

NEW WORK CHANTAL JOFFE

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"I used to deal with pornography quite a lot and I now find it very difficult ... motherhood has made things in the world more real"



1 **Untitled** (1998-99)
oil on board, 28.5 x 21cm

2 **Mother and Child II** (2005)
oil on board, 243 x 182 x 6.3cm

3 **One-Shouldered Dress** (2006)
collage on paper, 50 x 32.5cm

CHANTAL JOFFE's expressive and emotionally charged paintings have often seen her female subjects disintegrating into decorative backdrops, as if languishing in a claustrophobic Vuillard interior. She made her name with paintings boldly drawing on both intimate family photographs and images from pornography, but a new maturity has emerged in recent work – motherhood has lent her paintings a more starkly introspective feel. In a series of self-portraits made soon after the birth of her first child, Joffe appeared wild-eyed and slightly unhinged. Drawn from both magazines and the real world, the women in her work appear to be, by turns, lonely, vulnerable, sexually voracious, comic, and, sometimes, more than a little threatening. **INTERVIEW: Ross Green**

What is the origin of your name? And is the "e" silent?

It rhymes with coffee. For years our dad told us it's Lithuanian, but now he's worked out it's Russian. It's a Russian-Jewish name – it was probably originally Joffevich or something.

Are you related to painter Jasper Joffe? I'm Jasper's big sister

You used to work on a small scale, but you recently scaled up quite dramatically. What new challenges did this present?

It was amazing doing that. About two years earlier I'd got a commission for the Bloomberg Space, which is vast, and I had to make a proposal. I had wanted to make billboard-sized paintings for a while, because I use advertising a lot and I love it when you're going along a motorway and you see a massive ad – sometimes they're so beautifully photographed that you feel they're the equivalent of modern art. I wanted my own paintings to have that sort of potency – though they went somewhere completely different. But having always worked on such a small scale and been so contained, it was exciting – like a dance, extremely physical, because you're bending and lifting and splashing. You don't realise what a groove you get stuck into sometimes.

It sounds very liberating.

Yes, it keeps the painting alive. But it's important to hold on to what you think is worthwhile in the smaller paintings, like the speed, when you see how that one mark becomes an eye or a face. And I did that by using massive brushes. I didn't want it to become laborious.

In the Mother and Child paintings, the women all look faintly sinister, even a little deranged. Did they convey your state of mind at the time?

Yes, absolutely. I think they did. I found it

really hard to go from being a full-time painter to a painter and full-time mother. People talk about how you're going to be anxious when you have a baby, and I was so anxious. I think those paintings came close to trying to describe that feeling of being totally washed away by something – I don't mean that in a kind of clichéd, "it's so lovely" kind of way, but in the sheer hardness of it all.

Has motherhood affected your work in other ways? For instance, you used to paint images from porn magazines.

I think it's definitely made subject matter change for me. I used to deal with pornography quite a lot and I now find it very difficult to use that in my work because I think motherhood for me has made things in the world more real. And I paint fewer children as well. I used to look at catalogues with children, and it's just made some subjects very hard for me. It's made me want to paint subjects that are more real in a sense. But it wasn't just motherhood. It's like you reach an age. I was always mad about Sylvia Plath when I was younger, and it's easier to read when you're a depressive 20 year old. I find that much harder to read now. I think it becomes closer to you, more visceral.

You then began using fashion magazines. I'd been using fashion images for quite a long time, because they're an easy source of images of people. But even that's shifted. I quite like the subjects to be real now – people I know, or family. Although sometimes I like the detachment of investing a story into the fashion models. I like investing them with a personality. I suppose that's how I always think of it, that they are almost coming alive again.

Do you ever paint men?

I've painted a few men – some porno men. And I've painted a few portraits of real-life men, but I don't really like painting men. I've often asked myself why, and I'm not really

sure. I think their bodies are less interesting to me. And in a way, I think it almost feels presumptuous to paint what you're not.

Do you think there has to be an element of projection? You're projecting something of yourself on to your female subjects.

I think there has to be empathy, a sense that I'm in there somewhere. There has to be something about this person that I can create a narrative for. Even if it's a model I've never met. I can't not involve myself in that way.

With your cutouts you seem more interested in abstract patterns rather than psychological states.

They're funny, the cutouts, because if they do become just a design they kind of fail. They have to have some kind of intensity, through the eyes or something. I haven't made any lately because I almost think they became too easy – too enjoyable – to do, and I felt that that was somehow a bit wrong.

Your work recalls many modernist artists, like Picasso, Vuillard and Matisse. Are these your abiding influences?

I love Matisse's cutouts – of course, I can't compare my work with them. And yes, Vuillard, he's the master for me. But I also love Alex Katz. I've been trying to make cutouts like Katz for a long time – those very creepy, porno ones. It took me a very long time to be able to make the cutouts – they always ended up looking like fuzzy felt.

Finally, if you could live with any work of art ever made, what would it be?

Return from School After the Storm by Chaim Soutine. It was painted in 1939 and the war had just started, but it's a totally uplifting picture of a windy landscape with two children coming down the road from school. ☺

Exhibitor: Victoria Miro Gallery, London, June. www.victoria-miro.com



Born: 1969, St. Albans, UK. Studied: Glasgow School of Art, UK; Royal College of Art, London

Lives and works: London (represented: Victoria Miro Gallery, London; Chaim & Reed, New York)