



Prospect and Refuge

Artist Q&A:

Kate Groobey

David Surman: I have a couple of questions that I'd like to ask each artist in the show and then some more specific ones. The experience of artists has diversified greatly in recent years so it's always intriguing to get a sense of where and how they're working.

The exhibition is inspired by the ideas of Jay Appelton, particularly his observation that our ingrained comprehension of the landscape influences our aesthetic sense. Could you describe your journey to the studio or place in which you make your work, the place itself and your view from that place.

Kate Groobey: I work from home and on my journey to the studio I always pass through the kitchen. I pass coffee cups, a vase filled with cut flowers, a cheese grater and a lemon squeezer - all objects that feature in my current series of work. There is a door in the kitchen that leads into the garage where I make large canvases and costumes. The garage opens up on its south side to a Provençal landscape - blue sky and cypress trees. I make my paperworks in a different room inside where there is no view because I put sheets of Japanese rice paper on the window, mainly to diffuse the light, but I also like the cocooning, safe feeling.

DS: Should a studio be a comforting place or an antagonistic zone with potential artistic hazards? Do you clear away obstructions to make a clear way toward opportunity or do you trap yourself in order to find new intensities?

KG: My fantasy studio is minimal and tidy. The problem is I'm messy by habit, so over time my studio looks like a dump site until one day I start to feel trapped and claustrophobic and tidy it all away.

DS: In your recent work you seem to have settled on a recurring character motif -- a hat-and-shades wearing figure who often appears as a double-act with herself. Can you tell us a bit about this mysterious figure, she's very enigmatic.



KG: The figure in my work is my wife, the writer Jina Khayer. I paint moments in our relationship that have a strong emotional memory. In *There's still life* she holds some cut flowers. Every other week we buy a small bunch of flowers from our local market, either anemones or Persian buttercups, and each time the flower-lady gives Jina a rose for her writing desk, for inspiration. I am touched that the flower-lady never forgets.

We had a very old blunt box cheese grater which took a long time to replace because, as Jina was born and raised in Germany, when it comes to certain things, anything industrial, she swears on the German quality trademark. We couldn't find her favourite brand anywhere in France, then one day she came back from Germany, her suitcase filled with kitchen utensils, including the long awaited cheese grater. There has been a certain joy-in-grating in our kitchen ever since.

DS: You're living in rural France now, painting both inside and outside, experiencing a different context. How has that changed your work?

KG: I moved to the countryside in the south of France in 2020. With Brexit looming, I faced the option of relocating full-time to France or going home to England, so amidst the pandemic I decided for France. Like your protagonist, Jay Appleton, I was born in Leeds. I spent my teens in rural South Yorkshire, so I'm not a stranger to country-life, but this place couldn't be more different. It's where Van Gogh made his sunflowers, Cezanne painted his mountain and Matisse painted his window. It feels like I'm living inside the paintings of the great masters I admired growing up. The luminosity and colours here make the landscape come fiercely alive, it's very special. I have space and light to see what I'm doing, step back and look and see. It's a completely different experience compared with the dark car park where I worked in Paris, or any number of shoebox studios in London. It's also the first time I've been able to spend a lot of time with my paintings. When they're finished I carry them through the kitchen and into the salon and just live with them and look at them every day. I've never done that before, it's a game changer.

DS: After a period of making many video-performance works and smaller watercolour paintings, you've recently returned to working on larger canvases. Your subjects seem to move easily between these different forms, and I was wondering how you thought about your work as a whole at this stage. What drives a burst of songwriting and video-work, or painting at various scales?

KG: It's all different approaches to the same thing, to portray inner emotions. I enjoy experimenting and the proposition of painting coming alive through performance was part of my quest to find a place I can own in painting, but I'm a painter at heart so it always circles back to that. At the moment I'm working on a series of big canvases, the biggest I've made to date, which I am excited



to share later this year in my London solo show at Sim Smith. The different scales I work with are part of the process of bringing my ideas to life. I start with a small pen sketch and then build it up in stages into a large painting or performance. Large-scale work is expensive and time-consuming to make so I plan out the colour compositions in watercolour before taking an idea to canvas.

DS: In your 2020 show *Start Again* at Sim Smith it felt as if you were declaring a return to or renewal of your work as an artist, perhaps your life in general. It had an insistent quality, and I've noticed the work has taken a change in its subjects since then. I was wondering if you could comment on how you saw the period since 2020 in your practice.

KG: I'm happy you feel there is a change because I feel it too. We had a completely new life-reality because of the pandemic, the world we knew disappeared, and it did force a deeper reflection. *Start again* you can read as – think again. I've never been stuck before but *Start again* was a true sticking point for me. It was like a needle stuck on a vinyl record and you could see that stuckness in the show, but when I eventually did come unstuck a lot of painting problems I'd been turning over for years seemed to come unstuck too.

DS: You live with your partner the writer Jina Khayyer -- a painter and writer together in the French countryside. Does the culture of writing and writers influence you? I'm thinking here of your song lyrics that accompany your performances, and the words within the work.

KG: Jina questions everything and constantly articulates the world. Over the years that has helped me better understand what I'm doing and why I'm doing it.

One of the practices I took from observing Jina as a writer was how to take notes. She always disappeared off to scribble something down. When we travelled I was jealous that all Jina needed was a pen and paper, whereas I needed paints, brushes, a palette, a big pad of paper, a table. I realised at some point that all I needed was a pen and paper too. Now I make little sketches with a pen in the moment - in a car, in the kitchen, on a plane. There's something really pure and immediate about it that I like. I first put words onto canvas after I met Jina. It definitely reflects a new psychological landscape formed by Jina's words and also by living for the first time in a place where I don't understand the language. I notice words because I don't understand them, they become opaque like a material.

DS: Thank you for your time in answering these questions!

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