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Just Girly Things: The Works of Roxana Hall



Laughing While Igniting. Roxana Hall, 2020

By MAISON ALLEN

In the series *Laughing While*, Roxana Hall takes feminine joy to all new heights. Hall, a contemporary U.K. based artist, has been working on this oil-on-linen series since 2020, a sister series to earlier series, *Laughing While Conducting* and *Laughing While* (2012-2019). The subjects of these paintings are always women and they are always laughing, euphorically giddy in whatever scenario they're in. Hall's depictions of women laughing, sometimes in an unflattering manner relative to a cackle, seeks to subvert the classic depiction of women in art, weaving the values of Hélène Cixous' *écriture féminine* into the work.

Historically, the women subjects of paintings are often demure and subdued creatures, and they're often painted by men. Think of *Mona Lisa* - one of the most famous portrait subjects in history. What do we notice about her? She is sitting, arms folded in her lap gracefully, and she has that famous, ever-so-delicate, close-mouth smile. Everything about her in the piece - her posture, her facial expression - is meant to be

passive and delicate. Of course, this piece was masterfully created by one of the most influential painters of all time, but it also gives a snapshot into how women are often portrayed in art. More abhorrent depictions of women in art have shown them as victims of violent acts such as rape, completely stripping them of agency or power.

Contradictorily, Hall takes the idea of the demure feminine and completely flips it on its head. The women in her paintings are anything but demure - in fact, one could say they're downright obnoxious. But they're also happy. The women depicted in *Laughing While* are so blissful that they are unaware that they may look unattractive to the male gaze; it's not even on their radar. The concept of *écriture féminine* - a term directly translating to "women's writing" - is an act of radical resistance and self-love, originally meant to encourage women to brave spaces that have historically been co-opted by men. In Hélène Cixous' essay "The Laugh of

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Medusa,” the feminist author emphasizes the importance of women writing about women as a means for creating accurate historical portrayals of the female experience, in addition to writing as a means for women connecting to themselves on a deeper level. In the artist statement for this series, Hall goes on to say that “qualities of radical playfulness, ambiguity and multiplicity are prized” within *écriture féminine* and it is evident that’s what Hall intended with these pieces.

In every painting, there is joy, there is abundance, there is comradeship, and there’s also absurdity. Each painting boasts saturated hues and dramatic shadows. Every woman in every piece is fully rendered so that the viewer can see every ounce of euphoria on her face. Upon first glance, these paintings exemplify the joys of womanhood – walking down the street arm-in-arm with your best friend, for example – but if the viewer is able to unglue their eyes from the enchanting subjects, they will notice the background of each piece tells a story a little bit more sinister and absurd than what initially meets the eye.

In paintings like *Laughing While Perching (a vulturous boredom)*, we see a woman taking up the foreground; she is the picture of youth and femininity as she sits high above the ground on a tree branch, red heels in hand to match her red nail polish and accents on her dress, her head thrown back into an open-mouthed laugh as her blonde bangs sweep across her face. In the immediate surroundings of the woman, it looks like business as usual – below the tree are the green, well-kept lawns in a suburban neighborhood, with patio furniture and cars in driveways. But what’s that in the distance? One of the homes in this idyllic, sleepy neighborhood is engulfed in flames that are seeping out of the windows into our sight. Now taking in the piece as a whole, questions arise about the events that happened just before the scene. *Why is she in a tree? How did the fire start? Did she start it? Why?* Taking into account Hall’s ideas on *écriture féminine* and its need to be playful and ambiguous, it’s no surprise that



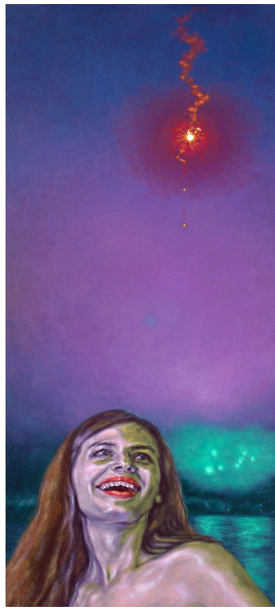
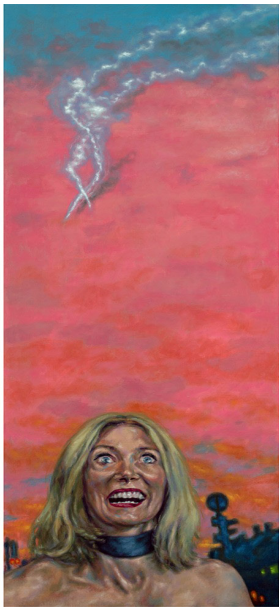
Laughing While Perching (a vulturous boredom), Roxana Hall, 2021

so many questions arise from a painting that, at first glance, seems to celebrate tomboyish behavior as an act of resistance. And while the very unfeminine act of climbing a tree barefoot in a dress is certainly part of the greater picture here, the allusion to our subject committing a crime takes the meaning to a whole new level. In this piece, like many others in the series, Hall depicts women in complete joy while defying gender stereotypes about what a “proper” lady would do, but she also subverts the conventional ideas of womanhood even further by playing up the absurdity and seems to say, “yeah, women can find joy in destruction, lawbreaking or whatever else they want and they don’t care about their perception in society.” In fact, Hall says it best in her artist statement that “the most seemingly innocuous actions can be subversive.” In this painting, climbing a tree as a lady in a dress is supposed to be a wild act of resistance and the arson is just a cherry on top.

Another painting in the series, *Laughing While Corpsing*, perfectly encapsulates the stylistic choices and painting techniques that present themselves in all of Hall’s work, while also playing up the unhinged absurdity of the series. This piece features four distinct panels, each with their own subjects. The commonalities between each panel are the manic expressions on the women’s faces amidst a landscape that is somewhere between a teenage girl’s

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Laughing While Corpsing. Roxana Hall, 2023

dreamscape and a nightmareish hellscape. These women, with their teeth bared and with joy in their eyes, look up into the technicolor skies of their respective scenes to see a violent disaster unfolding above. The bright pinks, purples, and blues, mixed with the impending doom that will soon fall down on our subjects, give the painting a surrealist element - one that, according to Hall, is inspired by the idea of “corpsing” written about by Virginia Woolf (another proprietor of *écriture féminine*) which is when an actor, least ideally one playing a corpse, breaks into unscripted laughter. This idea that these women, all of whom look conventionally unattractive with their mouths agape, wide eyes and dramatic, unflattering lighting, would laugh in the face of their own demise speaks to the spirited joy that exists in womanhood even when others deem it to be inappropriate.

Throughout the entirety of this series, Roxana Hall hits the nail on the head. Not only are her pieces visually striking with their bright, feminine hues and hyper-realistic portraiture that create a feast for the eyes, but they’re also a lesson in “women’s writing,” whatever form that may take, and how when given the opportunity for women to be painted by women, beauty standards and conventional gender roles go out the door to make way for unabashed joy. Hall

begs us to take a closer look at her piece and recognize not only the absurdity of the scene, but the absurdity of these rigid gender roles that, if broken, make women seem crazier than if they set a house on fire.



Laughing While Looting. Roxana Hall, 2021

References

Barolsky, P. (2017). The Art of writing about art. *Notes in the History of Art*, 36(3–4), 256–262.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/90022891>

In this article, author Paul Barolsky gives details about how to properly and artfully talk about art. Barolsky begins the article by explaining that too often in art history texts, authors are focused heavily on being technical and scholarly in their writing that they forget to make it interesting. He goes on to explain that writing about art should be fun because viewing art is supposed to be enjoyable; there's no need to completely sterilize the critique of a piece and remove all emotion from it when art is in fact, a manifestation of emotions. Instead, he offers the example of a piece of art writing by Anne Barriault, an acclaimed art scholar and author of a handbook for the Virginia Museum of Fine Art. The main takeaway from Barolsky's review of Barriault's essay is that it is highly descriptive; she uses vivid adjectives and playful descriptors when discussing art, rather than intellectualizing the human elements of the piece. This essay gives helpful details about what to do and moreover, what not to do when I complete my final critique.

Barriault, A. B. (2017). Piero di cosimo's portrait of a lady. *Notes in the History of Art*, 36(3-4), 123-134.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/90022876>

In this critique, Barriault discusses the 15th century painting, Portrait of a Lady by Piero di Cosimo. This is not a typical critique - as Barriault describes in the foreword - but rather, a deep dive into the multitude of possibilities and interpretations that exist in a piece of art. Barriault goes on to describe the painting with vivid detail, providing context related to the subject's jewelry and wardrobe. Through the descriptions of this piece, the author gives context about what the painting might be in reference to, acting as a sleuth uncovering clues about the subject's veil, shawl, and snakes around her neck to help us draw our own conclusions about what the artist could be saying through the piece. Originally, I chose this piece for this assignment because this author is mentioned by author Paul Barolsky in his essay also used in this annotated bibliography. Barolsky points to Barriault's work as shining examples of how to write about art. With this knowledge, I read this article to seek inspiration for my own critique and, in addition, gained some insightful thoughts on the beauty of ambiguity in art.

Cixous, H., Cohen, K., & Cohen, P. (1976). The laugh of the medusa. *Signs*, 1(4), 875–893.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3173239>

In this essay, feminist author Hélène Cixous aims to empower women to take ownership of their own narratives through writing. Throughout history, women have been silenced by way of omission - omission of their stories, perspectives, and struggles - because they have historically been excluded from the writing space. Cixous' essay acts as an instructional guide for women, encouraging "women to write women," as a means to reclaim the female experience, rather than have it co-opted by men any longer. Cixous describes the act of women writing as not only an opportunity for them to experience pleasure and emotional liberation, but also as a means for being active participants in history by sharing a woman's perspective.

In viewing the series "Laughing While" on Roxana Hall's website, there is a note from the artist detailing how Helen Cixous' term "Écriture féminine," coined in "The Laugh of Medusa," inspired the series of paintings. In order to fully understand Hall's inspiration behind this series of works, I went directly to the source of her inspiration to learn about "Écriture féminine," or, directly translated, "women's writing."

Denson, G. R. (2011, November 11). *From victim to victor: Women turn the representation of rape inside out*. HuffPost. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/facing-the-interior-and-t_b_1073672

This article by G. Roger Denson is part of a seven-part series that examines gender and sexuality throughout art history. In this particular essay, “From Victor to Victor: Women Turn the Representation of Rape Inside Out,” Denson looks at the historical accounts of violence against women being depicted in art. Excluding some notable yet scare outliers, art history is riddled with art made by men depicting the rape of a women. Denson goes on to say that depictions of men violating women in art made by men do not have a ton of tragedy or remorse; rather they depict the assailant as heroic or strong. This is in stark contrast to more modern paintings created in the 20th and 21st century by women like Frida Kahlo, who depict rape as an act of violence and show the damaging effects it has on a person’s mental and physical health.

I was interested in reading this article as research for my critique because I wanted to better understand how women have been represented in art throughout history. Based on prior knowledge and reading for this assignment, I knew women artists were historically banished from creating art, but deeper than that, I wanted to also understand how, with only the perspective of men, women were depicted in these pieces throughout history. Denson’s article gives a brief glimpse into the violent and tragic depictions of women by men that were glorified in their time and even today.

National Gallery of Art. (2023). *Women and art*.

<https://www.nga.gov/learn/teachers/lessons-activities/uncovering-america/women-art.html>

In this essay, available on the National Gallery of Art’s website, the author details the history of women artists and the greater representation and diversity in art that has started to emerge since the 1960s. The author uses the example of the iconoclastic and anonymous art collective known as Guerrilla Girls who use performance art and demonstrations to disrupt the status quo in the art world. They are known for bringing attention to the fact that art institutions are most likely to feature art created by men that is often sexist and/or racist. The author uses this example to parlay into a greater discussion about how women have always created art throughout history but because of misogyny and inequitable power structures, mainstream art history leads us to believe women historically have not been in art spaces.

This essay is useful in helping me reframe my mindset for this assignment. Since my art criticism revolves around a woman artist who paints women, it is important for me to understand the historical context that has kept women on the fringes of the art world and as a result, women who break into the mainstream today often use their platform to highlight these inequalities and experiences. Women creating art is an excellent way for the feminine experience to be documented in history and that’s exactly what painters like Roxana Hall are working to do.