JENNIFER PACKER

THE EYE IS NOT SATISFIED WITH SEEING

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SERPENTINE
‘My inclination to paint, especially from life, is a completely political one. We belong here. We deserve to be seen and acknowledged in real time. We deserve to be heard and to be imaged with shameless generosity and accuracy.’

Jennifer Packer, 2016

Combining observation, improvisation and memory, Jennifer Packer’s portraits, interiors and flower paintings centre on the emotional and physical essence of contemporary Black lives and their environments. Her work questions the invisibility of Blackness in Western painting traditions and addresses how the presence, strength and vulnerability of Black lives can be represented in painting today.

Packer takes a contemporary approach to the traditions of portraiture and still life that is rooted in her lived experience. While the portraits are of her family, friends and fellow artists, she acknowledges that the choice to paint figures is a political one: ‘Representation and particularly,
observation from life, are ways of bearing witness and sharing testimony.’

Packer began painting flowers from observation in 2012, originally as a respite between portraits. These flower paintings embody the fragility of life just as her portraits embody a tenderness towards the lives she paints. They can be seen today as revisions of Dutch sixteenth-century vanitas paintings of flowers and other worldly possessions, which historically symbolised the transience of life. Packer describes particular flower compositions as funerary bouquets and vessels of personal grief made in response to tragedies of state and institutional violence against Black Americans. Packer notes: ‘These bouquets highlight something that’s been true in my practice overall, which is this appreciation for observation and also understanding the emotional resonance of the things, the spaces in which we exist and around the people that we care about, whether we know them or not.’

Packer offers a protective distance between sitter and viewer by layering, revealing and obscuring details through constant shifts between grounds and space, dissolving figuration into near abstraction. Characterised by a vibrant approach to colour and a powerful play of scale, her paintings, often worked on over extended periods of time, combine formal rigour and painterly skill with emotional intimacy. The exhibition’s title The Eye Is Not Satisfied With Seeing (a reference to Ecclesiastes 1:8) points to the insatiable desire for knowledge through sensory experience and the existential and practical significance of bearing witness.

This exhibition, the artist’s first in a European institution, includes works dating from 2011 to 2020 and brings attention to the importance of drawing in her practice. For Packer, drawings rarely function as studies but hold a weight of their own that differs from paintings.

One of the most exciting painters working today, Packer raises timely and essential discussions on race, representation and art history.

'I had seen the Fantin-Latour paintings at the Met and I thought they were extraordinary. I thought, "How can a painting of a bouquet feel more compelling than a painting of a person? How do I feel the humanness of a thing?"

Jennifer Packer, 2017
‘I feel a resistance to the use of the word ‘bodies’ to describe the figures in my work. There’s an important difference between having a body and being a body. Bodies can be almost anything and are often subject to mindless objectification or a loss of humanity. I’m usually thinking about the significance of that distinction as I work.’

Jennifer Packer, 2020
A lot of my paintings around 2015 were monochromatic because I gave equal importance to negative space and the adornment of the environment. I thought, "What’s the significance of the difference between a person and a chair, in terms of social or cultural value?" I started to use the monochrome as a way to force any distinctions that were necessary to happen through tactility, through the amount of colour on the surface, rather than these other arbitrary shifts. I could then eliminate things that were inessential pretty quickly. I could feel something was there because it was dense. The monochrome became a severe editing process. It was a way of being critical about making very tight pictures with considered surfaces. Can you make a good painting with one colour?"

Jennifer Packer, 2020
‘When I painted Eric, I wanted accuracy, but I also wanted to privilege his subjectivity and privacy. Eric is someone that I love and respect, and even though the painting was for me, I wanted him to be on his own, in a sense. I didn’t want him to appear vulnerable or in need of a viewer’s affirmations.’

Jennifer Packer, 2016

Jennifer Packer’s portraits feature friends and family members. The American artist Eric N. Mack has sat for Packer on numerous occasions. Mack was part of the Serpentine exhibition Grace Wales Bonner: A Time for New Dreams in 2019.
‘For me, making a portrait of someone is wanting to do the subject justice and, if anywhere, the imagination sits in the respectful distance. It’s imagining a space that an image or representation can’t quite touch. There are parts of subjectivity that aren’t revealed on the surface and can’t be essentialised through drawing. Sometimes things in the paintings get collapsed, so in April, Restless (2017), I made the leg of the table that was behind her rest on her finger. It’s very slight, but I’m trying to build these metaphorical connections for how I think about those folks. There’s a give and take between representation and imagination.’

Jennifer Packer, 2020
‘Drawing is very rarely just a study for something. I want the drawing to be something that holds water and has weight on its own, has a gravity that painting can’t have, even in its fragility.

I started to think of drawing as this thing that could do something unique and immediate that painting would have to work so hard to achieve. I wanted to challenge myself to approach drawing in such a way that it could argue with a painting. They’re like this counter-practice. Even if it’s the same image, I see them as completely different.’

Jennifer Packer, 2020
Christina Sharpe in her essay *Abundant with Light* for the exhibition’s catalogue observes:

‘One figure’s head is inclined towards something and as we follow his look, the second figure comes into view and we see his sweet face, eyes closed, as he leans into the first figure, whose knee and arm are suffused with light. With that lit knee, I can’t not think of Colin Kaepernick, of George Floyd and countless others but also this reimagining of the knee and light. [...] Charcoals, blues, browns, a pinkish mauve, a dusty rose, bluish purple, bluish lilac purple, skimmed milk white, chestnut brown, deep orange-coloured brown, blackish grey, ash grey, smoke grey, and what connects and tethers a hand and a foot, a face being looked at with what I am reading as care, or interest, is a form of tenderness. Such intimacy. Whether or not we who look at Packer’s figure paintings can discern an action or a mood, what we are allowed to glimpse is “the undeniable quality of [the sitter’s] existence.”’
'Sandra Bland's death was profoundly disturbing. There was something that I couldn't say about why I was grieving for a stranger and why it was so painful. A significant time passed – a year or two – and I started to think about actualising an image. In commemorating her, I feared that I'd be commemorating her death. I noticed in my research that you could Google the funeral of someone who'd been killed by police and see the funerary decorations. When I Googled Sandra, I couldn't find any images of her memorial. I felt unreconciled about that loss. Painting isn't always good at grief. I realised that whatever I was feeling had entirely to do with me. So, in a way, this painting became an expression of an inability to deal with that loss.'

Sandra Bland (7 February 1987 – 13 July 2015) was a 28-year-old Black American woman who was found dead in police custody in Texas, largely believed to have been murdered.
Artist Dona Nelson, Packer’s former painting tutor, visited the Bronx studio in March 2020. She observed:

‘An easel-sized blue flower painting in the cold light of the unheated studio is propped against the wall. Its ground is a thin indigo wash. Finely etched rivulets of paint expand the painting’s space and define the picture plane. Although the paint is thin, the blue ground is as rich and warm as a May night. Soft purple rings and smears of green, rose and yellow are marks that fall somewhere between gesture and touch. Jennifer’s touches scatter and drift across the canvas. Her flower paintings allow her to paint differently than her figure paintings. She moves back and forth across the pictorial field as if she was making an abstract painting. All her actions are directed to opening a painterly field and never allowing it to close down or finish.’
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*Transfiguration (He’s No Saint)*, 2017, Oil on canvas, 182.8 x 91.4 cm, 72 x 36 inches, Collection of Igor DaCosta and James Rondeau. Photo: Jason Wyche

*Vision Impaired*, 2015, Oil on canvas, 107.5 x 137 cm, 42.3 x 53.9 inches, Private Collection. Courtesy the Artist and Corvi-Mora, London. Photo: Marcus Leith

*Eric (II)*, 2013, Oil on canvas, 43.2 x 49.5 cm, 17 x 19.5 inches. Photo: Jason Wyche

*April, Restless*, 2017, Oil on canvas, 121.9 x 91.4 cm, 48 x 36 inches, Collection of Adam and Mariana Clayton. Photo: Marcus Leith

*Untitled*, 2014, Charcoal on paper, 238.8 x 121.9 cm, 94 x 48 inches. Photo: Marcus Leith

*The Mind Is Its Own Place*, 2020, Charcoal and pastel on paper, 148 x 91.4 cm, 58.25 x 36 inches. Photo: Jason Wyche

*Say Her Name*, 2017, Oil on canvas, 121.9 x 101.6 cm, 48 x 40 inches. Photo: Matt Grubb

*Absence, A Condition*, 2020, Oil on canvas, 61 x 76.2 cm, 24 x 30 inches. Photo: Jason Wyche

Read more about Jennifer Packer’s work in the forthcoming catalogue, which includes new texts by Rizvana Bradley, Dona Nelson, Christina Sharpe and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, alongside an extended interview between the artist and Hans Ulrich Obrist. Order your copy online today from the Serpentine shop: serpentine-galleries.myshopify.com

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