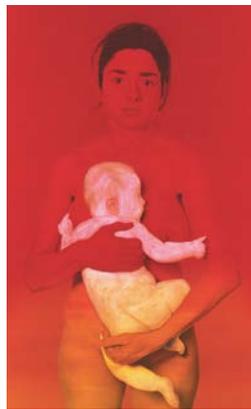


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UNDER HER SKIN: THE ART OF JENNY MORGAN

Emily Kremer



In an episode of HBO's **Girls**, Ray explains to Hannah that good writing must investigate tragedy (he cites acid rain, the plight of the giant panda bear and urban sprawl as examples) and finally decides on death as the most worthy topic. Although Ray is parodying a Brooklyn barista/part-time philosopher, after chatting with artist **Jenny Morgan**, I'm convinced that maybe he's not so misguided after all.

Morgan's solo show, *How to Find a Ghost*, confronts human flaws and life's mysteries: depression, love, loss, motherhood, pain, joy and spirituality, among others. She expertly navigates themes explored by Surrealists and Abstract Expressionists but depicts emotion and the subconscious through portraits of her closest friends and family (and even herself) to convey the "identities and personalities and energy that is their own."

Almost all of the paintings – and all of the figures – are nudes; is this a cultural commentary? An artistic exercise? An expression of human sexuality? None of the above, actually: "It starts as a pretty basic thing in school – you learn from the nude model," Morgan says. "And then when I started asking people in my life to pose for me, there would be the individuals where I wouldn't have the courage to ask them to be nude, like someone's mother or a friend that I'm not that close to. So a few years ago I would just allow them to have an article of clothing on. And then at some point I realized I have no interest in painting [clothing], and I'm at this place where I don't need to do that to get to this person. So if they're not willing to be nude for me then I just can't paint them. It absolutely has to be nude at this point."

So Morgan can speak to the emotional and psychological topics in her work, insightfully and candidly probing the depths of the human psyche. But what about the paintings themselves, can they match the intensity of the subject matter? Unquestionably. Her portraits are simultaneously sensual/attractive and tortured, the figures hovering between life and death. The emotions with which they cope internally manifest corporeally as scarred and charred flesh. In a portrait of a male friend, for instance, the subject stares directly at the viewer as he confronts his mother's death; the ghostlike quality to his skin and swaths of light breaking through the darkness of his torso even call to mind **Francis Bacon's** eerie **Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X**.

The figures in other works are similarly mutilated; Morgan paints a new mother bathed in crimson, the whites of her eyes bloodshot, a newborn cradled to her chest. It is difficult not to react viscerally to canvases like this one, although shock value is not Morgan's intent. In fact, the bold color choice is less about conveying meaning or inciting a reaction from the viewer and more about her artistic process: she sands the surface of the canvas, scraping away layers of flesh-colored paint like a two-dimensional rug burn, exposing the angry, raw red just beneath the surface. And for Morgan, the process is personally satisfying: "Recently I had someone compare it to the idea of those mandala sand paintings that Tibetans do. They spend all this meticulous time building up this structure and then they wipe it away. They take the sand and put it in the ocean and they see that energy going back into the earth. But they do it as an act representing the impermanence of everything. It is about the meditation of doing this really detailed work and then the exhilaration of fucking it up."

Art connoisseurs and newcomers alike often traipse through museum corridors, gazing at various works before claiming, "I just don't get it." Rest assured, you will get Jenny's work. And more importantly, you will feel it.

Photography by Joe Marquez

