

Black Mirror Interview - 2011

Judith Halberstam: So, I am sitting with Monica Majoli, and we are going to talk about her series of Black Mirror paintings that have been in process since 2008 until the present.

Let me give a little background to these images, when I was writing my book *The Queer Art of Failure*, I realized that we were pursuing a similar project looking at darkness, bleakness, mourning, loss and rupture through different mediums. Monica invited me to come and see the paintings and I did end up writing about them in my book. There is so much that you don't see along with what you do see with these paintings. I was actually really captivated with the distinction between what one's eye can see and what remains impossible to see.

Monica Majoli: Thank you.

JH: So why don't you begin with telling us about what exactly motivated you to paint these images. And then I will prompt you to tell us about the process too.

MM: I really like this idea of you mentioning something being impossible to see because that is so much of what I do. Not just visually but also emotionally and psychologically impossible to see but you can feel something from these paintings. It is almost that there is a disconnection between what you can see and what you cannot see and how that makes you feel. The start of this project occurred after buying a house. Three of the four walls in the master bedroom have large floor to ceiling panels of black mirror that were installed in the 70's. Somehow it's hard to explain the enigma of these mirrors because essentially one reflects into another and it creates a kind cacophony of darkness.

JH: Did you immediately focus on the long tradition that does already exist with black mirror paintings?

MM: I didn't actually know about it, my friend told me about how painters rested their eyes in black mirror in the 17 and 1800's after I bought the house. Then I found out about the relationship it has with the occult. This was information I only gained after starting this project though.

JH: Do you feel somehow subliminally drawn to dark painters already?

MM: Absolutely.

JH: For example, the way that many renaissance paintings have as much black color as anything else in them.

MM: Of course, especially Caravaggio. I'm also interested in the idealization that

is so closely associated with black mirror, a lot of my work is about that.

JH: How did you then move from having a cathexis onto an aesthetic space, to thinking about the space in relation to the self and the disappearance of the self.

MM: I think the experience of being in the room was a resonate thing that was aesthetically gorgeous and compelling. But it's also a psychological and emotional trigger for me. A room where the mirrors give an image back, rather than a reflection. Black mirror seems to absorb the thing it reflects, giving back a half-image. It's otherworldly. The sense of the removal of self automatically occurs.

JH: What I was trying to ask was how do we go from having this great room to doing these drawings. Also what are the differences between the drawings and the paintings here?

MM: The idea of doing a series of painting based on the black mirrors came about as I was photographing myself in them for a painting that I had planned on making for over ten years. It was to be a self-portrait , romantic rather than sexual, that was essentially a metaphorical image addressing the same theme-- the absent lover. After I bought the house I was involved in two brief experiences with beautiful, but inaccessible women. One was particularly painful. I fell into a prolonged depression and the room began to change for me at that point. Rather than finding it titillating, it became symbolic of my internal state. When photographing myself in the mirrors to establish the exact pose for this rather embarrassing self-portrait, I realized that the darkness cast by the mirrors described my feeling about love. The atmosphere created by the mirrors became the embodiment of the absent lover. From that point, I began thinking about those lovers who resonated most strongly as "missing", and then it occurred to me that it would be more complicated and difficult to actually paint those specific women.

The series involves two kind of images in terms of the painted works. The oil paintings which are images of former lovers. I'm also going to integrate lithographic techniques into painted abstract compositions. The reason I've chosen to do this is because my father is a lithographer and also in his seventies. He Italian and lives there, so there is this incredible separation--of actual space, culture and language. So in a way this is about my father in the sense that we don't have a relationship and I don't know him at all. It's a major sense of projecting oneself into the other to create desire, disconnection and absence. Then bringing these things together will obviously bring together ideas of the missing father and how a part of you becomes sealed off from yourself.

JH: So you have made these portraits of ex lovers who have had their photographs taken in the mirror and then that becomes the basis for drawings prints and drawings, is that right? The prints as I understand it are the

abstractions, so it is interesting that the abstractions are somehow related to the father.

MM: Abstraction seems right because the relationship is without form or representation. There are no memories. Each portrait is done one after the other, which is hard, and now I'm pursuing this other avenue, kind of the meta-loss of the father.

JH: *So many things come up there, the first word that comes to my head is masochism. Then the second question is about the relationship between abstraction and masochism versus figuration and masochism.*

MM: That's interesting.

But obviously this is the prevailing mood for the work - anguish, loss and so on. When I talk about your paintings, and I try and give a synopsis of what motivates the whole project, there is this immediate reaction of 'Gosh, Wow! Why would you do that?!' Why would you make paintings of your ex girlfriends first of all, but also why paint her in the dark, why make the painting a representation of the lost object so clearly? You are also torturing yourself in the process because of the emotionality of the subject matter that you have assigned to yourself.

MM: In the dark!

JH: *You are literally trying to sculpt their images in the darkness!*

MM: Yes!

JH: *The whole process is about recreating and then experiencing loss all over again. Can you tell us about the abstractions. These have been hard for me to talk about in the sense that with the figure they can be quite romantic. Some of these figures that we've been looking at can be a half figure rising up from a bed with a head tilted towards the light. Or an outline of a person or an imprint of what the person has left behind. But the abstractions in some way are very cold. I showed them at a lecture once and people had a really hard time knowing what to make of them. You have given them the same name, they are part of a diptych. You are asking your viewer to read them together. How can you help your spectator with that?*

MM: I'm trying to create the same kind of confusion that I felt or feel grappling with the woman and the experience. I'm asking the viewer to experience an irresolvable connection. Which is what it is, I'm trying to put these two things together. I think in your book you put it very well. This sense of it creating an abstraction of the figure and hopefully it gives a sense of representation to the abstraction--the melding that goes on. By using lithography as a base material, I'm giving myself an emotional key for the work.

JH: *You put it very beautifully though in explaining these figures. Of course, it is a very classic thing for an artist to do, to create images of past lovers. To have painting be the place of remembrance but also a place of mourning. On the other hand, it is unusual to try to depersonalize the relation to the other and to make the painting capture loss, memory and disconnection. Perhaps those sensations cannot be tied to the figure and so must be abstracted: they require a different form of representation.*

MM: It's about trying to capture impossibility.

JH: *Yes, there is also a sense of a frame in these images. You also mention this concept of an abyss, and this is what the abstractions try to capture. To create this space where you can't place yourself fully and the boundaries are starting to break down. When I first saw one of the paintings of the figures it was in a gallery on York Street where you had an opening. There were two questions that I had. The first one was that I was wondering what was the source of darkness in these images? Because usually for an image you are looking for a source of light and in this painting the light had been evacuated out of it. I really didn't understand what the set up would have been to create this kind of effect. Also what immediately came to mind was how did you paint this? I know that comes across as a silly technical question in a way but there is something about looking at a dark photo and then transcribing it and translating it. What is the process here?*

MM: Essentially I lighten the image to get more information. then paint it out by making it darker and darker. I suppose there is an essence of neutralizing the image. I'm neutralizing the individuality, reducing the person to a trace. Even the information that can be seen, a nipple for example I want the viewer not to be exactly sure of what they are looking at., if they can trust what they see. You see how her head may rest to the side on her pillow for example. With the painting you actually look at it in various ways, you are forced to move around the image to really be able to gather more information.

JH: *In a way the photograph is a guide, it almost doesn't give you much information. I was speaking to Judie Bamber recently about the portraits of her mother. I was talking to her about how difficult it must be to get her hair right from one image to the next to make sure that you can duplicate features so that we know that we are looking at the same person and so on. She was saying as a painter I'm looking for somewhere where there is a lot of information. With these you are painting out information.*

MM: Exactly, it is a different thing. I try to minimize information. Not just for the viewer, but also myself. It becomes a process of being aware of what the emotion is. The emotion is succinct, it's there and that is what I am more interested in. My decisions are really based on whats happening with the images.

They need to transcend the idea of a portrait.

JH: *Certainly, no one could really be able to say who they are. They are always lost but always about someone that a person wants to remain connected to. You are right, there is a way where they become the same but it is almost more like an abstraction because in the figure because it is hard to pin it to somebody. That is the quality that I really like because the abstraction allows me to go back to the painting and see it also as an abstract. Because I am looking at curves and harsh lines. There is a quality to the darkness which I would think would be difficult to paint. It's mottled.*

MM: There's color, it's never just black. There's warm and cool areas in the darkness, with the subtle variations that can create form. I'm really playing with that. I am also playing with how we see and how we take in an image. I am interested in how the viewer could feel blinded by these images. With so little light, I'm interested in how the eye captures an image or object visually. Parts of this project are about creating a new way of looking at something or someone.

JH: *So you had this desire to go back to this moment of impact and tried to recreate it but realized that you can't.*

MM: This is more about playing the role of the painter to the subject in a different way. Rather than revealing the subject, in a sense you are revealing the relationship between the painter and the subject.

JH: *Or the relationship to the painter to him or herself.*

MM: Which of course comes back to the idea of the mirror.

JH: *Exactly.*