

RUSSH

Oil on Canvas

WORDS Jess Blanch

The best works of arts are those that quietly seduce you until you're so mad about them you'll do anything to make them yours. At first glance they stop you in your tracks, becoming a screenshot on your mind you will visit when you have a quiet moment, often late at night before your head hits the pillow. For a while you feel you're the only one to have noticed them. They are your secret. And then suddenly, the timidity of this attraction is quickly replaced by an insane urge to seek them out, to own them, to make them belong to you and only you. Sometimes it is just one piece, sometimes it's an entire body of works. And that's not to mention the infatuation you have with their creator ...

Her name is Mattea Perrotta. Her world appears as one in constant search of summer nights, faded denim and interesting shapes. You can just tell she loved Picasso. She was born and raised in Venice Beach, California. There, because her Italian father was a bodybuilder at Muscle Beach and Gold's Gym in the 70s. Her mum is Portuguese. She has two sisters. They spent their days by the ocean, drawing and playing in the sand while their father worked. It was growing up in the "bizarre streets of Venice" that set her perspective on people and the world. "It was untraditional in the sense that we were exposed to so much positive and negative," she says. "I love that city, it's a cultural melting pot. Brings in a lot of weird cats, but inspiring nonetheless."

She lived there until she went to college at UC Berkeley, where San Fran and the Bay Area reminded her of Venice, but surrounded by eucalyptus rather than palm trees. She studied art in college and then travelled around until she unconsciously developed roots in L.A. and slowly fell in love with it in a new way ...

It was here, just recently, that she had her first solo show.

By accident or design, how did you come to be an artist?

I always wanted to be an 'artist' in a sense that I knew I wanted to be making or creating something. I always had a pencil in my hand. I guess I became addicted to the feeling I got when I was working. I love the ritual of drawing or painting something.

What's the inspiration behind your recent exhibition at MAMA Gallery, Portrait of a Nude Woman.

This show was inspired by a lot of experiences. I suppose the obvious one would be my time spent in Marrakech last summer. I've been lucky enough to spend a lot of my time travelling, and most of the time I travel alone. Being a woman travelling to these places has definitely made me look at gender in a different way. You read about the gender issues going on around the world, but it wasn't until I was living and breathing in the same space that it began to affect me, especially in Morocco where a woman's role is not yet equal to a man's. It is not true that women share the same experiences cross-culturally. Yet women do seem comparatively conjoined by a prevalence of emotional insecurities that brings us together as one gender. I wanted to show this by stripping away the excess and using minimal lines and shapes to emulate a feeling. I wanted to celebrate the presence of a woman without an explicit feminism undertone. Something a little more subtle and delicate.

Who are your modernist and contemporary heroes?

Agnes Martin, Lygia Clark, Jean Arp, Picasso, Carlos Mérida, to name a few ...

In what ways does Los Angeles influence your work?

I love L.A., but my love story with the city began recently. It wasn't until I moved to Berkeley and came back that I began to appreciate it. Old Los Angeles is very cool. It's a beautifully complex city that has a bad stereotype, that I wish kept more people away. It's a desert next to a sea, it's a very strange place. A friend of mine recently gave me a book, called Southern California [: an Island on the Land] by Carey McWilliams, that talks about the history of SoCal from the effects of missionisation on Indian communities, to the rancheros and the migration of Mexican and Japanese culture. The book made me perceive L.A. differently – there's a lot about this city's past I didn't know. It's a city with a deep and dark history that I find to be incredibly romantic.

How have your experiences living and working in Italy, Morocco and Portugal helped shape you?

It's made me a better listener. I love that about travelling to new cities; it forces you to exist in the present. When I'm back home I mindlessly do things because I know my way around, but when I'm travelling, it makes me more conscious. I enjoy the moments when you're lost, wandering empty streets. You have no wi-fi or phone to help you find your way, it forces you to interact with people and places that you might ignore. I also love the sense of inevitable loneliness you get while travelling, it makes you see the world differently.

Where do you dream of visiting to make work?

Mexico City.

Describe a day in your studio. For example, what does it look like; what music do you listen to; what materials do you use?

Every day is different. I wish I was more organised and stuck to a routine, but I'm all over the place. I paint at odd hours. Mostly late night or early morning, when the light is poor, which doesn't make any sense, really, but it's when my brain is most active. Some nights I go in there, put on a record, stare at the canvas and do absolutely nothing. Or some nights, I can work on three pieces at a time. I work in oil paint, so the drying process is slower than acrylic. I like to play with textures and using mediums like beeswax, gesso or pigments to layer with what I might find and save from my travels. When I was in Morocco I would go to the souk and buy things like black coal or raw indigo rock and layer a painting with that. When I was living in Florence I started making my own paints, which I really enjoyed, but I feel like I don't have the patience or time to do that anymore. The music varies depending on my mood. Lately it's been Sidney Miller, Robyn Hitchcock and Eden Ahbez. Some friends have a cool podcast that's called Reverberation Radio that has a nice variation of sounds.

What do you enjoy most about painting?

The sense of freedom I get when I'm working ... there's nothing like it. It's the only time when I can fully escape the madness of my thoughts. I'm shit at meditating, I guess it's my form of meditation. Painting is the greatest love of my life. If all else fails, I'll always have my studio to go back to.

And photography?

I'm not a photographer. I don't really know much about it either, and maybe that's why I'm so attracted to it. I don't understand how to properly use a camera, it's a little magic black box, but I appreciate it. I use it as a way to document things I see that I find beautiful: colours, textures, lines, shapes ... anything really. I like how photography captures the moments in between.

What do you like about using film cameras over digital?

I love the rawness of a film image over digital. The imperfections make it beautiful. Similarly, [it's] how I'm attracted to a painting. The colour drips, brush hair beneath the surface is what my eye is attracted to. There's a romanticism that a film camera has over a digital, it's much more tangible.

What came first for you, the camera or the paintbrush?

Paintbrush.

How do the two disciplines satisfy different parts of your creativity?

I like the permanence of a photograph. When I 'finish' a painting I still want to render it. A painting is never done to me, there's always something small to do. Photography feels more contrived to me. I feel like I have more room to get weird when I paint; it's not as linear as a photograph.

And how do they play off each other?

My photographs are inspiration for the paintings; the paintings are often abstracted versions of a photograph. Ultimately I want my paintings and photographs to live and breathe in the same space. I want both to have a similar rhythm and timelessness.

There's a sense of nostalgia imbued in your work. Where does this come from and for what are you nostalgic?
I'm a very nostalgic person. I think I'll always be searching for something that is never really 'there'.