

The Artist's View: Mary Jane Ansell Discusses Mixing Portraiture, Archetypes, Haute Couture & Feminism

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by Pat Rogers

The women in Mary Jane Ansell's paintings come across as portraits of protagonists from epic tales. Sometimes, traditional poses are struck while others walk on the wild side. Painted on aluminum, Ansell's paintings are distinctly narrative and possess an intriguing tension between an outward delicacy and an inner battle ready strength that feels like it could be activated on a moment's notice, if necessary. Her work connects both past and present, drawing upon the language of classical portraiture and pulling from the world of haute couture to create compelling characters that appear in mid-scene or may have just stepped away to be captured for the ages in paint.

Based in the U.K, [Mary Jane Ansell's](#) artist statement describes her figurative paintings as a mix of portraiture that can be autobiographical and is reflective of the exchange between model and the art making process. When autobiographical, Ansell explained that she may infuse childhood memories or responses to the current political realities or examine gender issues in her contemporary realism painting.

Ansell's art is exhibited internationally with solo shows presented in London, New York, Los Angeles and Singapore. Her art has been included in the Royal Society of Portrait Painters Annual Exhibition and has been selected for the [Columbia Threadneedle Prize](#). In The Hamptons, Mary Jane Ansell's art is exhibited at [RJD Gallery](#) in Bridgehampton, NY as a gallery artist. She exhibited paintings during the gallery's "[Women Painting Women - Men Painting Men: Voices with Vision](#)" exhibition in October and has work on view as part of the group show "Big Art. small canvas II" on view through January 5, 2019. [Click here](#) to see her art.

Pat Rogers from Hamptons Art Hub caught up with Mary Jane Ansell via email to explore her art making process, the ways she mixes classical portraiture with an unexpected iconography and why fashion has a role to play in her paintings.

Pat Rogers: Are all your paintings portraits in the strict sense that they reveal the person or are the people in your paintings more like models in a tableaux who unfold more fully as you make the art work?

Mary Jane Ansell: I tend to work with a small group of models and though their likenesses are recognisable in many of my paintings they are not portraits in the traditional sense. They're

archetypes seen through the lens of my own personal lexicon of symbols and imagery. Those archetypes recur and evolve, and once I start working with my models I'm endlessly fascinated by the layers of meaning that they bring to the idea.



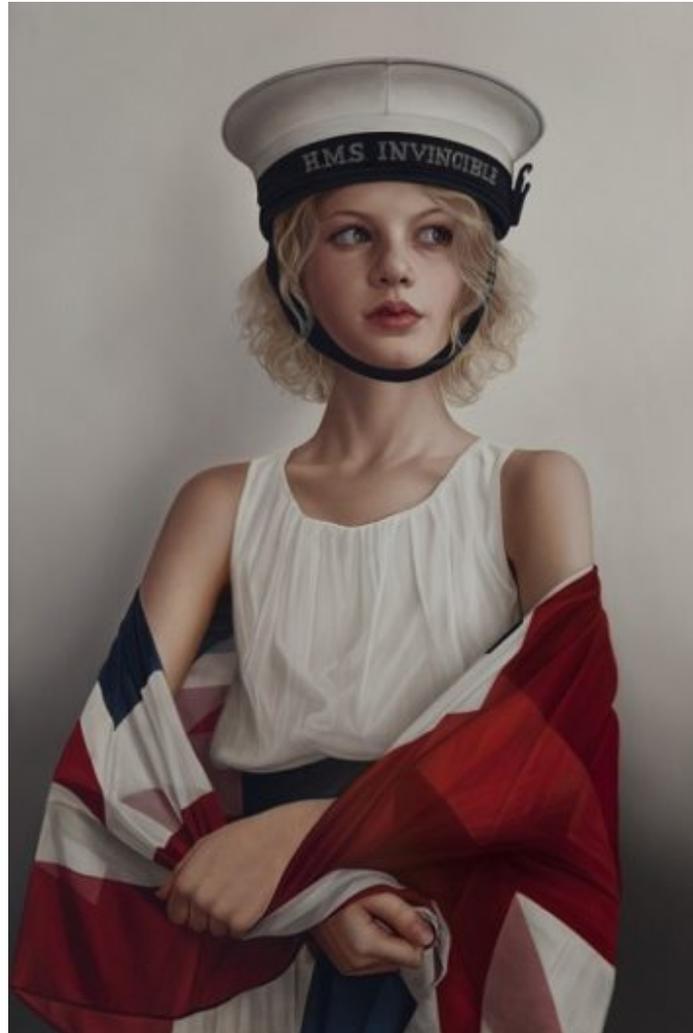
"Mercuralia" by Mary Jane Ansell. Oil on aluminum, 15.5 x 15.5 inches. Courtesy the artist and RJD Gallery.

PR: Do you work from live models, photographs or a combination of both?

MJA: It's really a combination of both... The ideas come first. I'll note down a few words and very roughly sketch out a thumbnail of the idea, then while we work, the idea comes to life in the sitting. I'll take hundreds of photographs, developing the idea further, bringing in those serendipitous moments that add so much to the meaning and effect of the final work.

Then, back in the studio, I'll begin to piece together the images. It can take time for the strongest ideas to reveal themselves, but often they jump out... demanding attention first! I begin to draw out the work, and as it emerges changes or additions can be made till the balance of composition and

focus feels right. I'll paint in layers, some full bodied colour, then transparent glazes, letting each dry, working on multiple pieces at once so they live with each other and I can feel the group take shape. Once finished I keep them displayed in a drying room, waiting to be varnished and framed and I start to see them more as a viewer might.



“Invincible” by Mary Jane Ansell. Oil on aluminum, 23 x 15 inches. Courtesy of the artist and RJD Gallery.

PR: What influences does your method of working have on the autobiographic aspect that is woven into the works?

MJA: Painting is my way of translating the way I see the world in to a language that makes sense to me... though I might be trying to convey the sitters personality more fully I'm also trying to make sense of what's happening in the world, which seems so deeply polarised right now. I'm happy for the viewer to read their own interpretation into them but I love it when people connect with them through the meanings I'd intended - it's a level of communication that I really value and it's at the core of what makes a successful painting to me.



“Antiope” by Mary Jane Ansell. Oil on aluminum, 31 1/2 × 39 1/2 inches. Courtesy of the artist and RJD Gallery.

PR: Is it fair to say that both feminism and fashion have made an impact on you and elements of both are woven into your work? It would be great to hear your take on fashion and how it relates to feminism.

MJA: Fashion and politics are so intrinsically linked, and women in particular have always used their clothing as a way to define themselves, even when they had no other way to speak. Whether it's the traditional male preserve of the swagger portraits garb or the military dress, or the more androgynous or traditionally feminine costume in my work, which is often white – one of the colours of the suffragette movement, they are all selected to carry a message of equality.



“Study for Return of The White Hart II” by Mary Jane Ansell. Courtesy the artist and RJD Gallery.

PR: Are the works in the show part of particular series?

MJA: There are several threads that have drawn together in these pieces – In *Relic Returned* and *Antiope*, for example, I’m playing with subversions of gender roles using poses that echo the swagger portraits of the 17th and 18th Century but rather than displaying their wealth with crowns and gold my characters are adorned in clothing and carry objects that represent nature and hold specific value for them. I’m celebrating the nobility of the individual, rather than the typically lauded upper-echelons of society.

Treasury of Souls II and *Columba* feature birds, which are another recurring theme in my work. Considered symbolic messengers for hundreds of years, they represent the voice of our subconscious, bringing wisdom and counsel when it’s most needed.



“Treasury Of Souls II” by Mary Jane Ansell. Oil on aluminum. Courtesy the artist

and RJD Gallery.

PR: The theme of the “Women Painting Women - Men Painting Men” exhibition at RJD Gallery is designed to celebrate the beauty we see within ourselves and, through the collected works, create an environment of equality through the reveal of our differences, similarities and how they meld seamlessly among all of us. Can you remark on how your art connects with any part of this curatorial theme?

MJA: I’ve always been drawn to the theme of the Anima and Animus - to the unconscious masculine side of a woman, for example in my painting *Antiope*, and the unconscious feminine side of a man, embodied for me here in *Relic Returned*. Jung would say our challenge is in bringing these sides into balance, bringing peace to the individual and in a wider sense to the world. I like to imagine my characters inhabit a world where both sides are in balance, the aggression of current power structures is redressed and we can celebrate the full spectrum of beauty.



“Relic Returned” by Mary Jane Ansell. Oil on aluminum, 32 x 24 inches. Courtesy the artist and RJD Gallery.

PR: Do you have a favorite work in the show? If so, why?

MJA: *Antiope* has a particular resonance for me. I've painted my model for this piece as several characters over the years, one of which was *The White Hart*, a painting lost in the [fire at the RJD Gallery](#) in 2017. What was extraordinary to me was that this mythical white stag was believed to be impossible to catch and ultimately unattainable... just like the painting as it turned out! The idea for *Antiope* came out of the ashes of that idea... Antiope was an Amazonian Queen, her name means "a voice against." She represents the voice that can't be extinguished and the will to be heard.



"The White Hart" by Mary Jane Ansell. Oil on aluminum. Courtesy the artist and RJD Gallery.

PR: What do you hope people walk away with after seeing your art?

MJA: One of the things I value most is to hear from viewers who have connected in a very personal way to the subjects or sitters in my work... that they stir an emotion or a memory for them that

they then share with me. It's a language that taps into something very personal and goes beyond every day revelations. In a way it becomes part of the story of the work for us both.



“Columba” by Mary Jane Ansell. Oil on aluminum, 16 x 12 inches. Courtesy artist and RJD Gallery.

BASIC FACTS: Mary Jane Ansell’s artwork is exhibited at RJD Gallery in The Hamptons. Her work was part of the group show “Women Painting Women – Men Painting Men: Voices with Vision,” on view from October 6 to 30, 2018, and also in the group show “Big Art. small canvas II” on view through January 5, 2019.

RJD Gallery is located 2385 Main Street, Bridgehampton, NY 11932. www.rjdgallery.com. For a preview, visit the gallery’s Artsy page by [clicking here](#).

NOTE: Exhibition information was updated on 12/22/18.

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