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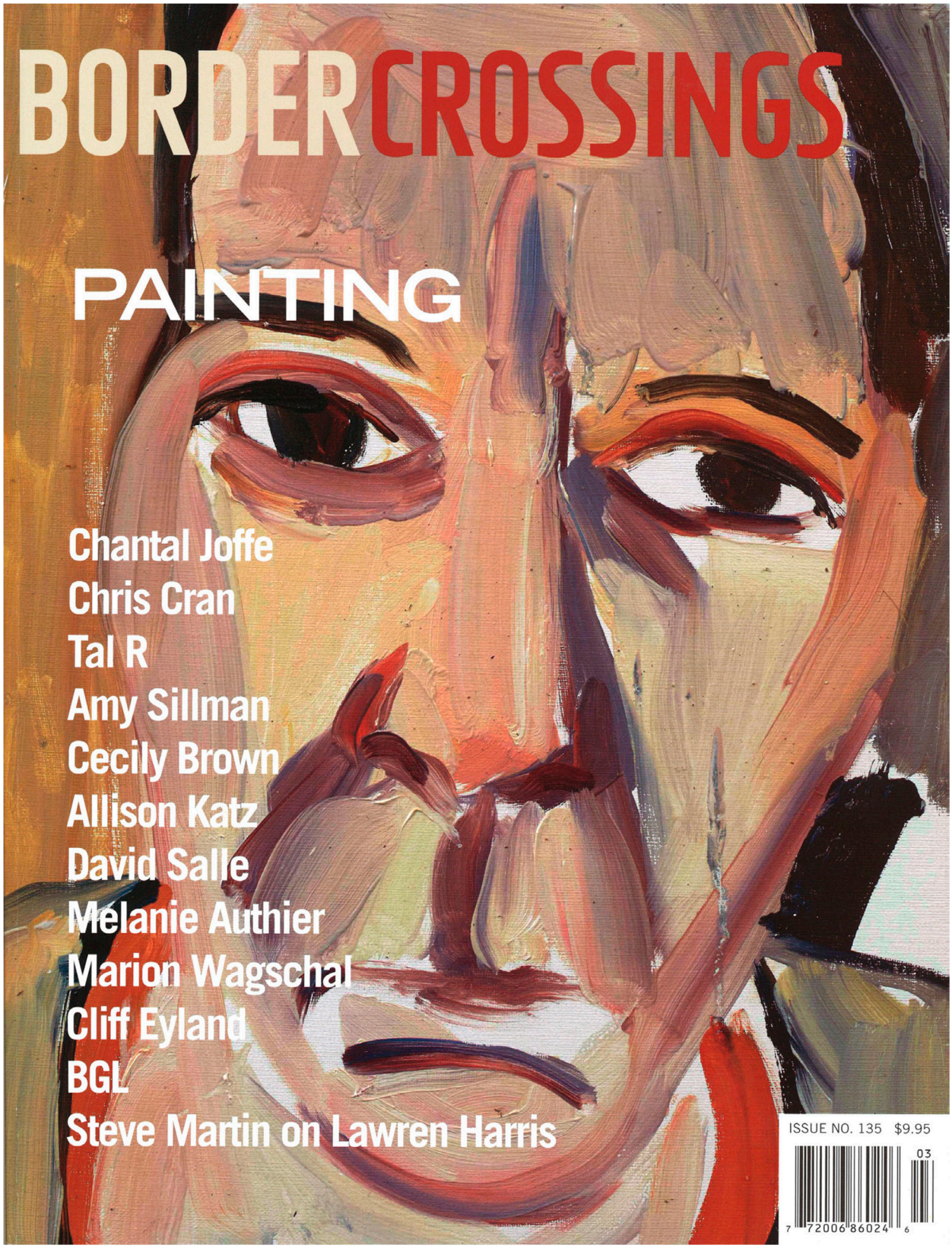

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Night Self-Portrait in a Red Dress, 2014, oil on board, 213 x 153 x 6 cm. Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York.

Painting's Whole Being The Art of **Chantal Joffe**

by Robert Enright

Introduction by Meeka Walsh

In the interview that follows Chantal Joffe didn't speak about Caravaggio as one of the painters at whom she looks; she might have, but she wasn't asked. Reading the interview and hearing her voice in it, I thought of John Berger's writing on Caravaggio and how remarkable it was, how he drew the essential nature of that artist's intentions so clearly, transforming painting to language. Joffe is an engaged reader and makes frequent references to writers she admires. The American poet Emily Dickinson is one, and in the following interview Joffe was asked if she makes tight tonal shifts in her paintings equivalent to the small but significant alterations Dickinson made through the substitution of a single word. Joffe's response was that there are painters who paint in a manner closer to the way Dickinson writes, and she does see in her own work moments that make that connection but added, "it's very hard to describe in the act of painting the way that hard things sit against soft things." Here is one of the places where Berger on Caravaggio came to mind because I think Joffe does get the feeling or sensation on canvas the way Berger gets seeing in words on paper. In *And our faces, my heart, brief as photos* (Pantheon Books, 1984), he wrote, "almost every act of touching which Caravaggio painted has a sexual charge. Even when two different substances (fur on skin, rags and hair, metal and blood) come into contact with one another, their contact becomes an act of touching." Here is Joffe's hard things sitting against soft so that you do know what she wants you to get and feel. "In his painting of a young boy as Cupid, the feather of one of the boy's wing tips touches his own upper thigh with a lover's precision," wrote Berger, and looking, you feel that quill on your skin.

The photographer Harry Callahan, Joffe noted, was able, in his work, to fix the tensions she finds desirable and necessary in art making. In his case it was between the formal quality and the intimacy of his subject, an intimacy she seeks in painting someone as close, for example, as her daughter. In speaking about Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand, two photographers whose work refresh or help her return to painting, she uses language which parallels Berger's writing on Caravaggio. A particular photograph by Garry Winogrand of a woman on a bench provokes in her a "shudder of excitement;" Lee Friedlander's work "gets you back to a night of the slipping glimpse." Berger wrote, about the feather touching the thigh, "that the boy can control his reaction, that he does not allow himself to quiver in response..." and he goes on. Joffe selects certain qualities in artists who use means other than painting—language, photography—to amplify, parallel or even explain in another medium what art making is for her. It is two opposites, or contrast, or tension leading finally to a tentative, maybe even a provisional resolution that is an artwork, a painting. She told *Border Crossings*, "In Dickinson you see it in the cheery, jaunty tone of something set against the darkness of the content. In Callahan it's the formal against the intimate. To me, great art lies in that contrast. In the moment of sharp against soft... it can be as simple as the fat woman painted in thin paint."

Little attention is paid by Joffe to the settings around her self-portraits or her paintings of other people. It's the face or figure, naked or clothed, un-occluded by trappings, that holds her interest. For Caravaggio it was the same. Berger wrote, "In Caravaggio's art, as one might expect, there is no property. A few tools and recipients, chairs and a table. And so around his figures there is little of interest....The impersonal surroundings—like the world outside the window—can be forgotten. The desired body disclosed in the darkness, the darkness which is not a question of the time of day or night but of life as it is on this planet...."

Joffe's consideration of flesh seems not to carry Caravaggio's painted desire so much as it speaks to their shared sense of its vulnerability. Nothing, for Joffe, is as poignant or vulnerable as the mottled blue/red flesh of the Britons dipping with questionable pleasure into the chilly water at the seaside. She sees beauty too, in the way flesh hangs and she delights in its ready accommodation to paint—the drips, the way it flows. It could be extended also to the rich creaminess of the material, and here I think of a painting by Charline von Heyl titled *Frenhoferin*, a checkerboard grid where she sampled a different painted representation of skin in each square. About Caravaggio's painted bodies, Berger wrote this: "Not being innocent, their bodies contain experience. And this means that their sentience can become palpable; on the other side of their skin is a universe. The flesh of the desired body is not a dreamt-of destination, but an immediate point of departure. Their very appearance beckons towards the *implicit*—in the most unfamiliar, carnal sense of that word. Caravaggio, painting them, dreams of their depths."

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Joffe's connection to the humanness of her subjects is evident. She describes as addictively beautiful faces which would fall far short of star status. She looks at them with interest and compassion. She paints, she says, the way she experiences the world and she sees the world as a vulnerable place. And who, here, does she identify as the exemplar of vulnerability? The photographer Diane Arbus because Arbus, she feels, was able to show the world how she saw. Arbus's subjects were the vulnerable and the unlovely and in Arbus's not turning away from presenting them as she saw them, Joffe reads a fearlessness she would wish for herself. That would be the courage to press on with the truth, unmindful of the hurt it might cause. Arbus identified vulnerability; Joffe does too but recognizes it needs to be responded to with tenderness as well as acuity.

"You have not converted a man because you have silenced him," wrote Viscount John Morley, a 19th century British biographer. The American artist Ben Shahn produced a lithograph using that phrase, which apparently adorned the walls in every leftist household in the US during the fraught McCarthy period. Chantal Joffe's mother painted a version of this salutary caution on the footboard of her daughter's childhood bed, perhaps explaining, Joffe thought, her feeling the need to atone in her life, for what deeds it would be difficult to imagine.

The evanescent, missing artist Bas Jan Ader produced a three-and-one-half minute-long film, *I'm Too Sad to Tell You*, in 1971, a silent and ceaselessly weeping self-portrait that sears the memory and remains there like a stain. Chantal Joffe's *Self-Portrait (Weeping Woman)*, 2015, does the same. She describes the act of painting it as self-redemptive. Like Picasso's *Portrait of Dora Maar*, 1937, on which it is based, Joffe's inhabitation is powerfully iconic, massive and unavoidable; you cannot look away. The silvery tear will slide from Joffe's cheek for all time and worry will crease her brow.

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1. ***Naked Self-Portrait with Esme with Her Arm Raised,*** **2014, oil on board, 244.2 x 183.2 x 6 cm. Courtesy Cheim & Read.**

2. ***Naked Self-Portrait with Esme in a Pink Nightshirt,*** **2014, oil on canvas, 244.2 x 183.5 x 3.5 cm. Courtesy Cheim & Read.**

This interview was conducted by phone to the artist's studio in London, UK on June 22, 2015. Chantal Joffe's recent exhibitions include a collaboration called "Friendship Portraits: Chantal Joffe and Ishbel Myerscough" at the National Portrait Gallery in London, UK from June 11 to September 28, 2015 and "Using Walls, Floors, and Ceilings: Chantal Joffe" at the Jewish Museum in New York from May 1 to October 25, 2015.

BORDER CROSSINGS: You went to school in England, originally at Camberwell and then to Glasgow in 1989. Why Glasgow?

CHANTAL JOFFE: I read a magazine article that said they were very interested in life painting and that it was a really good place to paint the figure, which was what I wanted to do. And the atmosphere was right. The Charles Rennie Mackintosh building was purpose-built for an art school and it perfectly caught the light from the north. It is an incredibly beautiful building. I had the kind of feeling when you go into a place and you think, this is just for me, and so that was that. When I'd finished there, I wanted to come back to London and the Royal College was again a situation where I said to myself, God I want to be here. It was a good time to be at the Royal College, Peter Doig was teaching and there were other incredible teachers.

You came back from Glasgow in 1992 when there was a good deal of talk about the death of painting. Was the atmosphere at the Royal College congenial for a figurative painter when painting was regarded as an irrelevant discipline?

I was this pretty naïve person when I arrived, who would try to get models to sit in my space. But the way I was being challenged was quite exciting, so I'd have a tutor saying, are you happy to fit into a group, like Auerbach or Lucian Freud? Those people were still huge heroes to me, but my teachers were saying, was that enough? So I was being pushed constantly to believe in what I believed. I had to go around a lot of different paths to come back to where I'd begun.

What was Doig like as a teacher?

He was amazing, friendly and open and sweet as a person. My friend and I called him "Doig Doig

Doig" because he was so full of enthusiasm and bounce. It was like he had a spring.

"Friendship Portraits," the project you've done with Ishbel Myerscough that is now on exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery in London, is an intriguing one. Is it a conversation through self-portraiture, portraits of one another, and your children?
Yes. I guess it's about the shared and the unshared. Through the years she gave my daughter pictures of herself for every birthday and I gave her kids pictures of them, and we painted each other pregnant. It's so important to have colleagues you can talk to and we speak every day. She lives down the road from my studio and we've never not been friends.

That show indicates the way you use portraiture and self-portraiture as an act of intimacy.
I think the self-portraits are a kind of auto-biographying, if that makes sense. And yes, there is intimacy. I love to read biography and autobiography so in a way, they are my equivalent.

Do you think of them as being courageous?
The last show at Cheim & Read was a bit of a breakthrough because I felt those self-portraits were getting closer to the kind of honesty I want. But I don't ever think in terms of courage. There is a particular painting that I suppose other people think is quite ugly, but I get quite excited by it. It's very brown and I've got my hand on my hip. It felt like a huge step forward because what's hard about self-portraiture is that you're always fighting vanity. When I was about 16 there was all that pouting-into-a hand-held-mirror kind of thing, and however honestly you think you're making yourself, a sort of vanity and prettiness always creeps in. I said that to somebody about an earlier self-portrait and they just about died laughing because they didn't feel I'd made myself look pretty. But I think it does creep in; you make yourself look younger; you make yourself fatter or thinner. So I'm trying to fight my way through all that. In a weird way, I'm after detachment more than intimacy. When you're a painter you always think you'll be better in 10 years but with these works I felt I was painting right in the now.

There were two self-portraits in that show where you have your hand on your hip. When I saw the one with the brown palette, I couldn't help but think of Max Beckmann. His self-portraits have a certain stridency and forwardness and your self-portrait has the same quality.
That's a big compliment because I like Beckmann a lot. Funny enough, it was actually Paula Modersohn-Becker and her way of seeing that I was thinking about a lot before I made the painting.

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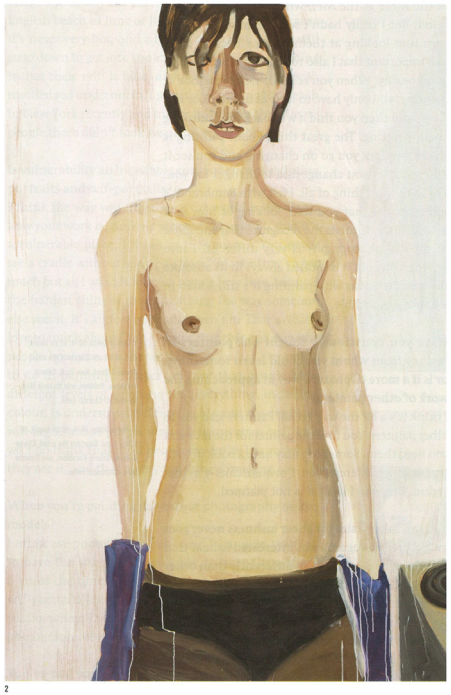
The range of the paintings in "Night Self-Portraits" is quite remarkable. There are two other self-portraits in which you're wearing blue knickers: one is smaller and relatively innocent, and a larger one where you're topless. Even though they were both painted in 2014, they seem like totally different kinds of paintings.
In making them I got quite intoxicated thinking about colour, particularly those ones with blue pants. Inevitably, you start out at one point with the painting and you end up somewhere else. People kept saying they looked like different people, which felt odd because they all felt like aspects of myself. I never intended a narrative, really. The other one that's important to me is the large version of the red dress painting with the very big head. It's called *Night Self-Portrait in a Red Dress*, but another title I had for that was *Night Anxiety* because at night you can't sleep and I was trying to redeem certain aspects of being an anxious person.

1. ***Self-Portrait with Hand on Hip***, 2014, oil on canvas, 183 x 122.5 x 3.5 cm. Courtesy Cheim & Read.

2. ***Topless in Purple Gloves***, 2009, oil on board, 213.4 x 139.7 cm. Courtesy Cheim & Read.

A painting like *The Hard Winter*, 2013, has a quality that makes it seem like a generic painting rather than a specific rendering of your own personal difficulty at a certain point in your life. It looks like a Depression-era painting.



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I suppose in a way you work through thoughts in painting. You paint one and you think, Okay maybe that's expressed, and then in the next one you want to explore something else.

Is that discovery made in the making, rather than through any preconceived notion about what you thought you wanted to do when you began?
It's very hard for me ever to find my way back to my original idea. Before I begin I sometimes write on the wall. But it's hard to talk about what I thought when I began, or even what I thought when I was painting them. It always seems a bit artificial to find your way back because all that change has gone on, through the thinking before, the making and then the aftermath. Maybe some of them have more dramatic moments, like the *Red Dress*, or the painting which I think of as The Banana and the Peach, where my daughter is sort of peachy and I'm naked and like a shrivelly banana. There was also one where I was thinking about *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*.

The *Weeping Woman* self-portrait does have a Picasso quality about it, almost a kind of facturing, where the brush marks add up to a structure as much as they register gestures.
I was very consciously thinking about a *Weeping Woman* portrait in the Tate when I made that painting. Again, it was a question of trying to redeem aspects of your life through painting.

In this conversation you've used the word "redemption" and when you've talked about your work using pornography, you've said your intention was to redeem the lives of the subjects. Is painting an act of redemption for you?
Maybe it's more redemptive for myself than anybody else. But in the making I get excited about ideas of redemption and salvation. I went to Catholic school when I was quite small and though I am not Catholic, maybe they get you. I am interested in questions of good and evil. I should also tell you that my mother painted "You may have silenced me, but you have not converted me" at the end of my bed when I was a child. It seems to explain my sense of needing to atone for things.

What was your initial interest in using pornography as subject matter?
I was at the Royal College and I wanted to paint nude figures. So I was trying to find other source material and another option for myself, rather than having models come in. I actually think it was a veiled desire to paint sex, but I kept selling it to myself as a rather pure idea. The other idea I had at that time came from looking a lot at Quattrocento painting, thinking about how you could paint pornography in that way. I made these small gesso panels which were my equivalent of the altar pieces, where the story is contained in little boxes. When you looked at them you would get a bible story in a series of small pictures, and pornography would work very similarly. You'd get a man coming to the door, a woman would answer, and then they'd hook up. I thought if I could paint pornography in that way, it would slow things down. I knew that if the first thing you saw was the act of sex, then it isn't a painting

any more than it's writing. I wanted them to still be paintings, to be about painting itself, rather than to be just images of sex. A lot of my ideas had to do with that desire.

Why would you have needed a veil? Why not go at it directly?
I think I was quite a shy 22 year old who also wasn't so shy. In painting you always paint what you want to paint. Of course, the paintings you make always say more about you than what you say about them. I was interested in sex and finding out more about it, but I needed to disguise it as some kind of social benefit. I wouldn't have said that then. The social benefit was combined with locating it in a religious way through something like *The Ecstasy of Saint Theresa*. But in the end there was a real joy in painting the women I chose to paint—I loved that they were always tanned with white boobs. I loved flesh and the contrast of skin tone against skin tone. It was also about finding a way to make the paint somehow work with the subject. I had to break it all down and that's actually the most important thing I learnt; it wasn't so much thinking about pornography as it was thinking about subject and paint. Long before, back in Glasgow, me and Ishbel made paintings of ourselves in bed with the same guy. It was all done in a sort of self-deluding way, but we were always interested in Degas and brothels and the way that prostitutes had been used as models. That has a big history in painting.

I thought a painter who would have been a model for you would have been Suzanne Valadon, because she was a woman who also painted women. There were such interesting women artists among the French painters, including Marie Laurencin.
I never was interested in Marie Laurencin but on the other hand I love Berthe Morisot. I think she's an amazing painter and I love the paintings that Manet did of her. I find that whole relationship so interesting. And I'm very interested in Mary Cassatt. But Valadon isn't someone I've looked at or thought very hard about. It's odd when I think about it, and I will look at her again. Different people jump up at different times in your life.

I'm always interested in who painters look at because of the way that other painting is generative. When I looked at *Emma*, the attenuation of the neck made me think of Modigliani.
There are painters you get a bit swamped by. I love Modigliani very much and, in a funny way, I have to stop myself. Looking at painting is for me the biggest pleasure. I spent the whole month in New York in the Met and got excited by Vermeer in a way that I never had before. I know he's an obvious painter to look at but for some reason I hadn't understood him. What I realized was his empathy for those lonely, trapped women in those funny Dutch houses. And there's the ugly one, the middle of the three at the Met, who just hovers in your mind. But I really hadn't seen them and I hadn't seen him looking at them looking back at us. It was important that I also recognized it was okay to paint beauty. When you're really stuck you look at painting; you only have to look at Bonnard or van Gogh and then you find a way back into thinking about painting. The great thing about painting is that it goes on: you go on changing and you see it differently as you change and it changes for you. That's the best thing of all. I felt with Rembrandt's self-portraits that you were looking at him as if he was there. It made me recognize that the sense of time in photography is very different. I love photography but it is located always in its absolute moment, whereas with painting it's still a man in a hat. It's incredible.

Have you consciously sought out painters in history from whom you could learn something, or is it a more haphazard way of approaching the work of other painters?
I think it's a bit the way I read. Painters lead you to other painters. You find the painter for the moment you need them. Somebody may have a book in their studio which interests you. I'm quite thief-y in that regard. But who I look at is not planned.

You say, "the desire for sheer lushness never goes away." In that regard I was interested to hear that you think of the paintings differently than other people. Do you have a different notion of what constitutes beauty?
That claim would be a bit grandiose. I remember when I was a student I painted a whole series of a friend who had that incredible red-hair-people skin. She was just beautiful with her red eyelashes against pale blue eyes. Even thinking of it now gives me goose pimples. But she wasn't a woman that anyone else in the street might necessarily have said was beautiful. I do find people very addictively beautiful. Just people as a thing.

The way you handle paint says something, not just about the act of painting, but also about the act of perceiving what you're painting. That also connects with the notion of beauty.
Well, it's trying to realize skin as paint because paint is a great thing with which to make skin. In those self-portraits it was a question of letting it flow down the canvas. I find it beautiful the way flesh hangs, like if you've got a hanging fat tummy. I find so many aspects of flesh very beautiful.

1. *Nancy Spero*, 2014, oil on board, 46 x 38 x 1 cm. Courtesy the artist, Cheim & Read, New York, Galerie Forsblom, Helsinki, and Victoria Miro, London. © Chantal Joffe.

2. *Diane Arbus*, 2014, oil on board, 40 x 30 x 1 cm. Courtesy the artist, Cheim & Read, Galerie Forsblom, and Victoria Miro. © Chantal Joffe.

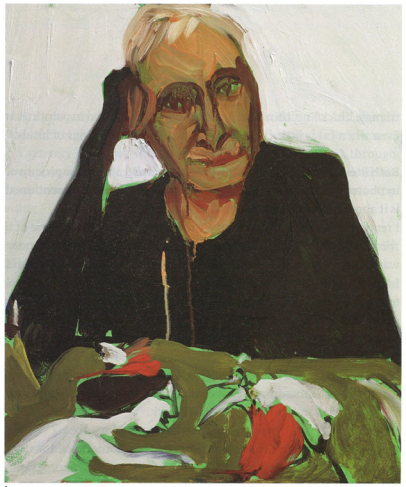
I've always thought that British painters have a different way of looking at and rendering flesh than anyone else in the world.
There's probably no more touching a scene than an English beach in June or July. It doesn't matter because it's never very hot, and a bunch of English people will strip down to get into the icy cold sea. What's touching is that their skin is blue, dark blue or light blue, with mottled red underneath. I remember coming to a beach in New York recently and maybe because of the climate people there didn't look nearly as vulnerable.

Is vulnerability an inevitable consequence of painting portraits and self-portraits?
I think the way you experience the world is inevitably how your work is. And my sense of the world is that it's a vulnerable place. I think of that quote, "You never see a cradle without seeing a grave." Maybe that's a bit much but all I want is to show people how I see, because the hardest thing is to see anything the way someone else sees it. It's almost impossible, isn't it? That's what I love so much about Diane Arbus; that thing of showing people how you see the world. That's what I'm trying to do in painting. I never get over that people have different levels of sight and that everything, including colour, is understood differently. Me and my daughter will argue about purple versus brown versus red. And yet I do think that most people recognize beauty when they see it, and that is very touching somehow.

When you're painting do you use photography or live models?
I often use photography but I find I get quite irritated to have the sitter, so I don't like to have them there a lot of the time. I do sometimes paint from life. My self-portraits are a mixture; some are from life in the studio, where I've got a big mirror, and some are from photographs of me.

You've said you have no imagination whatsoever for invention and that you only paint what is there.
I think I have an imagination which reveals itself in the paintings, but only in the way they're painted, rather than in what they're of. I can't invent a chair. I have to have a photograph or it has to be in the studio.

You don't seem interested in the way that painting drifts towards abstraction. There is one painting, *Self-Portrait in a Bra*, 2013, where there are two black squares above you and you're sitting on a blue/black sofa, so the ground of the painting seems vaguely abstract, but the subject matter isn't.
When I'm actually painting I'm thinking abstractly, in the sense that if I'm painting pattern, then I'm thinking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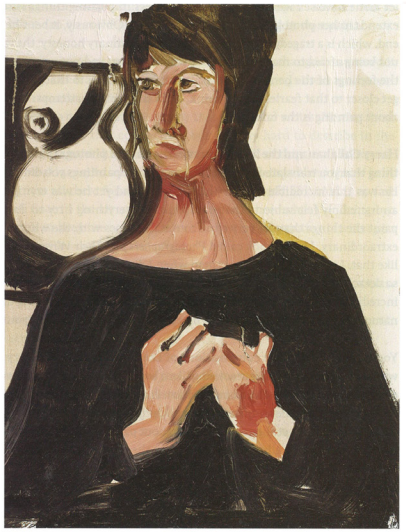
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triangle, thick line, thin line. But I'm not very interested in paintings without figures. Even when I was little there are notebooks full of drawings of heads.

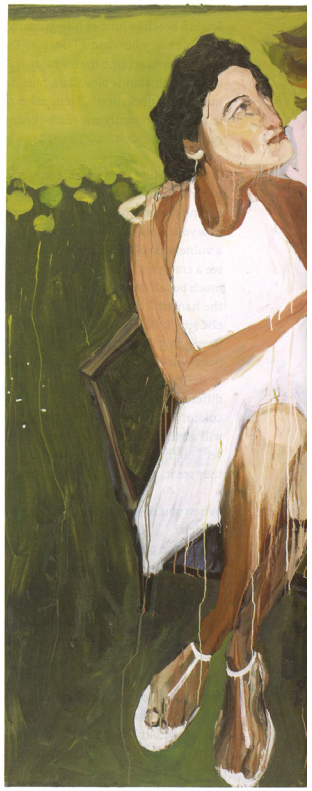
Both literature and photography feed your work. I want to pick up on your interest in photography and specifically Diane Arbus, whom you mentioned earlier. What is it about her work that you find so compelling?
I remember seeing her images in a slide talk—particularly the one of the couple with the hot dogs in Central Park—and it was like recognizing a memory of my own. It was an incredible feeling and then I ran and got the book. At first I didn't know what I was responding to. She describes it best when she says that everybody has the need to look one way but they come out looking another way and that's what she calls the gap between intention and effect. I don't think I could have articulated that at the time. Somebody said to me that she was amoral, that she was photographing freaks. I never saw that; I saw them as extraordinary and close to the way I looked myself. Even though they're not anything like how I paint. The way I have of loving people's work is to somehow do a version of what they do, so in college I painted myself as the identical twins in New Jersey. It didn't work.

Arbus got very deeply involved in the world she photographed. As an extreme example, she ended up having sex with the subject in her 1970 photograph called *Mexican dwarf in his hotel room, NYC*.
I'm in awe of that because I could barely ask someone if I could photograph them, let alone have sex with them. Her fearlessness in pushing things is something that extends to her photography and her mind itself. Obviously, it bent her in two in the end, which is a tragedy. But for me, it's her extraordinary honesty: the way she saw and not being afraid to make a picture of what she saw, and not worrying about hurting the feelings of the person she saw. I'm always aspiring to that. I'm always trying to get closer to that fearlessness, I think, and failing in the attempt. But the good thing about painting is the failing.

Harry Callahan and the lifelong passion he had for photographing his wife is something that you translated into the intimacy of the paintings you did of your daughter.
He was this incredible formal photographer and yet he was trying to photograph an incredibly felt subject. That encapsulates everything I try to do in painting; to paint the things that are very close to me. The ones with the wife and daughter are extraordinary. I had a book called *Photographers and Their Wives* or something awful like that. I just couldn't believe them when I discovered them. In one way, they were so detached, but then the daughter is asleep next to the mum and there's something incredibly intimate about it at the same time. It's like he's bending against his own natural impulses. It's always great when you somehow do the thing you can't do easily.

You were moved by the compositions of Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand. I would have thought that something like a brushstroke or a gesture would have that effect. But to be moved by a composition is a highly formal way of talking.
A photograph like the women on the bench by Garry Winogrand makes me shudder with excitement. I get them out to think about painting sometimes. And Lee Friedlander gets you back to a night of the slipping glimpse. They're so like the way we look and see but what they do is done in a second.

You've said one of the things you liked about Egon Schiele is that he "needed to make his drawings." Need is a visceral, physical desire to do something, as if you have no choice in the matter. Is that how painting functions for you?



Anne Sexton with Joy, 2008, oil on board, 244 x 183 cm. Courtesy the artist, Cheim & Read, and Victoria Miro. © Chantal Joffe.

Yes. In the most ridiculous way, I can't think properly without doing it. And even if the paintings are bad, the thinking I'm doing is worth the painting, and I can't do one without the other. I get very depressed if I don't paint because I can't think through the things that have happened to me. It's my whole being. I don't want to sound too emotional, but it's my whole existence. I'm not trying to be melodramatic, but I stop being if I stop painting.

Literature interests you as well. Your reading ranges from Wallace Stegner to Emily Dickinson. Has Stegner specifically moved you to make a painting?
Yes. I couldn't believe him. Crossing to Safety made me want to make a painting. There's something about that moment when the two couples go on the boat trip that is hard to put into words. Sometimes it's very obvious to me how writing works to make paintings; at other times, it's much more roundabout. There's also his Pullitzer Prize winning novel, Angle of Repose. I always want to call it Angel of Repose, because that's how I read it. It has to do with a relationship to landscape and tragedy. I'm also very keen on Canadian writing; it has a very particular quality. Maybe it comes at things from a different angle.

What was it about Emily Dickinson that you found so appealing?
Again, it's a bit like the thing I love in Harry Callahan. It's putting two opposites together. In Dickinson you see it in the cheery, jaunty tone of something set against the darkness of the content, like "Because I could not stop for Death - / He kindly stopped for me." In Callahan it's the formal against the intimate. To me, great art lies in that contrast. In that moment of sharp against soft. In painting it happens all over and in all kinds of ways, but it can be as simple as the fat woman painted in thin paint.

Emily Dickinson's poems were so concentrated that when she changed one word it could completely change the trajectory and meaning of the poem. Is there an equivalent for that kind of dramatic shift in painting?
I think there are people who paint closer to the way that Dickinson writes. For me, there are lots of moments that make that connection, but it's very hard to describe in the act of painting the way that hard things sit against soft things, or drips or thicknesses. For me, painting is a working up to a kind of frenzy, a bit like being able to throw balls in the air and keep them all there for a second. A bit like a dervish; if I wind it up fast enough, and they all float in the air and then I don't even know what I'm doing but I've got enough control to keep the colours clean. The best bit of painting is when you get to that point.

I'm interested in the way you allow the drips to exist on the surface of the canvas. Why is that?
It doesn't interest me per se, but it's what happens in that kind of frenzied moment, and to clean it up seems artificial.

So you accept what the act of painting gives you. In that sense you don't revise.
I do if I don't like the faces because they're obscured. It's important that they be able to be seen. There's a kind of thingness, a solidity, like when you're making a dress in paint, that when it arrives at that point, you leave it.

Where does your interest in fashion come from? I know that you've gone backstage. Did you then develop paintings from the photographs you took?
I did, but I don't particularly like fashion. I find the quality of fashion photography useful and interesting and I like stripes and things. I like the images from *Vogue* and the weird contrast you get between very

young women and those clothes. But I wouldn't say I was interested in fashion.

But when you go backstage you're not frisky the way Ellen von Unwerth is. The work that comes out of that isn't as naughty as she would render things.
I felt very guilty when I went backstage. They were so young and oddly they were very protective of their nudity I couldn't be the Diane Arbus I would have liked to have been. They were young girls and they were vulnerable. It felt wrong.

***Woman Reclining*, an oil on board painting you did in 2002, has a certain physical drama about it. The woman, who's wearing a striped dress, has one hand on her head and the other between her legs. It's possible she is experiencing one of those ecstatic St. Theresa moments. Is she post-orgasmic?**
I suppose if I have an imagination that's where it comes in. It's funny, I only can see where they're going when I look back at painting. Even in talking about that recent show in New York, I find it very hard to see where they're headed.

You have made an amazing portrait of Anne Sexton and her daughter. Did you do that painting because of your admiration for Sexton as a poet?
Yes, I love Anne Sexton. And, of course, I know about her children and their difficult lives and her difficult life. Also, her sandals are just like the sandals my mom used to wear, so it was both a painting about her and about mothers and daughters.

You have a gift for rendering. The Jessica Chastain cover you did for *W* is very compelling. You take a famous person, remake her, and present her in a way that I sense she's never imagined herself.
She was very touching and unguarded. She had a rawness to her, to her bones. She made it easy for me. I would have found it harder with someone like Charlize Theron. Jessica was new to her extreme fame and a bit tentative and maybe awkward with it. She was pleased to be asked. All that vulnerability made it easy to find a way in.

One of the painters who comes up often in the writing about your work is Alice Neel. Is she a painter who has interested you in the past?
She's a great painter whom I admire but I never think our work is alike. I never quite understand the comparison because what she does always comes from life and that seems important. We do have a common subject and we're both women, but her work is much more drawn and you can see the extraordinary quality to her line. She's a real drawer who uses a blue line in all her pictures; whereas I don't draw and then paint.

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The critic Neal Brown talks about your paintings having an "apparently flippant style." Do you think of them in that way?
I don't really think of them. It's a really bad idea to start thinking of yourself from the outside in. I'm sometimes funny but I'm not often flippant. I take the world seriously and I take painting very seriously.

***Brunette by the Sea* is a startling painting. The way the arms are stacked, the configuration of the hands and the way they conjoin and contrast with the linearity of the back and side of the body, which have this cinnamon-torte palette. It's such a distinct portrait.**
Often I'll start by thinking about the poignancy of the body, or about what the figure is thinking. Then it will lift away from that and be about things: the figure against the sea, or the eyes against the face, or the hair against the skin. I suppose in that sense they do become fairly abstract. But the best quote about painting is from Guston, when he talks about the room being full of people when you begin and then one by one, they leave. That's a bit how painting is for me. You have all these rather constructed ideas and eventually the people leave and you're actually painting somewhere else.

It's interesting when you talk about what the figure is thinking. You have said that in painting them, you get to live the lives of your subjects.

1. Installation view, Cheim & Read. Image courtesy Cheim & Read.

2. *Self-Portrait in a Bra and Blue Knickers*, 2014, oil on canvas, 65.1 x 54 x 2.5 cm. Courtesy Cheim & Read.

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