Jocelyn Hobbie, *Stream,* 2015, Oil on canvas, 22 x 42 inches. Image courtesy Fredericks & Freiser, NY

LESSONS IN LOOKING:

WHY ARE THERE SO *MANY* GREAT PAINTINGS OF WOMEN BY WOMEN RIGHT NOW?

A Case Study

- Craig McDaniel

Jocelyn Hobbie's painting, *Stream,* completed in 2015, is an elongated rectangle. 22 inches high by 42 inches long. The shape is extraordinarily pleasing. Two more inches in length and the horizontal would measure exactly twice the vertical dimension – the size of two squares kissing side by side. But the painting is not quite that long; and this slight difference makes all the difference. Inside the composition, colorful imagery pulses with energy. A lithe young woman lies flat, her eyes open like moist dark wishing wells; but looking upward she isn't seeing

anything hopeful. She almost appears expressionless; yet, she is not expressionless, she's deep in thought, consumed by her own interiority. The *setting* that surrounds her physical being – the place where she ineluctably, irreducibly, indomitably *is* – is not only the representation of a domestic space (perhaps a bedroom with patterned wallpaper) but, additionally, the setting's bold visuality marks itself as a painting. So, the painted figure is locked *inside her own head,* and also *she's locked inside an artwork.*

Hobbie knows what she's doing, composing the imagery so a viewer may naturally want to compare *Stream* with the iconic Pre-Raphaelite painting *Ophelia,* completed by John Everett Millais [1829-1896] in the middle of the 19th century. There's obvious parallels of subject, setting, composition, theme. Millais' image shows Ophelia, Hamlet's would-be fiancé, as she drowns in a wild stream. In the painting, Ophelia has her eyes open, staring upward, lips slightly parted (is she singing a lament?); she too is boxed in, surrounded by densely patterned fabric surrounded by a flower-filled forest. (The flowers in Millais' image had been carefully researched for their symbolic relevance: the pansies, for instance, signify love in vain.)

But it's *differences* in color, style, and mood that mark Hobbie's art as early 21st century. Not a remake of the 19th century. I'm drawn to write about Jocelyn Hobbie's painting *Stream* – and her work in general – because she is an artist who has received both praise *and* criticism. The book is still open on her. Which allows me to venture out on a limb and call to anyone who'll listen: Hobbie's paintings are *great.* Doing so, I seek to make a larger point: *why. Why* are there so many great paintings of women by women right now.

John Everett Millais, *Ophelia*, 1851-1852, oil on canvas, 30 x 44 inches, Tate Britain, London, image in Public Domain.

Back story: Millais' painting of his painting almost ends in (its own) tragedy. Elizabeth Siddal, the young woman who posed as Ophelia, fell seriously ill because the bath water in which she was submerged, during prolonged, numerous modeling sessions, turned freezing cold when the artist failed to keep the oil lamp burning to provide sufficient heat. Elizabath never called out to complain. She *never called out* to complain. The drama of the undramatic. She nearly died. As Ellen Hoe reports: tragically, Siddal later committed suicide, in 1862, "suffering from post-partum depression following the stillbirth of her daughter."

1. 1971

1971. Art historian Linda Nochlin wrote the essay, *Why Have There Been No Great Female Artists?* Her aim: to explore and explain *why* this was the case,

and, drum roll please, to provide a roadmap for change. Her rhetorical strategy unsettled her fellow-feminist readers, for she asserted women are casualties of causality, and continuing to engage in detailed scholarship – with an aim to identify more overlooked and under-appreciated women artists of the past – wouldn't rectify women's subpar record. Nochlin turned heads, pointing a finger: "The feminist's first reaction is to swallow the bait, hook, line and sinker, and to attempt to answer the question as it is put: i.e., to dig up examples of worthy or insufficiently appreciated women artists throughout history; to rehabilitate rather modest, if interesting and productive careers . . . to demonstrate that Berthe Morisot was really less dependent upon Manet than one had been led to think—in other words, to engage in the normal activity of the specialist scholar who makes a case for the importance of his very own neglected or minor master." The hard truth: the scholarly excavation process hasn't yet, and won't ever, unearth a female Michelangelo. Or a female Matisse. (Spoiler alert: we return to challenge this assertion later.) (Plus, let's not overlook: 99.999% of male artists can't compete with Michelangelo and Matisse either.)

Nochlin's text modeled the type of scholarship that would yield *real results,* would identify *correctable* factors, targets for future activism. What are these correctable factors? Women's relative lack of success (recognition *and* achievement at the highest level) was a function of a very, *very* tilted playing field. Women under-performed compared to their male counterparts because, basically, *how could they not?* For starters, they weren't provided equal opportunities for training. Women weren't welcome in those studio classes in which male students learned to draw and paint from live nude models. The way a skeleton fits inside skin, how tendons and muscles move. Without extensive training, painting a convincing battle scene, the martyrdom of a saint, or an image of nude men fighting (a popular subject in Florence in the early 1500s) would be a tall order

indeed. If a woman did (somehow, against steep odds) demonstrate unusual talent and achievement, she (more often than not) saw her accomplishments belittled or ignored. Nochlin painted a picture of a patriarchal art world, with networks of power, prestige, and the maintenance of a status quo that constrained women, just as they were constrained in other public realms and cultural frameworks. (An equivalent context worried observers of the history of music, who wondered, *where are the great female composers?* while overlooking (overhearing?) the obvious: in 1971, the same year Nochlin published her essay, Carole King completed *Tapestry.*)

2. *Five decades later*

In the fifty years since Nochlin published her essay, the social landscape and the art world have changed dramatically. In the arts, Nochlin's essay made an impact as her writing flowed into a *stream,* a stream that picked up speed joining other currents – theoretical discourse (e.g., Griselda Pollack, Luce Irigaray, bell hooks), artistic projects (e.g., Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro), political activism (e.g., Guerilla Girls, more bell hooks). By the 1980s and 90s, gendered themes (e.g., *identity*, *the body*, *language*) had gained undeniable momentum in the artistic production, public engagement, and critical reception of contemporary art in the West. The participation of women and artists of color in publications, galleries, performances, and as members of university faculties rose swiftly.

On a more specific level, scholars and critics and theorists and activists debated Nochlin's thesis and her aims. If Nochlin's goal was to effect change, change not only in the basic fairness of opportunity but also to *unpack* the structure of human achievement, others wondered how. In what ways? When Nochlin wrote

> "Even a simple question like 'Why have there been no great female artists?' can, if answered adequately, create a sort of chain reaction, expanding not merely to encompass

> the accepted assumptions of the single field, but outward . . . to challenge the assumption that the traditional divisions of intellectual inquiry are still adequate . . ."

then this was a point to consider, and reconsider. Yes, the search for great women artists would yield different results if 'Art' itself was defined by different parameters. Yes, examined in a new light, women's preeminence in quilt-making, for instance, would expand the possibilities for identifying greatness. But, to paraphrase Freud, is *this* what women want? Hilary Robinson, analyzing the strategic maneuvers of the period, observes, "Feminist activity has worked extremely hard to disrupt the notion of the canon. Few feminists other than those who advocate complete separatism have been content to leave patriarchal structures untouched." Veteran feminist theorists know pitfalls can multiply. Robinson explains, "Early collective action and [feminist] authorship were intended as a means of avoiding the replacement of patriarchal authority-figures with their matriarchal equivalent, leaving the structures intact while simply changing the sex of the players." Since the 1970s, and, in a way, going against what Nochlin advocated, scholars and curators have added volumes to our knowledge of women artists from earlier eras. Welcome, Angelica Kaufman, Judith Leyster, Georgia O'Keefe, Dorothea Tanning, Frida Kahlo . . .

As to the warning, by Nochlin, that it would do no good to continue sifting through the silt of art history panning for gold, hoping to find the missing shining talent, a woman who truly does rival Michelangelo, Rembrandt . . . Matisse . . . Well, surprise! one was found! Hilma af Klint! Born in Stockholm, in 1862, Hilma af Klint produced an astonishing body of work, between 1906 and 1915, that pioneered non-objective painting. (Non-objective painting is, in layman's terms, *total* abstraction.) Years before Vasily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich, and Piet Mondrian developed *their* first full-fledged abstract paintings, af Klint's production of a totally abstract painting in 1907 *could* have been as significant in

bursting open the reigning paradigm of representational painting as Picasso's 1907 painting *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, hailed as the first (European) artwork sending artists on the path to Cubism. Except, wouldn't you know, af Klint's work was kept secret. Her secret from the world.

A persuasive critique of Nochlin's original essay occurred recently. In a 2022 essay, art historian Paris Spies-Gans really gets down into the weeds and reveals inconsistencies and inaccuracies underlying Nochlin's thesis. For example, in studying those purported restrictions that kept women from studying from the nude (especially nude male) model in earlier centuries, and, thereby, held women back from success, Spies-Gans provides a corrected, carefully researched history:

> "recent statistical research has even initially found that on the Parisian art market from 1737 to 1820 women artists as a group—albeit significantly fewer in number—sold at a higher price point than men. Long before they were admitted into formal institutions of training, women navigated institutional barriers to pursue figure drawing and to create, exhibit, and carve out reputations, selling works in the highest Academic genres of the time."

But the basic thrust of Nochlin's argument still holds. Throughout history, women artists, and could-have-been artists have been shortchanged.

3. *What has changed?*

Two changes seem especially pertinent. *First*, in the fifty years since the publication of Nochlin's seminal essay, current conditions for women in the visual arts have undergone a dramatic make-over. Female students outnumber male students in most university art departments and graduate schools of fine arts today. Young women, upon graduating from top tier art programs, are selected regularly for inclusion in 'emerging artist' exhibits that constitute an all-essential step in the breeding process for the next generation of recognized artists. How it all adds up: the *systemic inequality* that Linda Nochlin railed against in her seminal 1971 essay

has, in this cultural moment, been rectified to a significant degree. Not fully, and, not altogether fairly – a study of success would, for instance, reveal young women from higher economic backgrounds are groomed for success at much higher ratios than women from middle and lower class backgrounds.

Second, in spite of the women's movement, in spite of the fact that women in North America and Europe have broader access to training and support in the arts than ever before, and, thereby, appear to live in a social context that is more supportive for women to express themselves, there are powerful, countervailing forces that curtail female self-agency. In their 2019 revised and updated edition of *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls,* psychologist Mary Pipher and Sara Pipher Gilliam re-sounded the alarm, "our cultural prescriptions for what is properly feminine creates enormous problems. To paraphrase a Stevie Smith poem about swimming in the sea, '[girls] are not waving, they are drowning.'"

Social media replacing real connections. Media-saturated, lookist-culture. A relentless emphasis on valuing adolescent girls' and young women's appearance at the expense of the broader development of the whole self/whole selves. Mass media that frequently pairs violence and sexuality. Wage inequality. These are but a few of the litany of social constraints and threats that *tend* to weigh more heavily on females. "In 1993, the American Association of University Women released a study . . . It reported that 70 percent of girls experienced harassment and 50 percent experienced unwanted sexual touching in their schools." As bleak as the situation was for many girls in the 1990s, Mary Pipher concludes that the situation has only gone downhill: "with the invention of the iPhone, indices of girls' mental health plummeted." Anxiety and depression take a widening toll. Constraints can inflict tremendous damage on young women's self-confidence; writer and sociologist Guillermo Rebollo Gil points out "the quotidian experience [of women] of being made to feel both small and always in the way somehow."

It is against this backdrop of sweeping social changes and changes to the support system of the art world – changes that can appear to be running *counter* to one another – that this essay focuses on a singular painter's body of work. Who is Jocelyn Hobbie? Born in 1968, in Massachusetts, she received her B.F.A. in Painting, Rhode Island School of Design. As a member of the first generation of women who grew up in the post-Linda Nochlin-essay era, her achievement as a painter offers the opportunity for a *great* case study.

4. Why – a 'great painting'?

Rather than concern ourselves with "great painters" (or "great artists" as Nochlin calls them) the title of this essay puts the spotlight on "great paintings." This alteration is not minor: the appellation *great painter* smacks of the mythos for which previous eras coined the term *genius.* A quality one is *born with.* This essay, instead, foregrounds the process of *production*, by women, of great *paintings*.

5. Why are women painters painting women*?*

Considering the ever-changing state of society, women's status in popular culture, the political climate, imagery in mass media, and the history of representation of women in visual culture and fine art, it should come as no surprise that women artists focus much of their attention on female subjects. There's *so much* there *there.*

Women subjects are close at hand; as close as a mirror, as convenient as a selfie. Women *know* women, from the inside. Inside their bodies, inside social structures. They know how they look, and how they are seen, impacts how they feel. But, let's qualify: women don't know, intuitively or experientially, *all women* – for there's no *essential* nature to gender, that is a figment of society's collective determination, a myth like women turning into laurel trees. After 500 years of

many male-made views of women, it is (high) time for female artists to offer alternative viewpoints, viewpoints that offer bracing correctives, expansive alternatives. Jenny Seville and Lisa Yuskavage, two of the more prominent painters working today, experiment with the female body in startling directness, offering paintings of nudes in unexpected proportions, colors, textures. *Why are women painters painting women?* One response: *how could they not?*

6. Stream-ing

Repeating patterns swirl across the composition; they divide the composition into thirds. The upper band marks a stretch of wallpaper. In the middle band, where the female figure fits, her torso wears small explosions of color running the length of a dark dress, colors of a night sky. The dress's sleeveless simplicity is perhaps the style called a shift – a style that never goes out of style. In a band along the bottom of the painting, runs a sequence of blue and orange stripes, they arc in small gentle waves. . .

Jocelyn Hobbie, *Stream*, 2015, Oil on canvas, 22 x 42 inches. Image courtesy Fredericks & Freiser, NY

This lower band of orange and blue stripes reads as the painted representation of a fabric covering for a bed, but not a bed, not quite. Maybe a *cot.* Not even one pillow. But a simple place to rest. To sleep. To make love? Maybe you know, these orange and blue hues are complementary colors. They exist on opposite sides of the color wheel, as far apart from each other as hues can be. Their juxtaposition in such a tight configuration ratchets up a tension between the physical and the psychological: while the young woman appears to relax (or, *tries to relax)* in her supine position, the vibrant striped colors she rests upon move with restless energy. She is, at once, perfectly still and on the verge of undergoing radical transformation. As the Argentine fabulist writer Borges advised: being on the cusp of revelation, a revelation that, at its most mysterious, is never consummated – this is the zone of the aesthetic experience. This is where *we are*, mind melding with the realm of Hobbie's imagery. This is also where the figure in the painting exists – in limbo. The painting is a portal to a revelation never to be fully, finally revealed. Is this the spring of spiritual awakening, the young woman gaining a glimpse of her existence within the universal? So far off, and yet all around her too. Or, does she daydream, in the zone of *giving in to* desire? Her stillness masks the energies flowing inside her, her hands resting on the bed/cot's covering, as if the lightest touch could steady her world.

7. *History is context, context is content*

There's comparisons to be offered with other paintings by the same artist. The elongated rectangular composition of *Stream* is relatively rare in her *oeuvre*, but similar subject matter – a kempt young woman immersed in bold patterns (the fabrics she wears, the textiles and flowers that surround her) – appears in canvas after canvas. Looking at her output chronologically, the *ratio* has shifted; in

Hobbie's more recent paintings there's less emphasis on the figure (less space is devoted to the female form) and an increasing amount of attention is devoted to the abstract patterning. I could go on all day, and night, comparing and contrasting one *Hobbie* versus another *Hobbie,* but equally intriguing comparisons are made scouting farther afield. The artist is aware of this as well, declaring, "My choice to paint women points to histories & complexities beyond the frame."

Who else likes to mix patterns and plop a figure in the eye of the storm? They are numerous: there's Kehinde Wiley (a contemporary African-American male artist who deserves his own exceptional renown), although in his case the preferred figure is an African American male. Then there's Finnish Rikka Sormunen (b. 1987). While Hobbie's paintings invest an undercurrent of dissatisfaction in her contemporary female figures' attitudes about the world around them, Sormunen ratchets the emotional to a love-hate relationship with the self, specifically, the bodily self. "I try to challenge how I relate to beauty. It feels like a personal project, even though I make it public. I often resent how much time and energy I've spent trying to look hot. There are rewards and punishments for sexiness and the whole thing is very hard to ignore." [quoted in "Rikka Sormunen," by Brian Greene.]

Rikka Sormunen, *Goodnight Venus,* 2017, watercolour and gouache, 62 x 54 cm

To trace Hobbie's precursors at the heart of the Modernist project, there's many to consider. There's Matisse, of course, especially with his paintings done in Nice, in the south of France, in the late 1920s. World War I is over; peace has been given another chance. If you *love looking at art*, be on the lookout for Matisse's *Odalisque with Gray Culottes,* from 1926-27, and the charcoal drawing *Reclining Model with a Flowered Robe,* c. 1923-24, in the collection of the Baltimore Museum of Art. These paintings, like Hobbie's *Stream,* feature a female model lounging within a 'curated' setting, flush with a cornucopia of eye-catching printed fabrics. Going back another generation, the parallels with Guztav Klimt are hard to miss. Perhaps you recall the Austrian's iconic paintings, such as *The Kiss,* featuring a miracle of patterns, figures hellbent on passion. But, for me, the stronger link between Hobbie's approach and Klimt's can be found in the way both artists concoct a believably alive woman amidst all the razzle dazzle. To see this in operation, I've placed (below) Klimt's last painting followed by an intimate-size painting by Hobbie:

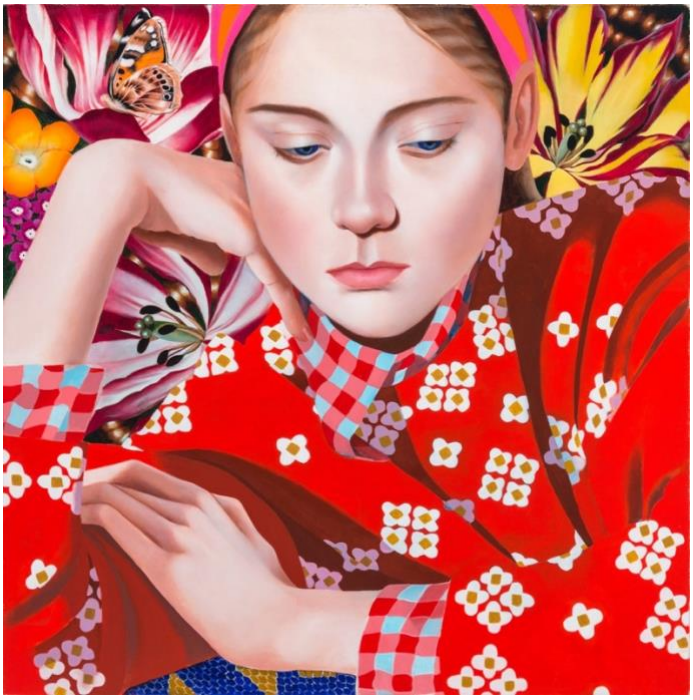
Guztav Klimt, *Lady with a Fan,* c. 1917-18. Public Domain.

Jocelyn Hobbie, *Sun Facing,* 2022, oil painting, 18 x 18 inches. Image courtesy Fredericks & Freiser, NY

8. *How do you see a painting?*

You look *at* the painting, and you also look *with* the painting. Like with a new powerful pair of prescription glasses. You also look through the lens of texts that color the view. Like this one.

Other writers have deemed Hobbie's female figures as 'dispassionate'; I'll argue otherwise. In her best work, Hobbie injects a world of feeling into a feminine face. The psychological fuses with the physiological. *Stream* impacts the viewer at levels both conscious and subliminal; each viewer's reaction and interpretation is built up of a mixture of culturally-learned *and* universally known. Starting in infancy, we *learned* (we're indoctrinated) to read expressions. Psychologists aren't all in agreement on how much of emotional communication is hardwired into our species (recognizing fear and anger and happiness may have strong elements of the innate)[i]. Is it ingrained in us by nurture or nature that the dilation of the pupils in the eyes in the female figure in *Stream* (shown earlier) and *Aurora in Red Sweater* (below) imparts a subtle, but unmistakable, allure, as compared to, say, pupils that are small, cold, dark pinpricks? Hobbie's a master at showing how the slightest shift of the eyes and lips, a movement of a hand, alters the nuances of each figure's frozen micro-expression.



Jocelyn Hobbie, *Aurora in Red Sweater*, 2019, oil painting, 16 x 16 inches. Image courtesy Fredericks & Freiser, NY

How does the artist see her own paintings? For the most part, she sees them when making them. She sees them taking shape, coming into being. What may surprise many viewers is that Hobbie never works from a live model. In fact, she often *makes up* the faces and forms of her figures. Imagine that! As art critic Scott Indrisek testifies, "In almost all cases, the subjects aren't real people, but rather subtle combinations of faces the artist has seen—in real life or otherwise—'Frankensteined together,' as [Hobbie] put it. Sometimes, she'll take photographic self-portraits to work out a particular pose or angle of the body, but Hobbie never has a subject sit for her in the studio." Once the figure is mapped out, most of the painter's energies are spent experimenting with the riot of colors and patterns that complete the composition. Hobbie knows her target: "The goal is to achieve a "disjointed, harmonious thing, simultaneously. . . It's all very much a discovery."

9. *Great paintings are rare, but everywhere*

Does a great painter always make a great painting? Many art collectors (and some curators also) wish 'investing' in a famous name guarantees a great artwork, but, alas, the strategy is not foolproof. Few artists sustain their practice at the highest pitch consistently. Supremely talented painters make some (but not always) great paintings. Henri Rousseau, Paul Cézanne, Peter Paul Rubens, and Mary Cassatt all made their share of clunkers.

Another aspect that is wickedly overlooked: *great paintings are not created only by great painters*. There are many (many) artists that complete the feat. Some catch fire only a handful of times in their entire lives. You want a great painting? Then, don't count on getting one necessarily from a great painter; and, please, don't discount the not-so-famous. What is left out of this lesson is any qualifying qualification that a great painter is an artist whose influence impacts art history. I wonder: is making an impact a necessary and sufficient condition for greatness? Or, is making an impact a necessary but not necessarily sufficient condition? Or, is making an impact not even necessary? How do these questions come into play in determining (or in making) a great *painting*?

10. *Pretty much the same*

From the middle of the fifteenth to the middle of the twentieth century, paintings of women were primarily paintings of *pretty* women. Some exceptions worth noting: Goya's paintings of the Spanish royal family didn't hold any punches when he depicts the misshapen body types of male and female monarchs; and Kathe Kollwitz's portrays the grandeur (the beauty) of women, of varying ages, looking distressed, under duress. Both artists prove *beauty* isn't pretty-plus, an upgrade from pretty. Beauty is a different quality altogether. One does not require the other.

Of prettiness: the pattern is no matter set in stone. A fetching woman that Rubens or Rembrandt chose to depict in oil paint in the 1630s differs from a female figure that Bonnard or Salvador Dali painted in the 1930s. What "pretty" means may change, in terms of the width of the hips, the waviness of hair styles, the fabric of clothing, make-up, even in the exact ways a mouth opens or eyes shut, but the term remains pretty much the same: a *pretty* woman is *desirable.* In fact, this equation underlies a psychological insight: the perception of physical attractiveness depends more on the perceiver than the target of perception. *Whose* gaze is being measured matters. This insight became a powerful strand of inquiry in late 20th-century feminist theory. The presumption of a male gaze, for instance, underpinned another influential essay of the period – British film theorist Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" [1975]. The assertion of a gendered gaze gets complicated by the recognition that *what qualities* a viewer of any gender prefers change over time, and place, in a complex feedback loop that connects biology and culture (ideology, lust, and the painting of paintings). How far back can we trace *desire* in art? Linda Nochlin, in another essay (this from 1985), probes the hypothesis: "masculine desire literally led lusting but frustrated Aurignacian males [approx.. 30,000 years ago, in caves in southern France] to represent in stone the desired, absent object – the female sex organ – and thereby to create the very first artwork." So, desire => art.

Stream's creation is out of the ordinary, within the long view of history, because the artist is female. Although, as noted, the painting's imagery is no surprise. It fits within a global art historical context. Hobbie recognizes her depiction of captivating young women within patterned surroundings revisits the approach found in Ukiyo-e prints and paintings, a genre of art popular in Japan from 17th century to 19th century. (Note: Nochlin's thesis focused on Western art; but in the main, her argument bears consideration in other cultures at other times,

as well.) Japanese artists gave detailed attention to the patterning of then-current hair styles and clothing, as well as the built environment of the period. Among other favorite subjects, geisha and courtesans command the stage in many outstanding examples. One promising line of future inquiry: to compare the treatment of faces in Ukiyo-e (often quite generic and simplified) which differs from the greater variability that characterizes Jocelyn Hobbie's portrayal of her female subjects.

Kitajawa Utamaro, *Two Beauties*, c. 1795

11. Reimagining Ophelia

Ophelia is in danger of drowning throughout *Hamlet,* not from water but from the Danish Prince's overwhelming flood of emotions and *his* feigned madness, demands placed upon her by other characters, and the general twists and turns of the action. In Shakespeare's play, Ophelia's death occurs off-stage. In a contemporary feminist drama, *Ophelia,* by Natalie Hennedige & Michelle Tan, the character and characterization of Ophelia is reshaped. Kat Hipkiss explains why the make-over is so necessary, as it challenges the original version's romantic stereotyping:

"Ophelia's drowning is the consummate representation of an eternal retreat into the feminine, trading an individual voice for eternal silence in union with feminine essence. In turn, her death expresses the danger of reducing an individual to his or her gender and disregarding the voice of the marginalized."

In *Stream,* Jocelyn Hobbie's painted imagery offers, it seems to me, a new turn: rather than dying in a confusion of longing and despair (as, arguably, Ophelia does in the drama), or actively denouncing or defying her situation; in Hobbie's painting we see a young woman staring existence in the face – *existence* with a small 'e', not the big 'E' Hamlet tossed and turned over. Perhaps this interpretation stretches too thin, but, look again at the painting, see for yourself: Hobbie's painting is too *weighty* to suspect that all the artist intends is to depict a young lady riding out a passing mood swing. The figure in *Stream:* without voice, but not without thought. Surely soliloquies churn within.

12. *Rethinking Greatness*

Training for female artists is more robust now (my focus is on North America and Europe) than it has probably been in any period in history. Not coincidentally, the rapidly expanding numbers of artists who identify themselves as asexual, gay,

queer, lesbian, bi, pansexual, or trans has warranted a change in the discourse, contesting the male/female binary, and changing the terms of critical engagement to recognize realities of gender fluidity and the hybridity of identity.

As Nochlin predicted, high achievement follows enriched opportunities for training and a strong support system. Case in point: the success of Jocelyn Hobbie, who painted *Stream,* owes much to the ongoing support she's received from the gallery that represents her: Fredericks & Freiser, a prominent art gallery, established in 1996, located in New York City. Fredericks & Freiser currently represents twenty-two contemporary artists (two of them are a team): eleven of these artists are she|her and they|their. Exactly 50%. How the times have changed since Nochlin's essay was published in the early 1970s! What's also notable – in the context of the topic at hand – how often the women artists in the Fredericks & Freiser gallery paint paintings of women. I'm not saying that these painters are great artists (present-day Michelangeloes, to mirror Nochlin's terms), but I assert that many are creating – more often than *you may imagine* – a great painting! Danielle Roberts, for instance, another artist that the F & F gallery represents, blows the doors off my grandpa and grandma's inherited notions of beauty with her seven foot wide 2023 acrylic painting, *Snow Day* . . . As for me, I recognize the scene of a stolen moment, snowflakes out the windows, an unexpected enchantment, with the hundred-ton conviction of *déjà vu.*

Danielle Roberts, *Snow Day*, 2023, acrylic on canvas, 54 x 84 inches. Image courtesy Fredericks & Freiser, NY

13. Where are all the great paintings of women by men?

One answer: many men may worry *what is there that's new to offer?* From Raphael's *Madonna of the Pinks* (1506-1507) to Andy Warhol's *Marilyn Diptych* (1962), painting ladies was a favorite motif for male artists for a 500 year period. Just as Linda Nochlin's 1971 essay pointed out the flaws in the *system* that undervalued the women and overvalued the men, things began to change. Increasing numbers of female painters gained agency (training, support, recognition), and women artists started painting women, in droves. Almost simultaneously – coincidence? – male artists increasingly veered away from depictions of the female figure.

As to be expected, exceptions remain. I promise, I won't discuss John Currin. Instead, I'll offer a lesser known who deserves more renown: Matt

Bollinger (b. 1980), whose paintings focus on the American working class. Specifically, the *white* working class. My favorite: an image of the extraordinary ordinary (see below). A pair of women sharing a smoke, by the side of the road, bathed in the glow of dusk. Note the other car and people by the side of the road in the background. What's up? Bollinger's art spans a wide range of ages, including the middle-aged and elderly; and a variety of body types are his unlikely subjects. By selecting them, the artist widens the spectrum, the spectrum of identity, self-worth, and, yes, stop-you-dead-in-your-tracks beauty.

Matt Bollinger, *Sharing a Smoke,* 2020, flashe and acrylic on canvas, 48" x 60"

14. *Back to the Future*

A cursory look at Jocelyn Hobbie's practice may give one the impression that she has found her lane and is sticking to it. That there's a formula at play that can be traced from canvas to canvas. Pretty young women + patterns. Examining her output over the past dozen years, however, leads me to conclude that the changes are significant, and arrived at through one of the most effective methods an artist can follow – long hours in the studio, where the studio becomes a *laboratory* for careful experimentation. Twisting a dial here, lowering the temperature a nudge there. Then checking the results. Then making slight adjustments and looking at those results. Slowly but surely, changes add up.

I, for one, think Hobbie was operating on all cylinders in her paintings, from 2012 and 2013, that open *en medias res,* when the story starts, or the curtain rises, in the middle of things. *Infant* (below) may not be the painting an individual collector would choose for the dining room wall, but an adventurous museum should be honored to see this artwork enter its collection. It may not pack the same wallop as a 700-page anthology of feminist texts, but Hobbie's painting speaks volumes, visually, about perspective/s of young women facing their futures and their pasts. Carefully crafted, the painting's possibilities for interpretation open widely; the painter luxuriates in ambiguity.

Jocelyn Hobbie, *Infant*, 2012, oil on canvas, 36 x 24 inches. Image courtesy Fredericks & Freiser, NY

Horizon (see below), from 2013, offers another variation on the theme of the lone female, adrift. Contemporary poet Monica Ferrell captures the feeling deftly in her own gorgeous art, the poem "In the Grips of a Sickness Transmitted by Wolves":

> "For that was in an autumn,
> The time of year when young girls get hopeless and feel like
> Giving it all away . . ."

Jocelyn Hobbie, *Horizon,* 2013, oil on canvas, 22 x 54 inches. Image courtesy Fredericks & Freiser, NY

Is she alone? The young woman in *Horizon?* See the way the dog in the foreground looks. Straight at us. The canine stare is a fulcrum on which the implied plot pivots. Are you and I there? If the young woman looks up, can she see us? Or, does the painting implicate, symbolically, our broader, hypothesized function as members of society? Or, does the artist play with the representation of representation (a conceit/concept that is treasured by modernists and post-modernists alike). For argument's sake, let's consider the obvious: the figure in *Horizon* isn't real. The artist imagined her, or 'Frankensteined' her out of remembered bits and pieces. If so, then can we, should we, care about her sadness?[ii] How can we have real feelings for what is only a painted part of a painting? (A whole cottage industry of philosophers has sprouted up to puzzle out various aspects of just such ideas.) Though the psychological feelings the fictive characters appear to feel may be a mirage, the materiality of the paint surface is unmistakably real. And not to be missed – there is the strong contrast of values, those dark shapely shadows, set against the bright thighs and shirt. In this, the physics and metaphysics of light, Hobbie's painting *Horizon* repels a million

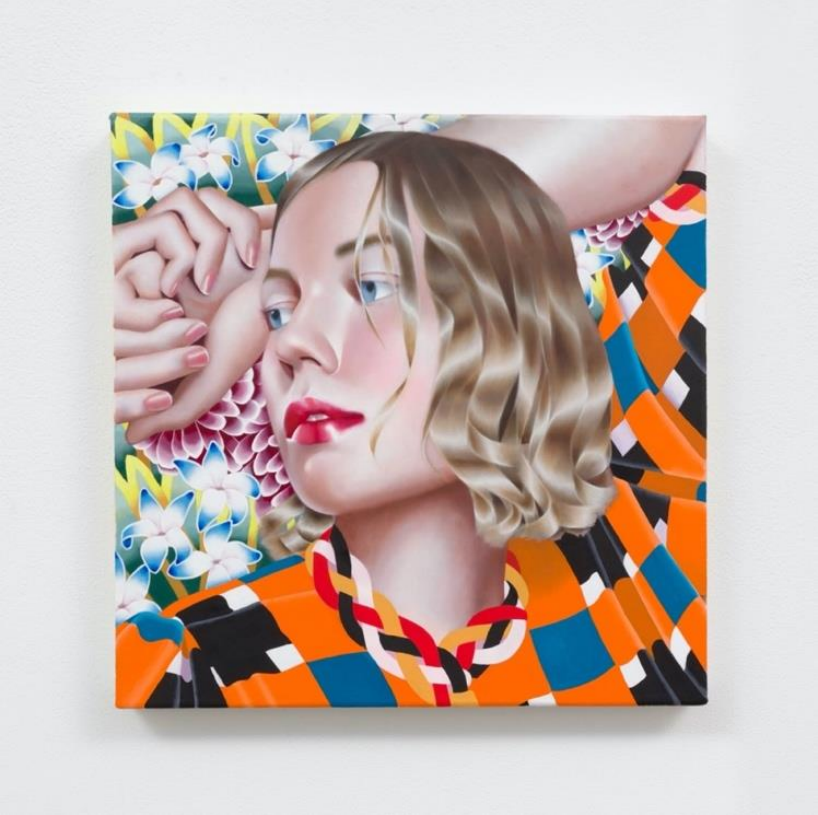
paintings of male artists in the long history of art who handle the depiction of nubility without a stitch of nobility. But, then, all is not lost: there is German artist Max Beckmann's glorious portrayal, *Reclining Woman with Parrot*, in which the woman's closed eyes and exposed breasts offer her femininity to the viewer like fruit on a platter. Both the *Hobbie* and the *Beckmann* are great *great* paintings. They vibrate to the same tuning fork of Eros. In spite of their sharing respective grandeur, each painting may make some contemporary viewers uncomfortable. Hobbie's may strike some as overly melodramatic (how can a young woman feel so blue and look so well groomed? (Answer: sadness can seep into any corner of the human condition.) Beckmann's may strike some viewers as a tired rehashing of a sexist trope (there are those who refuse to see dreams and rituals as doors opening backwards into our most ancient selves).

Max Beckmann, *Large Reclining Woman with Parrot,* oil on canvas

A dozen years later, and now Hobbie's art has moved away from the narrativity that powered these earlier canvases (*Infant, Horizon).* The painting

Stream, from 2015, a few years later, shows the direction she's moving. There are fewer props to support a clear story line – for example, if it weren't for the echoes to *Ophelia* the painting *Stream* would be much harder to pin down. Lately, Hobbie has placed increased emphasis on the exploration of increasingly complex patterns. But the figure still exists, centered in the compositional wonderment. Reviewing a 2018 exhibit of Jocelyn Hobbie's paintings, critic Johanna Fateman praised the seductive surfaces of the artist's depictions, but asked "do the distant expressions on these lovely faces signal a critique of the Madison Avenue ideals they embody, or are they—as seems more likely—simply part of the look?" Fateman makes a point, for Hobbie's output can appear to rest, at times, too lightly on technical finesse. But, in the artist's defense, isn't there a value-added in our troubled, troubling world by images that are *great to look at*, for their bounty of visual firepower?

Which brings us to the present. Below I show two of Hobbie's latest paintings, on view in the artist's solo exhibit (Spring 2024) at the Jessica Silverman gallery in San Francisco. I love that the shapes of fingers in *Shine, Star Flower/Orange Plaid* (below), rhyme with the waving strands of blonde hair. The color scheme is bright; the scene and figure glow, like they *emit light*. But, as in so many of Hobbie's paintings, visuality ratchets up tension with itself (a surfeit of shapes and colors), while the young woman's outward calm seems ever vulnerable. Things could change. The kaleidoscope of patterns and pressures, outside and in, can turn at any moment.

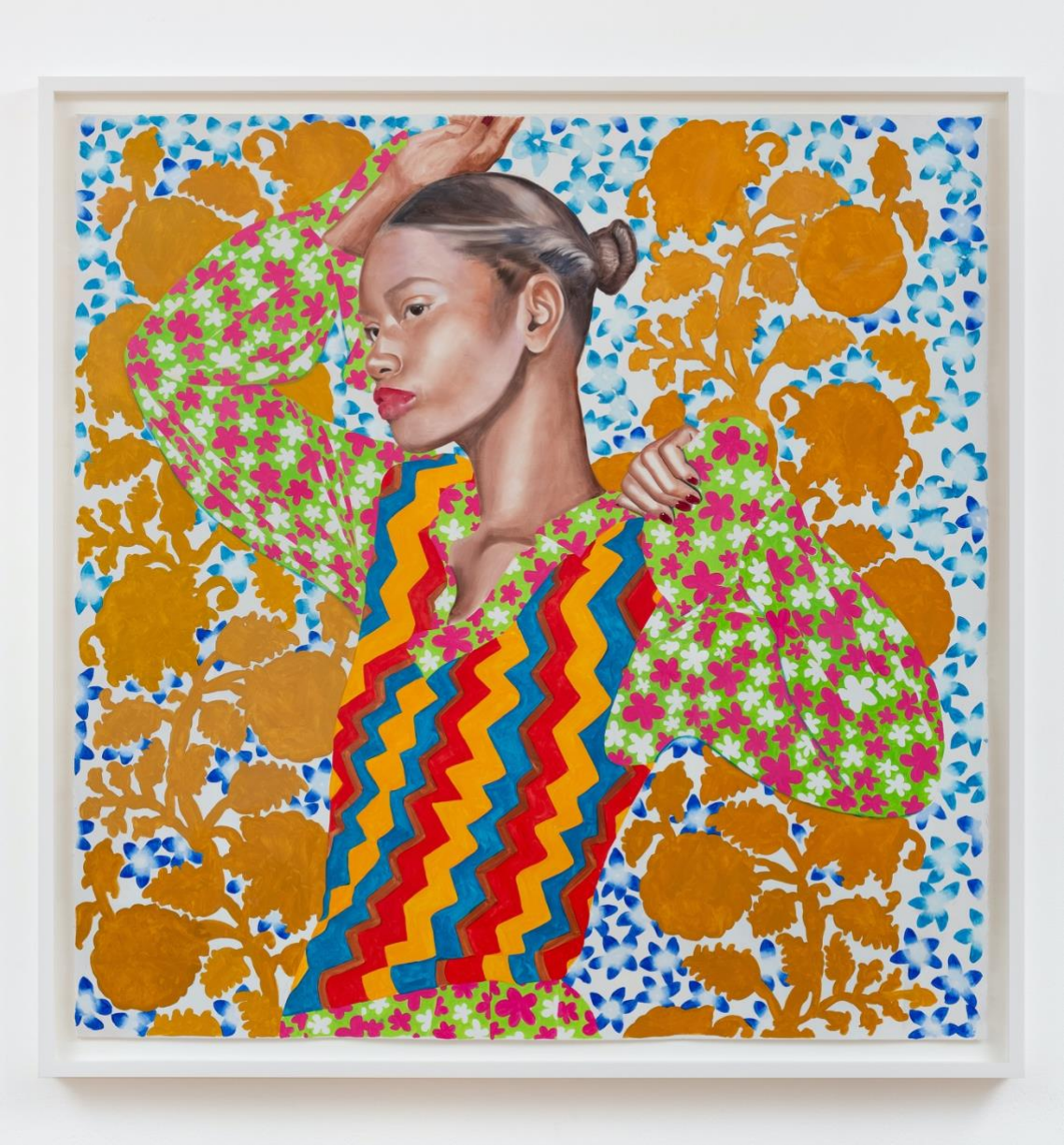


Jocelyn Hobbie, *Shine, Star Flower/Orange Plaid,* 2023/2024, oil on canvas, 16 x 16 inches. Image courtesy Fredericks & Freiser, NY

The gallery's website provides clues – how artist and gallery may aim to tilt interpretive angles. "Her dense patterns do not entrap her subjects; rather, the swirl of visual activity *shields them* [my emphasis] from solitude." And, "The exhibition also includes several oil-on-paper paintings. Unlike the dense layering of her canvases, these delicately executed works combine patterns on a flat plane. *Like art quilts, they draw from the legacy of 1970s feminist art.* [my emphasis]". An example, *Chevron Vest/Blue Flowers,* from 2023, (see below), helps connect the dots between Hobbie's current artistic practice and the quotes I've italicized.

To create *Chevron* . . . , the painter has succeeded, I think, in fashioning a delicate balancing act, between attracting and shielding. The process is Darwinian, devilishly difficult: to discover the niche, that ecological condition where the

creature's camouflage supports both ends of the spectrum – simultaneously capable of attracting (wanted attention), and shielded (from unwanted attention). Attracting approval; shielded from criticism. Attracting desire, hidden from shame. How does she do it? *She* being both the painted figure *and* the painter, Jocelyn Hobbie. She does it by having things both ways, by helping the painting's imagery to circle back. The painting channels the 1970s feminist art movement and those savvy quilts/paintings by Miriam Schapiro; and, at the same time, the painting evokes the present, staying utterly hip to what's happening now (such a pouty face!). The female reveals herself *and* hides herself, simultaneously; she's stitched herself inside her *quilt*-like clothing, clothing camouflaged to go flat as the background, flat as a shield. Back to the future. *Is this a goddam great painting or what??!!*



Jocelyn Hobbie, *Chevron Vest/Blue Flowers,* 2023, oil on paper, 39 x 38 3/8 inches.

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BIO

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[i] [i]For an example of research supporting a thesis of significant universality of facial expressions in humans, see Alan S. Cowen and Dacher Keltner, "Universal facial expressions uncovered in art of the ancient Americas: A computational approach," *Science Advances,* vol. 6, no. 34, 2020.

[ii] Philosopher Alex Neill tries to settle such an inconsistency (of knowing fictional characters aren't real) by explaining, "in watching a performance of [Shakespeare's] *Lear,* I may experience a variety of more or less intense emotional responses to one or more of the characters; as the lights go up, however, my attention is forced back to the fact that what I have been watching is a *play,* and in this case a supreme work of art. And my responses then change; the focus of my attention gradually moves from Lear to *Lear.* If I am moved now, it will probably be the performance, or the play, or Shakespeare's art, that I am moved by." p. 190.