

— JENNY — MORGAN

interview • jen schwarting



To start, can you describe your recent body of work?

My most recent solo show, "Turning the Tide," was at Beers Gallery in London in March 2016. I was working with psychological themes centered on the shadow of the human psyche. Carl Jung popularized the idea of "the shadow" and described it as the unconscious aspects of the personality that the conscious self denies or rejects. On a personal level, I believe it's important to acknowledge the shadow aspects within myself, and then make an effort to integrate that material into my awareness. Carl Jung expressed, "To confront a person with his shadow is to show him his own light. Once one has experienced what it is like to stand judgment between the opposites, one begins to understand what is meant by 'the self.'"

When I saw your work for the first time in person at Driscoll Babcock Galleries in New York, I was surprised by the scale. The figures

are all the more powerful painted larger than life.

It's important to me that the figures exist at a scale larger than life – I need the scale to reflect my personal feelings towards these individuals and I often want to venerate them or make idols. I like offering the viewer the experience of encountering giants who feel super human. The physical labor that goes into a large canvas is very rewarding. When your whole body is involved in the act of painting, it can start to feel like sculpture. The grander the scale, the more physically cathartic it feels to execute.

You use a color-shifting, psychedelic palette, and many of your subjects have a dreamy, blissed-out expression. Are they in ecstasy? What accounts for their altered states?

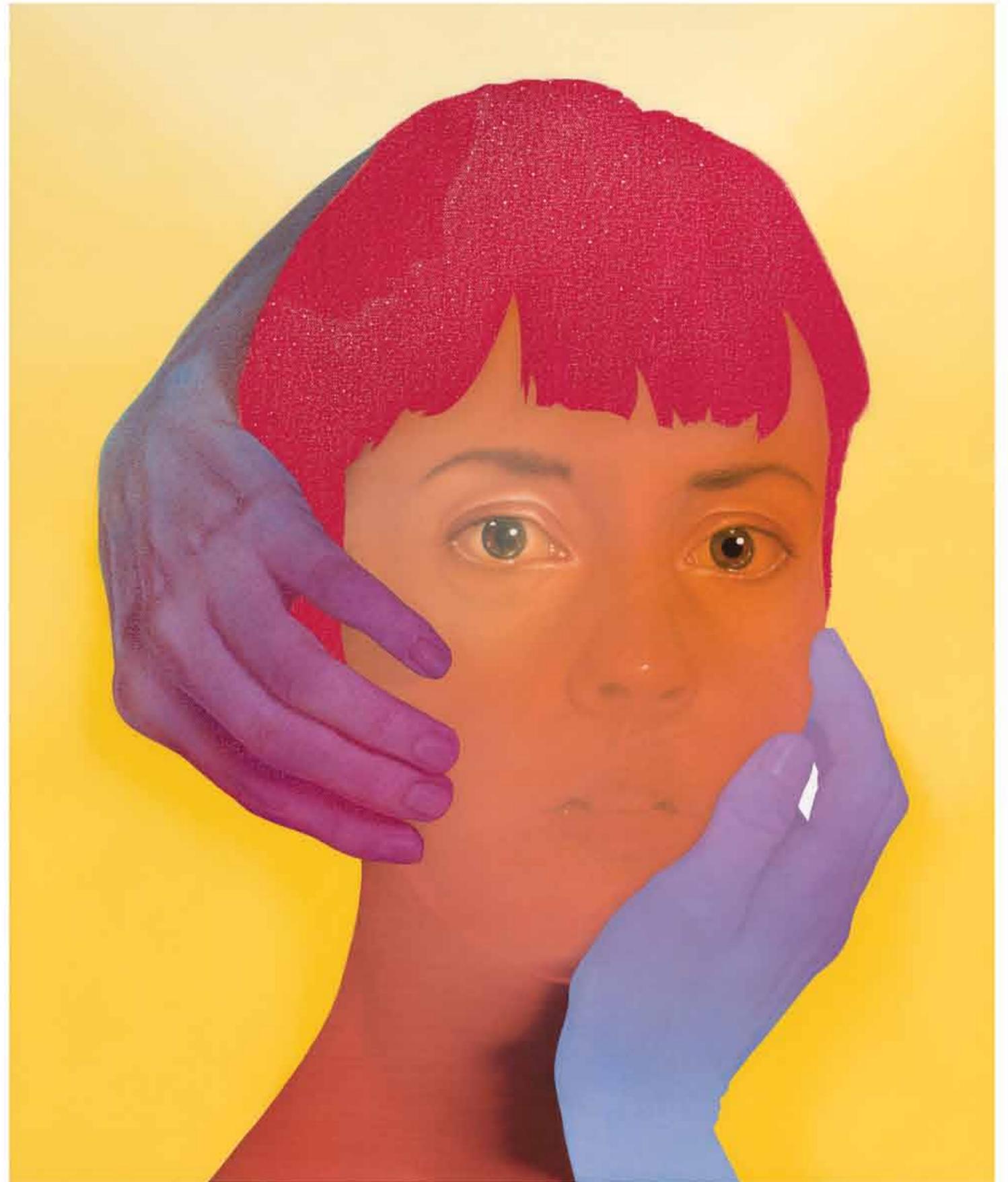
The subjects are experiencing both the ecstasy and the agony of being alive. The more subtle facial expressions allow for ambiguity, which leaves room

for the color to speak louder than body posture. I also have an appreciation for very simplistic and static poses, again, allowing for color to demand importance. Bathing the subjects in gradient fields of color helps to elevate them and place them in altered spaces.

My work is primarily self-portraiture and people whom I am close with on a personal level. My connection to the sitter is foundational. I try to address each portrait from the point of view of the sitter and ask myself what is needed. Does the sitter need a jolt of electric color to energize and move them? Or maybe the sitter is posing for me because there is a major life event taking place, the depths of which will need to be made evident through more aggressive techniques. Taking into consideration the present state of my subject helps me to shift them in some way. Color has proven to be most satisfying and profound in terms of truly transforming the figure.

Can you talk about the role technology plays in your painting? The manipulation and saturation of digital photo filters comes to mind, but the newest work, painted in reverse, seems to draw from old school film negatives.

I am highly influenced by digital gradients and love mimicking the smooth perfection with paint. That is why I am often asked if the work is airbrushed or manipulated in Photoshop in some way, but it's all brushwork. I don't make preparatory sketches; I prefer to play with the image digitally and try color schemes or ideas out in Photoshop and then allow myself to problem solve on the canvas itself. Since I take on the role of photographer and the photographic reference is such a huge part of my process, I look to other photographers such as Rineke Dijkstra and Sally Mann for inspiration. Sally Mann's daguerreotypes were on my mind during the last body of work; it was helpful to reference her





analogue process when thinking about inverting my images digitally. I was reminded that in traditional forms of photography, the image starts as a negative and is made positive by adding light – a synchronistic metaphor for the content of the work.

You can't know light without dark – I explored this duality through the use of a limited palette and inversions. When the portraits became monotone, I felt an immediate impulse to turn them inside out. With white and black switching places, it was as if the contrast between light and dark was amplified – the white glowing and the black deepening. This reversal of color structure was psychologically shocking to my system. I started dreaming about the paintings and having conversations with them about their content. I ventured pretty deep down the rabbit hole and used the making of this work to help me navigate through an internal landscape.

You recently painted a self-portrait

in which your facial features are almost entirely blurred, except for one exquisite, all-seeing eye. Are you representing a higher consciousness?

Yes. The blurred features are a push and pull between states. Symbolically, I think of it in a few different ways. The blurred features are being pushed back into an infinite fog of color, while the more rendered eye can clearly see through the haze. The all-seeing eye is allowed access to higher levels of consciousness and is looking out at the world from the perspective of the highest self. The eye being singled out also alludes to the power of the proverbial third eye – providing the subject matter with the ability to perceive the world beyond ordinary sight.

This particular self-portrait is titled *Purple Haze*. How much does music influence your painting?

I often pull titles from the music that has impacted the work. In the studio, there are times when an album

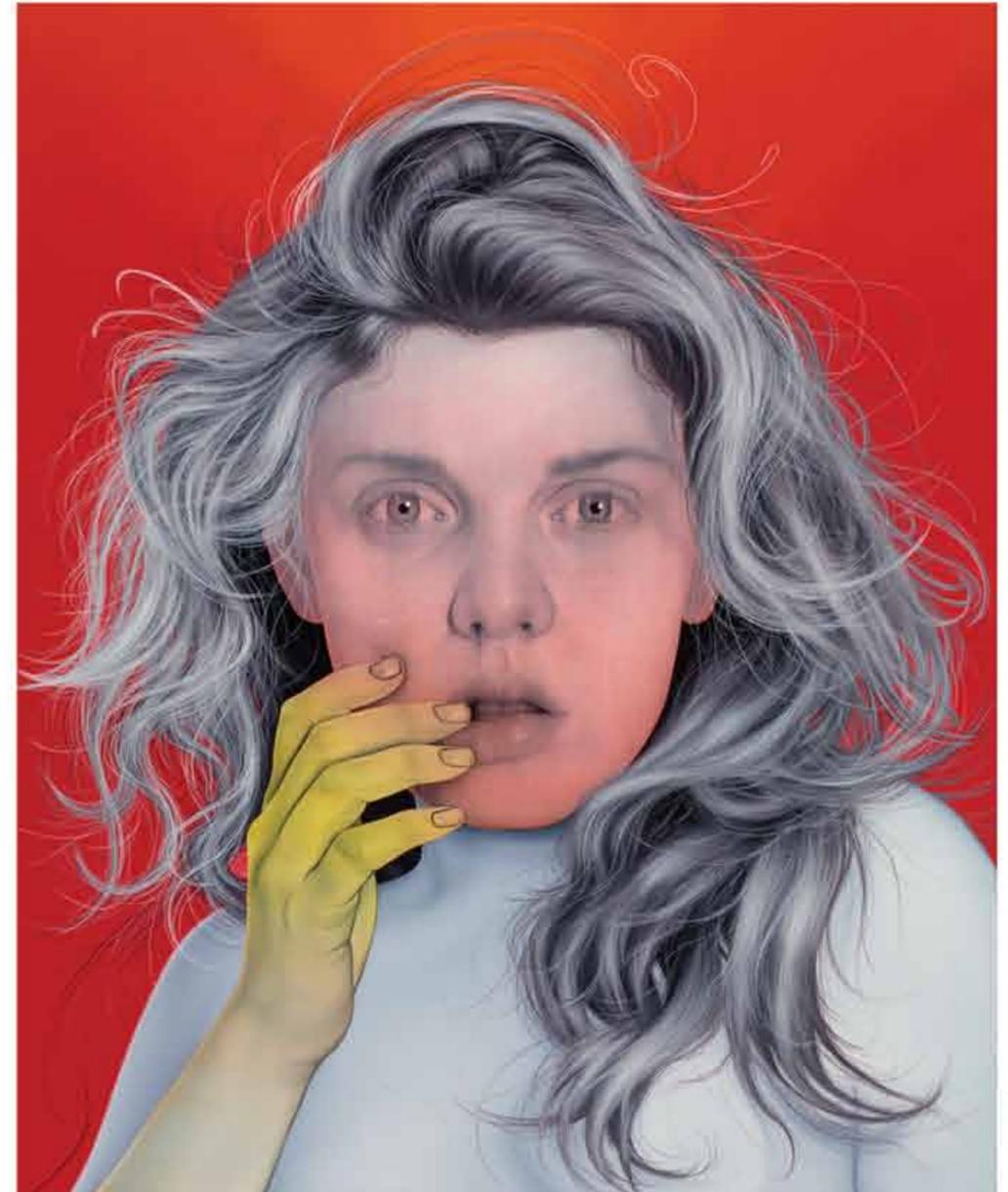
will serve as a sort of soundtrack, and I'll notice a beautiful synchronicity when the themes in the music mirror the ideas I'm working with in the paintings. I honor that influence by pulling lyrics or titles from the poetic musicians. In reference to *Purple Haze*, the title is also a tip of the hat to the weed and psychedelic culture – both having an influence in my creative process.

The treatment of your subjects' hair is intriguing – both as a formal framing device, and as a singular nod to fashion. Otherwise, your backgrounds and your models are bare, devoid of clothes or any specific stylistic references. Are you pursuing a sense of timelessness?

A sense of timelessness is very attractive to me. I haven't wanted to add hints of fashion or include tattoos on the skin because I think that figurative work can denote its place in time purely through style. Maybe it's a strange quirk of mine, but too many

narrative signifiers in figurative work tend to make me uncomfortable, so I like to strip mine down as much as possible. The subject matter doesn't exist in an earthly space filled with material cues – it hovers just outside of those bounds. My long-term goal is to keep pushing the figure deeper into an abstract space – some have referred to this space as purgatory, but I see it as more free form and other-dimensional.

The hair has become its own pictorial device and can move through different levels of realism – sometimes every strand is depicted in detail and then the dimensionality can be lost all together and it becomes purely graphic and hard-edged. I start every painting with an acrylic base color of cadmium red, and I enjoy leaving this red layer visible by turning the hair into an open graphic shape – framing the figure with a bright crimson mane. With the hair actually being a part of the body, it serves as a middle ground between contemporary trends and the eternal.





Speaking of the eternal, you have been painting yourself and your friends, and you all exude the glow of youth. As you begin to age, will the work change?

I have always known that as I age, the work will directly reflect that transformation. At this point, my work has allowed me to have an intimate understanding of my own skin and shape – I’m watching my body subtly change, looking more and more like my mother’s. And since I do pull my subjects from a close pool of people, I will watch them age on an intimate level as well. I’m looking forward to witnessing this process of life and cataloging the beauty and drama behind it. With age comes deeper life experience.

Bearing witness to the process of life but also, I’m guessing, its end? Skeletons and skulls are recurring motifs in your work. Do you

identify them as symbols of death or something else entirely?

The symbolism of the skull has been evolving through the years of its use and will continue to do so. I first started painting the skull as a blanket symbol for mortality, referencing art history more than a personal narrative. I thought of the skeleton as an inert object, able to simply represent an idea, but essentially empty. As I have been confronted with more deaths in my own life though, the skull and skeleton have taken on a complete life of their own. They are no longer inert and lifeless, but filled with existential quandary. Working with these symbols helps me to slowly comprehend grief and the concept of death. The skeleton now feels like an entity, a living being who is able to walk between worlds.

Do you paint every day?

My schedule ebbs and flows in the

studio based around deadlines. My practice in the last few years has been built around creating specific bodies of work, with a few pieces that bridge the gap between them. When preparing for a show, I’m in my studio between six and seven days a week, getting lost in the work. I lean more towards the workaholic end of the spectrum, so I have to balance myself out. I have about three months a year where I need to recharge and I find it impossible to paint, which can be frustrating but also necessary.

What do you do to recharge?

I take time off from the studio and put my energy elsewhere, which can feel challenging after such concentrated focus. I first clean the studio as an act of cleansing. Then I give myself a few weeks of catching up on all the other life activities I ignore or push to the side while working; like exercise, reading, travel and downtime. One of

my priorities during this time is to look at as much art as possible, so I can refill my well of muses.

Have any recent exhibitions inspired you?

I saw Toyin Ojih Odutola at Jack Shainman Gallery in NYC. Odutola is an artist who works with themes of identity and the sociopolitical concept of skin color through portraiture. I have been following her work for years and was thrilled to see her latest show in person. She creates her portraits by building up layers of ballpoint pen ink, allowing the ink to transform in color and range. Her figures are beautifully rendered and multilayered in terms of content and soul. Upon entering the space, I was stopped in my tracks by her inverted self-portrait – blown away by its subtle glow. That same day, I had started my own inverted self-portrait, so seeing her glowing on the wall made me feel a deep kinship with the work.



Another exhibition that has stayed with me is the inaugural exhibition at the new Met Breuer Museum in NYC titled “Unfinished: Thoughts Left Visible.” The exhibition focuses on the question “when is a work of art finished?”

Comprised of 197 pieces of unfinished works, the show spans 600 years of art history. The unfinished quality of the work allows for a deep look into the process of the artist and reveals previously unseen layers of thought. Some of the work is incomplete due to death or unforeseen circumstances, but the more contemporary end of the spectrum shows artists working with the concept of “non-finto” – intentionally unfinished. Seeing this show gave me profound insight into my own desire to deconstruct the figure.

Abstract painting has arguably been the predominant trend in painting for the past decade until now, when the pendulum seems to be swinging back to figure painting. This is an exciting moment in art

and I’m curious to hear not only your thoughts on figure painting, but also your thoughts on realism. What can you say in defense of realism?

I have had to stand up to harsh scrutiny and defend my affinity for realism. For me, the realistic structure is a natural tool to communicate themes about the body and mind. For the last century, there has existed a strong prejudice against realism – it has been denounced as unoriginal, and simply a copy of nature. The instant communication offered by realism is seen as proof that it must be void of deeper content, and woefully unsophisticated. The readability and narrative quality of academic figuration went out of favor when abstraction offered a portal to an elite way of viewing art, separating itself from the common language. As a culture, we needed this evolution in visual language. The art world gained more liberty to expand the definition of art and its function in the economy

as a commodity. Art has always served as a mirror to culture and this rejection of tradition served a purpose. However, realism never left the social sphere, although the artists who were still attracted to its power were marginalized for decades. It has been suggested that figuration and realism are experiencing a re-birth at the moment – I see it as a resurfacing, being pulled back into view. Gradually, the marginalized are becoming more visible.

What do you love best about being an artist?

My favorite thing about being an artist is the ability to see hidden structures in my environment that otherwise be might be missed. Moments like finding an unintentional color combination that feels charged due to its randomness, or seeing a poetic metaphor in an exchange between strangers. Artists tend to look at the world through the lens of needing inspiration, and if you get lost in that perspective, the world

can feel pretty electric.

What are you working on right now?

This coming October I have a show opening curated by Ivar Zeile based on the last few years of my self-portraiture. Being confronted by the idea of standing in a room lined with only self-portraits has me thinking about what it means to paint the self. I’ve been wondering where the boundary between introspection and self-obsession lies. To paint a self-portrait I think requires deep introspection, but also the ability to detach from the painted image. As I look at this dichotomy, I’m realizing that it’s increasingly difficult for me to dis-associate with the painted self. I’m thinking of tackling this tension by also painting my Doppelgänger. Two years ago, I met someone who I consider to be my true Doppelgänger, I asked her to pose for me and I’ve only painted her once. The overlap between other and self will be interesting to explore.