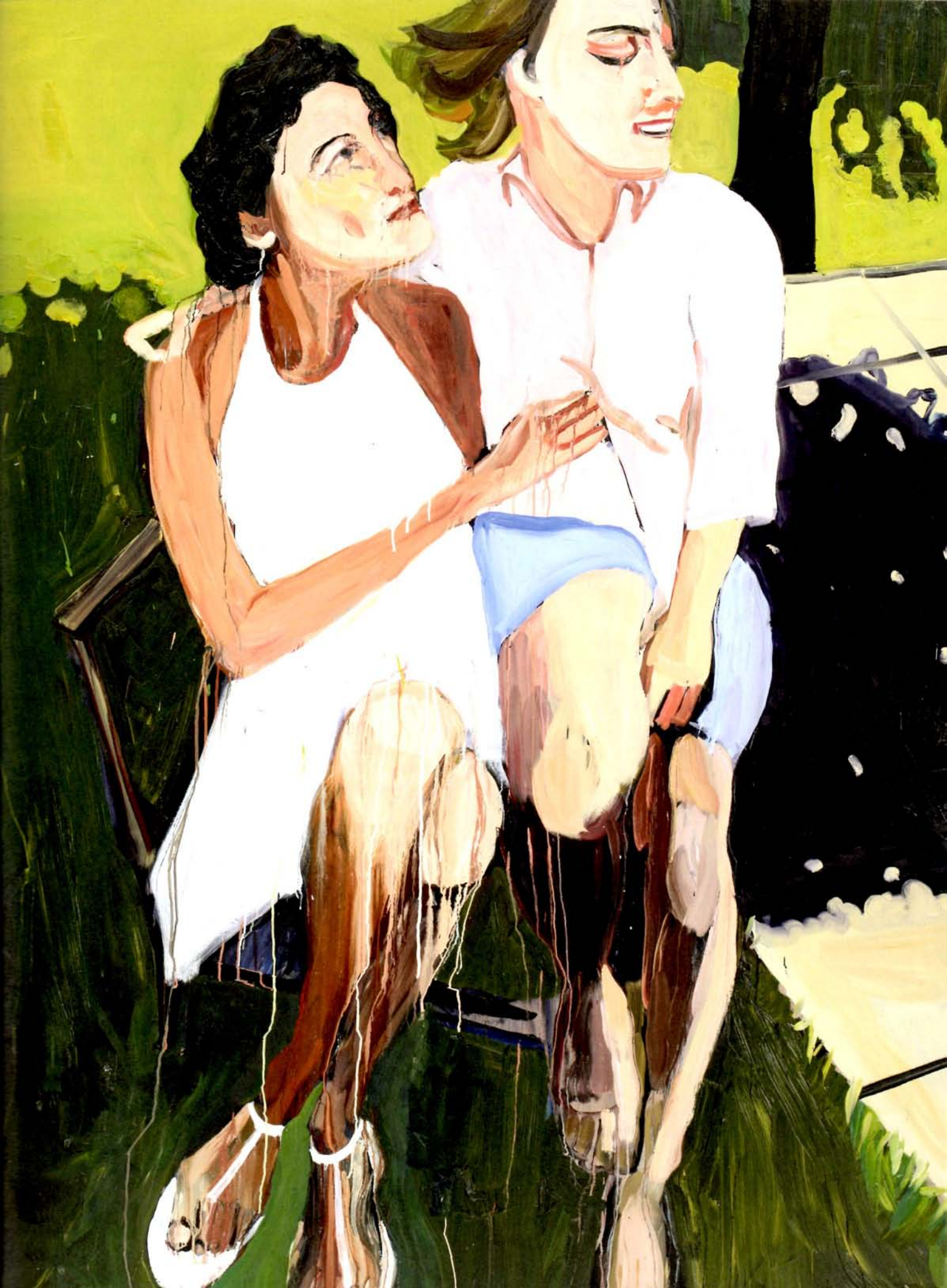
by Natasha Hoare

LOOKING IN COMPANY

In an issue which tries hard to address (and redress) the gender balance amidst the populous pages of this magazine, Natasha Hoare visits painter Chantal Joffe, who speaks openly and candidly about her background, her choice of subjects (why, for example, she is more drawn to female models than male ones), her day-to-day practise (why she finds working with live models sometimes uncomfortable), and the dark turn her colour palette took.



Beckoned out of an anaemic East London morning into the studio of Chantal Joffe, I was immediately struck by the incredible proliferation of dots, dabs, spills and splurges of oil paint coating every available surface. The floor especially is covered in a myriad of colours coagulated in jewel-like clusters or mulched into each other. Canvases, large and small, are propped in stacks along the walls creating a small central space in which Chantal can pirouette from picture to picture under the large liquid eyes of her subjects. Any spare wall space was covered in images plucked from fashion magazines and photographs of models. Cup of tea thrust in hand and two shortbread biscuits later I was impressed by her warmth, modesty and passion for painting. Entirely lacking in pretension or art speak, despite an anointing from Charles Saatchi and over a decade of international solo shows, Chantal conveyed the ecstasy and purity of laying paint on canvas, of creating form and expressing the inner worlds of her subjects. We both mourned the passing of the age of public arts funding and wondered whether the vitality of London's art world would survive the strictures of the [new British Tory and Liberal Democrat] coalition government.

— Your next solo show opens at Victoria Miro in March, do you still get nervous before an opening?

— Yes! You think it will get easier but it gets harder. Preparing for a show is like you are having an argument with yourself. You certainly don't have that starry eyed approach you did earlier in your career. You know the emotional trajectory involved; feeling anxious, nervous and worried, then on a high for the show opening and post-show is a real downer. I always feel awkward standing at an exhibition and being asked about my work. I mean there it is, on the wall. For me the reality of the work is in the experience and feeling of creating it.

— Have you always painted?

— I've always drawn and painted and made things. My mum is a painter, my brother is painter, both my sisters are artistic. My teacher said to me when I was fifteen, 'are you serious about painting?' and I thought yes, this is something that I want to do. It's a real gift to have something that you want to do whatever it is, be it hairdressing or art.

I grew up in America until I was thirteen, and we came here and I went to school in London at a place called Highbury Fields. I had a really great art teacher who loved watercolours, and she had a husband who taught life drawing which I went to after class and was fantastic. My school took us on this art holiday to Suffolk when I was fifteen, which was a real turning point for me. I suppose with these cuts it just makes me think that that was the most incredible thing, to take us kids on a coach to a stately house to look at slides of Monet and Manet. It was a revelation to me that you could paint all day outside. It breaks my heart that that won't be so any more. It was the most incredible thing and changed my life.

— During your time at art school, was there a feeling that being a painter was not fashionable, that conceptualism was the only way?

— I was somebody who, from the moment they got onto the foundation course, was covered in paint and charcoal. Really I don't think I ever wavered from my conviction that some painters were gods and that painting was the best thing you could do. I am not someone who cares what others think, particularly. I was at Glasgow with Jonathan Monk, David Shrigley, Simon Starling, Toby Webster, all those people, and I knew them as friends, but it never struck me that their way or what they were doing was more interesting then what I was doing. It's funny how you can be quite monomaniacal! Jonathan Monk got me to paint a portrait of him for his degree show which was a very conceptual work, and I was like 'fine' without really assembling the fact that my work was very different. You either fall in love with painting and believe in it or you don't. It's a bit like a religion in that way; you can doubt it, or believe it. It's a belief structure and conceptual art is like that as well. Not to say that I am not interested in conceptual art, it's just not the way that I work.

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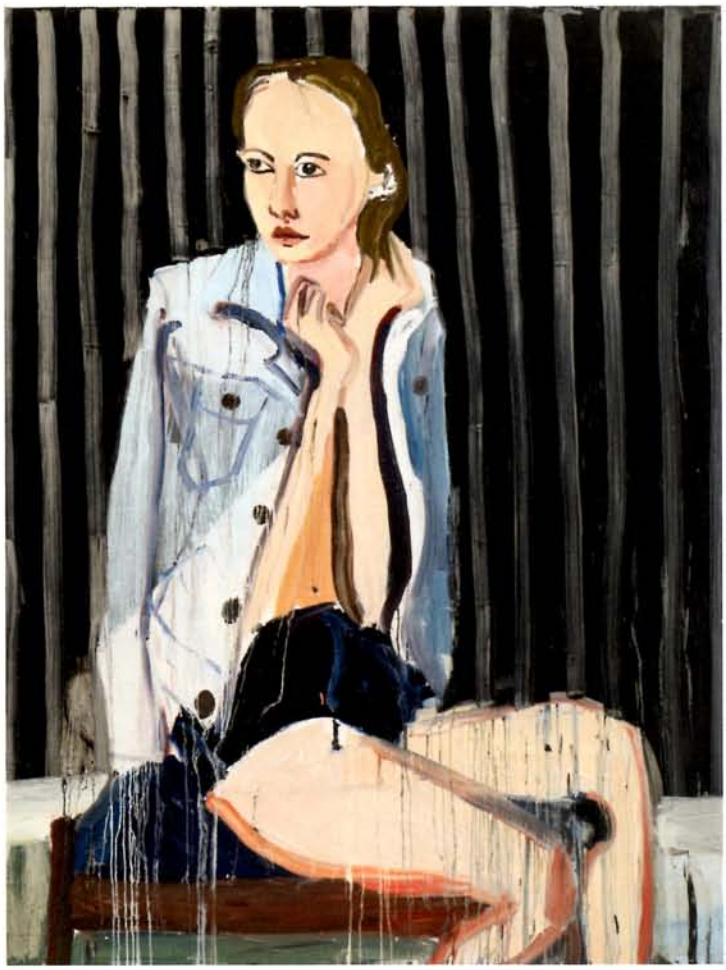
— What is your studio routine?
— I come in every day. I think that with painting you have to do it whether you feel like it or not. The only way to think about painting is to be painting. It isn't something that you can conceptualise. I have to paint to have ideas; it could be a painting of a box of tea or anything lying around the studio. It's about finding a way into your own brain. I'm always astonished when you are painting how it opens your mind and you can think in a really free way. I mean it's not always like that, sometimes it's really dreary and depressing and not fun. People say that it must be lovely to go paint every day, but sometimes it's not, sometimes it's about making things you aren't interested in because you just have to get through it. It can be quite a lonely thing also. But there is this strange effect that painting well has on you. At the end of a week's painting and painting and painting you feel really charged up and there is nowhere to put it all that because to paint is to be totally in the present. I'll go home from the studio and my daughter will be watching Arthur or something on TV and you have that feeling of, argh! You can see why a lot of painters drink a lot because it's a way of really maintaining that high – not that I do!

— What does beauty mean to you? A lot of critics describe your paintings as expressing the awkward and fragile beauty of the subjects you take from fashion magazines.
— I'm not sure that I think about beauty explicitly. I'm drawn to different people certainly, in the street and such. My earliest consciousness of that is looking intently at people on buses, particularly people's legs, the line and shape of them. When I was a teenager that was the first thing that I looked at! I spent a lot of time at school looking at other people. There was this trend, when I was at school, to wear a bun that was a plastic cage with a spike through it. It was the worst thing that I have ever seen but also really formally fascinating. But I have always been interested in looking at other people in a real teenage girl way. There are people, bodies, faces that I am really drawn to and there are those that don't draw me in at all. I love the way models will appear in different guises in differ-



Above
Chantal Joffe, portrait by Niall O'Brian
Untitled, courtesy Victoria Miro Gallery, London. © Chantal Joffe

Opposite
Untitled, courtesy Victoria Miro Gallery, London. © Chantal Joffe

ent images, but you can identify the good ones no matter how they are presented or styled, they have a special quality. I don't know if I think of 'beauty' in any specific way but rather as that which your eye likes to rest on.

— Are you uninterested in painting men?
— I am certainly less interested. I've painted a man recently as part of a pair and I've really struggled to make it look like he was ever alive or existed in any place. I think my brain is limited in that I can't emphasise with men. I can paint women because I empathise with them, I can think of how they feel. My boyfriend would agree with that! I prefer women writers, books and biographies about women, the work of women artists. Not exclusively, I'm not as mad as all that, but I tend towards them. It's that odd thing that most people find it quite hard to see beyond what they are. I was painting a portrait of Caroline Blackwood who was Lucian Freud's wife as I found her so fascinating and I was finding it really hard going as she is such a difficult person to understand. Then I read more and more about her and found that she really was a terrible person, and I just couldn't paint the picture any more.

— From pornography to fashion, your paintings use photographs as their model. In providing an emotional landscape that was missing from the originals do you imply that photography is deficient or cold in some way?
— Oh no, no! That's not what I am intending at all. I love photography, absolutely love it. I am a failed photographer. Really truly, I take crap photographs. Diane Arbus is my favourite artist of all time. And the classic work of Robert Frank and Harry Callahan is amazing. Photography for me is about the momentary. Its instantaneity and immediacy is what is so attractive. I think in a way my paintings are homages to the lost photographs of the world. I love leafing through fashion and lifestyle magazines, they are an amazing resource of images of every kind. I learn vital visual and compositional lessons from snapshots. A good photograph, even a commercial one, holds the eye and is utterly unpretentious, much less so than art photography.

— What did you learn from working with Miles Aldridge?
— Ah, that was an interesting experience. We got on extremely well as we share common interests in literature and both love all those photography greats. We'd sit and talk for hours in restaurants, which is strange as we both come from such different places. His subjects are aestheticised, plasticized and eroticised which is very far from what I seek to do. It was a series of trade-offs between the two of us. He would say, 'I want to shoot in your studio,' and I would say, 'I want to use your wife as the model'. It was very traumatic for me to have him come into the studio. He made it more of a set and moved everything around. I'm not sure that I would repeat the experience but it was a great experiment.

— You have stated in previous interviews that you are a fan of fashion, but you have also stated that your backstage experience highlighted the extreme youth and vulnerability of models. Is this a difficult position?
— I don't think that I am a 'fan' of fashion, or that I love fashion. The backstage experience was one I enjoyed as it was one in which I felt closest to being a photographer. But I did not find much to inspire me. At the time I thought that going backstage would be like Degas going backstage at the ballet, but it didn't feel as useful. In truth I find the attention of the fashion world a little bewildering.

You have this impression of someone, your read their body and you invent a life and a personality for them. It's distracting when they come and sit for you and you find out that they are an entirely different person. You have to start again and reformulate your approach to them.

— You were recently in the exhibition 'In the Company of Alice' at Victoria Miro. Has Alice Neel been an influence on you as a painter?
— I truly love Alice Neel, her life is so attractive. It's easy to romanticize what she went through, but truly her life was devastatingly difficult and tragic in the thirties and forties. She was such a startlingly original painter; she made it her own, like Marlene Dumas. But up until very recently she was seen as being very naff. That show at the Whitechapel Gallery was stunning and showed just how much she opened up her subject matter. Her paintings of women and babies have been very influential for me, with their hunched shoulders and strange bodies. I don't know how she did it, sitting in front of all those people and painting them.

— Do you ever have people sit for you rather than working from photographs?
— Yes I do. And it's an interesting but tiring process. People often forget that there is this extra social element to it. I recently painted the mother of a friend of my daughter's from school. I'd seen her in the playground and approached her. She was pleased to sit for me. I find it difficult though. You have this impression of someone, your read their body and you invent a life and a personality for them. It's distracting when they come and sit for you and you find out that they are an entirely different person. You have to start again and reformulate your approach to them. It interferes with what I am trying to do. It reminds me of the book on sitting for Freud [*Man with a Blue Scarf: on Sitting for a Portrait by Lucian Freud*, by Martin Gayford]; such a fantastic exploration of the social interaction at the heart of that kind of portraiture process. It's like confessional therapy, really intimate and revealing. It reminds me also of work by Sophie Calle, which reveals intensely private and intimate details about people she comes across or volunteer to take part in her pieces. I also think of Munch and his wish to get back to the original feeling or view. That is what I am trying to do, get back to the original version or view of that person, too much socializing with them gets in the way of that!

— How has having a child changed your work? Has it made you look at the female body in a different way?
— Nobody tells you how hard having a child is going to be. With

regards to my painting it made me realise that there was something more to life than painting. It also made me so much more sensitive to the world. It's like you have lost a layer of skin. Any harsh word cuts you, and you experience beautiful moments in such an intense way. Both ugliness and beauty are enhanced to such a painful degree. In that sense it was really useful to me as a painter at the time, but the feeling recedes, thankfully. It certainly changes the way that you see yourself, I mean it changes your whole identity.

— Your new paintings take black as their colour theme. Why has this palette emerged?

— The black was a way of reducing my options and the palette. In limiting yourself you open things up again. I was finding that my paintings were becoming too literal and too tight, I needed freeing. I was looking at a lot of Degas paintings and they have this very limited palette to them and the idea presented itself. In not thinking about colour you are free to think about other issues, there are other aspects to focus on. I was reminded a lot of Emily Bronte who wrote about the unchained soul. It also allowed me to use subjects who didn't look too much like they were of the moment or contemporary. It's funny that when people look at them, they immediately presume that you have been through some depressing time or something. Far from it. I was dancing when making them!

Chantal Joffe opens at Victoria Miro, March 2011.
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