes artificial when it’s pared down to a single IG story. The notion of how we present ourselves, in knowing that what we share will be seen, becomes loaded. What are we participating in? What is real? And who is looking?

Lucky for us, Jenna Gribbon is a painter whose work aims to reckon with the peculiarity of this indulgence. Her obsession with scopophilia creates contemporary daydreams that reveal our remarkable ability to devour with devotion, yet consume with indifference. Confronting our proclivity for voyeurism is the stallion inside the Trojan horse. The intimate visions may beckon, but that’s only one part of the story. Gribbon told me to relax and take pleasure anyway.

Shaquille Heath: How are you doing and where are you finding your joy right now?

Jenna Gribbon: I am... I’m feeling well, actually. I’ve strangely—I feel a little bit out of sync with everyone else in the way that I’ve just been really working a lot in the last year. I feel really lucky about that. But also, sometimes it makes me feel like there’s a little bit of a disconnect with the experience that other people are having, because sometimes it feels like I’m the only person who is constantly sort of on deadlines. But I feel really lucky, because I’ve been able to have a few shows. I had a show last September in Berlin, and it just happened to be at this moment when Berlin was a bit open for a little while and everyone was going around and seeing shows. It was in between shutdowns, so I got really lucky in that little window. And then I’ve been working on another show that’s going to open in May in London, and it feels like that timing is going to be okay too. Like things are gonna be open again by then. So... I don’t know. It’s weird. I think that if it were a different time, I would be feeling really sad about how much I was missing out on being with friends and things. I can just be in the studio and not feel like I’m missing anything, which is actually kind of nice. So, I don’t know, I don’t really want to be like, *I love covid because I’m selfish.*

No! I mean, I totally hear what you’re saying. And for me personally, putting covid aside... like just putting life aside, I feel like I’ve been able to connect more with my work. If I was still living the life where everything was open, and everything was normal, I would be continuing to try to keep up with regular life.

Yeah, exactly. It’s really hard... I don’t know, especially in a city, where there’s always something kind of pulling at you, you know. Something trying to get you to like, leave your space and engage with the outside world. I’m kind of an introvert. So I find



Above: Mutual Pleasure, Oil on linen, 8" x 10", 2019

a lot of enjoyment in the quiet alone time. Time for thinking, introspection. I don’t mind it.

I hear you. I’m not necessarily an introvert, but I’m a homebody. So when this first started, I was like, “I’m not mad about not having to stay home. This is exactly where I want to be.” Same!

I’m glad you brought up your show in Berlin. When I was speaking with an artist for our last issue, Shannon T. Lewis, she mentioned that she was living in Berlin, and one of the last things she was able to do before the second shutdown was to see your show.

That’s great. It’s always nice to hear of people who actually got to see it in person. I love that people sometimes meet my paintings for the first time online, that’s cool. And I love that there’s so much

more access to art now than ever before. But I also feel like there’s this whole other layer that is just so different in person with painting in general. I really... I work very hard on my paintings to make the surfaces really beautiful. And to make that experience worthwhile.

People now, because you *can* see everything online... sometimes become a little bit lazy. And they’re like, “Oh, I don’t have to go see art in person, because I’ve already seen it,” or whatever. But then I think of the people who do go to see it, and it’s almost like a pilgrimage or something, you know? And you want it to pay off for the people who make the pilgrimage to see the work.

Totally. I’m in San Francisco where museums just got the green light to reopen, so I’ve been able to see art in person this week. And it’s just so



different... you need that interaction in person. I've needed that. I want to talk about some of the shows that you had last year. I especially want to talk to you about "The Artist, Eroticized," series, these gorgeously seductive portraits. And I'm wondering, what sparked the series? I was asked to do a show at The Journal Gallery—and I love those kinds of opportunities. It's a pretty small space, so just a different kind of thing, you know, not my usual New York gallery, very much an opportunity to do something that might be slightly different than what I'm otherwise working on. And I just had this idea kind of rolling around in the back of my mind for a while, a little bit because I think it's really funny how artists are always expected to provide photos of themselves in the studio. I just think it's such a strange, kind of voyeuristic

expectation that we have to be able to, like, see the artists in their natural habitat.

Also, you know, the artists' studio photos are often just really sexy. Like, everyone tries to look really good. And I don't know, I just think it's such a strange practice that doesn't really get scrutinized at all. Part of it is that, I get it, because I love those images, too. You know, I love seeing an artist's studio and what the artist looks like. But I think it's weird that there's such an expectation, also that there's this anticipation that artists somehow be like, physically presentable, you know. So, we do eroticize artists in this way, which I think of as being kind of simultaneously loving and critical. Like, these are artists I love, that I also think are really beautiful subjects to paint. But I'm also thinking how ridiculous that we do this, you know?

That was actually one of the questions that I had! Because I feel like an artist's studio is such an intimate and personal space. You know, it's just this very sacred space for an artist. And I found it so interesting that you positioned them there. I mean, it goes with a lot of your work, in that, as viewers, we often get to peek into places where, typically, our gaze is not usually granted. I love that you bring this up, because you're right. It's funny that it's always, like, "artist with paintbrush in hand" [laughs]. Or even, on that Instagram promo that you did with The Journal where you're posing with the apron.

Yeah! Totally! It's like, so fake. Either they're wearing clothes that are way nicer than they would normally wear in the studio. Or they're wearing their painting clothes, but you know that they're not really there to be painting. They're just there to have their photo taken. So, either way, it's like, weird and fake. And I don't know, staged and just funny. It's just a funny practice. So I thought I wanted to give the artists themselves a chance to kind of troll the viewer a little bit, you know? To just show some sort of self awareness. We know what we're giving you when we take these photos and present them to the public.

It's very tongue in cheek! How did you create these paintings? Were they made throughout the past year in quarantine? How did you formulate the imagery?

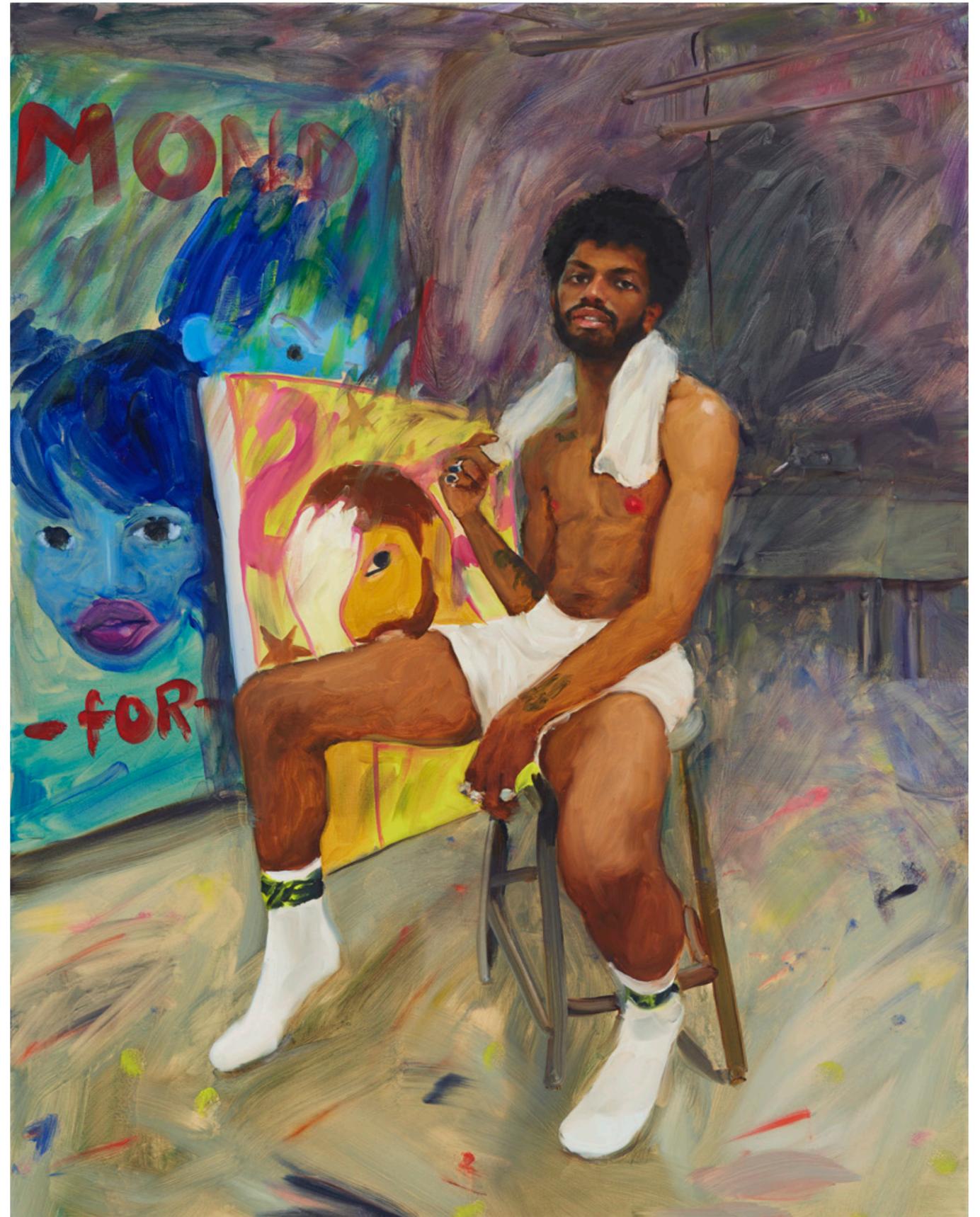
Yeah most of them, because it was covid times, were made in quarantine. The artists would send me photos.

That's exactly what I felt when looking at them... OK, so, you know those days when you're just really feeling yourself? You're like, "Damn, I look good today!" And so you take some sexy selfies? They're not for anybody or anything—they're just for yourself. That's what those paintings felt like... except when you decide to send the photo off to your best friend instead.

Exactly. I did enjoy that aspect of it. Because, yeah, there's something to that vibe, right? It does make it feel very of-this-moment. Like, recognizing that way of positioning yourself. It's intimate, but also you can feel that that's the way the artist wants to be seen, and for sure, it's hard to describe, but I think you're exactly right.

Your works have so much to do with this personal narrative. I love how you've really jumped onto this idea of how we present ourselves online, and I feel that, over this past year, the essence of our interactions with others has become completely dependent upon what we decide to share online. Have you thought about that?

Yeah, I've always been interested in this thing of "seeing people being seen." Like, watching people present themselves to be seen and how it's a little bit different than seeing someone who is not expecting to be seen. I mean, I like looking at both, as in having something to compare it to. I am kind of on the cusp of Gen X and so I remember





Above: *Midday Watch*, Oil on linen, 9" x 12", 2020

a time before people first started taking selfies. I remember it being really shocking, and being like, "I can't believe people are doing this!" It just was so strange and kind of antithetical to a Gen X sensibility, you know? I just found it really fascinating that it was such a phenomenon, and now it's, like, completely accepted—I accept it and I love it. I love that this is something that people do now and that they've embraced. People are just owning their individual presentation of their own image, doing what they want with it, and really, with so little self-consciousness. I don't know, it was an interesting shift for me. You know I think it's partly coming from a place where it was really kind of alien to me or something. Obviously now people are even more choosing to live in that digital space.

I mean, in general, don't you think this is the most voyeuristic time that's ever been? You know, all sort of peeking into each other's intimate lives, the intimate details of each other's lives. But I think people get it wrong when they make it all about voyeurism because that's only one aspect. Really, I'd say it's more the pleasure of looking—scopophilia. It's an interest and a curiosity about investigating that, but not in a way that's damning.

Which is what I have really enjoyed when spending this intimate time with your work. So, yes, there is this voyeurism, but at the same time, there's also power that we have in ownership. I don't know, I've also felt, for lack of better words, that the joke was on the viewer. That we think that we're peering in, but really, these figures are holding that power and we're seeing exactly what they want us to see.

There's also my desire to make people a little bit more self-conscious of consuming an image of a body or an intimate moment or whatever. Because I think that painting is so old that people forget that it's a depiction of a person that they are consuming, that they are in a voyeuristic position. Which is kind of why I started using the fluorescent pink nipples. It was a way to make the viewer like, a little uncomfortable, a little self-conscious. Also it's just this funny thing where you can't not look at them. Even though we're trained all our lives to skim over that part of the body—it's not polite to stare—but yeah, you're forced to, you know, kind of reckon with the discomfort of looking.

What questions do you hope people might ask, or might think about when put into that position? I guess I want people to kind of own their pleasure in looking. And you know, question it, but also recognize that it's not benign. Looking at a body depicted on a canvas... you are participating in something. And what are you participating in? You are receiving pleasure in that act.

Maybe the question is, what do you find pleasurable? I'm not making a judgement about that, I need to point it out. I don't think people realize that it's sometimes a bodily experience



Above: *Funny How They Call It Shooting*, Oil on linen, 11" x 14", 2020

when they're looking at paintings. It's like, you think you're having an intellectual experience, but you're also having a bodily experience, as well as a relationship to a physical object that holds the physicality of paint. But then also, when you're looking at figurative painting, you're responding to a depiction of a physical human being. And, you know, there is absolutely a physical response. I think it's just interesting to remind people of that.

So tell me, what have you been working on? I'm working on this show with Sim Smith that opens in London in May. And it's a two-person show with the estate of Agnès Varda. I'm a huge fan of her work—she's been an influence on me for many years. Like always, I'm really focusing on the looking that happens, and I think that she also actually focuses on that in her work. So, in that way, I'm kind of looking for the common thread.

One way I was doing that was in trying to capture these moments where her subject looks directly at the camera, which obviously is more rare in film. It's a lot about how important a real experience with an image can be. The importance of encountering her imagery, the importance of that to me in my work, and really focusing on that in a nuanced kind of way.

I could have made 50 of these. There's so many beautiful moments. I think there's a nice parallel with painting. The work ends up being... it's not specifically about the work of Agnès Varda, but about my relationship to the work, which has been really fun to investigate. ■

From there, Jenna shuffled her phone around her studio to give me a virtual tour of the new work. Spoiler... gorgeous.

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