

# Aine Macken, Artist

words by Emily



Aine Macken is an Irish feminist painter who's most recent work is inspired by our reactions to and interactions with visually drenched Western culture, especially in an online capacity. Previously concentrating on self-portraiture (large nude self-portraits) and having experimented with the boundaries between art and pornography, her latest exhibition takes a more severe turn. Here Macken plays with the ethical challenges of passively consuming visual imagery and teases out an awareness of the longstanding and controversial connection between terror and pleasure in images that populate our environment. Her art is very human; the subject matter is bodily and sometimes crude, but Macken paints in a way which has led one or two critics to describe her style as 'girly'. Her new body of work reduces vast and immense emotional moments to painted squares, units of online video stills in loose watercolour, the facial expressions of a person masturbating to orgasm, or someone experiencing extreme grief on a small white tile. Each image is ambiguous: the terror or pleasure is uncertain, and spectators of these reduced moments experience an instance of illness, a critical spark set off by the dubious image, a question regarding the lack of image-consuming ethics:

In painting these images, I am trying to activate a response, a rupture in the form of viewing an image and recognising it as titillating, upsetting, monstrous or otherwise. I am thinking about how I look at images, how I navigate my way through



the day... aimlessly trawling through different screens on my laptop. I am growing up a bit too. I remain spiced with elements of the narcissistic of course, but I believe that gratifying oneself continually can only become tiresome. An element of conscience has elapsed itself into my work where I find myself continuously questioning what is that I can do as a painter, and whether the

exercise of painting is merely, in itself, an act of self gratification!

Macken took images from online porn websites such as beautifulagony.com, an artistically inspired project featuring masturbators shot from the shoulders up. In their new watercoloured form, the faces became blurry expressions of what could be pleasure or pain. Macken began dotting the works with faces of politicians and celebrities to create further uncertainty, a purposeful attempt to increase a sense of confusion within the viewer, but at the same time, perhaps, subconsciously illustrating how images of horror and sex go hand in hand with celebrity and politics in popular culture.

On her website, Macken has written three essays entitled 'Screwtube', 'Painting' and 'Horror' which discuss both the inspiration behind her work and the practical application of her skill in negotiating the elusive relationship between horror and sex. But sex and sexuality are preoccupations that appear in all of Macken's work in various manifestations:

Sexuality has always been pretty central to my work. I am intrigued by perversions and arousals and always have been. I find that there is a certain electricity to the act of looking at an image that can induce arousal, I also enjoy elements of the forbidden, public versions of privacy and how they can be related back to sex. There is something about the orgasm that is so crucial to a break from a monotonous existence. It instigates feelings of love, it brings about life, it can kill you, produces intimacy, it can relieve loneliness, boredom, test your capacities for pain to seek out pleasure, and only lasts a moment. For me, it is one of the only methods of physical play for an adult who is not too keen on football... There is also an element of indulgence to it though that I seem to relate to the pleasurable activity of creating a painting.



The outcome of this particular combination of thought and application can be seen in Macken's finished work; her paintings have an overtly sensual style. Delicate, almost vague watercolour lines and shapes only suggest a face or a figure. On one hand, this effect is an appropriate depiction of the passing moment – it is ungraspable. On the other hand, these washy qualities may have contributed to Macken's work being referred to as 'girly'. Although such comments may have been meant critically, Macken doesn't think girlyness is necessarily a bad thing:

I find girlyness intriguing. I find it to be a performance certainly, and this has led to the series of portraits of ladyboys that I have done in the past, as having viewed them at various cabarets throughout my travels it became clear that they were far more feminine than I could ever be. Saying that my work is girly I find curious, as my current work deals with horror, death, depravity, torture, masochism, vanity and joy, I hardly think that these can be deemed solely girly subject matters. The fact that a large portion of my work makes use of a female subject matter is deliberate, but not necessarily abrasive or aggressive/nonchalant towards a masculine viewer. I am a feminist. I expect every man to be a feminist too. To gender an artwork is to attempt to decipher it, and certainly some of my images play up and make use of this genderisation in order to question how gender can be defined, yet some of my more recent work is a lot darker, with a lot more violence attached both to the subject matter, and the application of the paint itself.

Just as she draws on the connections between her subject matter and the actual process of applying paint to canvas or tile, Macken also aligns painting with indulgence, narcissism and vanity. Personally speaking, this is one of the most interesting concepts to have emerged from discussions with Aine about her work; that narcissism can be empowering and that this new take on narcissism involves the need for a new ethical mode regarding our consumption of imagery:

I think there is a level of guilt attached to the pursuit of narcissism, particularly

*“Looking at what I don't enjoy and considering why that is has been extremely productive for me. Strangely!”*

in a society such as Ireland which champions the humble. The fact that I am secure and confident in that I am an attractive woman has been an issue for me. I am vain. I believe others are too. Well, I hope they are... Of course I have my insecurities, but I have always found it interesting that I address my appearance in conjunction with my work. I choose to do this. What does that say about me? Not only as an artist, but as a woman? For me I believe that masturbation and seeking to bring oneself to orgasm is an activity of self love, and when placing that within an online forum for people to view, it becomes an activity of narcissism... In relation to ethics, I feel that by combining these with images of the horrific, the unthinkable, the torturous, a short circuit occurs, where instances of emotional physical and ethical issues come into play. For me it is a comment on the consistent barrage of commercial abuses, of focuses on beauty magazines, of the desperate struggle for the body beautiful. These paintings seek out beauty in the unconventional, unstaged moments, a pure visceral insatiable beauty, but also a horrendous frightening

voyeuristic consumption of an image.

Macken's latest work brings to bear how powerful our visual experiences can be and how convoluted, experiences that co-exist in both real and virtual realms. Her art

is challenging because it reveals an uncomfortable medley of emotions, pleasure, horror, ecstasy and grief, which our culture attempts to separate but which often co-exist in lived experience:

Each screaming face is a voice of contemplation upon the horrors and ecstasies which exist from moment to moment, and the vitality of being alive, in terms of existing within a space where the opportunity for both extremes could elapse itself at any moment. These instances of sheer emotion are what inspires this monotonous churn through existence, the possibility of something happening<sup>ii</sup>.

#### Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> & <sup>ii</sup> Macken (2009) "Painting" available from [www.ainemacken.com](http://www.ainemacken.com)

