

Chris Aerfeldt

Story Lisa Omagari

FOR CONTEMPORARY ARTIST Chris Aerfeldt, painting is a compulsive way of dealing with the world. In her works, women with physical oddities engage in peculiar acts, perhaps her way of exposing her favour towards the 'unfashionable'. These larger-than-life scale women are products of contemporary society yet do not exist within it. Disguised self-portraits function as markers of cross-cultural identity and personal history.

In the past, Aerfeldt's practice has been as much about making sense of the world as it has been about empowering women. More recently, however, the artist has adopted a socio-political stance. Her latest body of work critiques the stale fabric of Europe's degenerate economy. What has become paramount in Aerfeldt's work is the individual's struggle to survive in a time of global crises. The plight and glorification of the female has been replaced with a frightening preview into apocalyptic visions of the end of the world.

Can you tell me about some of your artistic and creative influences? What drives you to paint, both in the practical sense of the medium and conceptually or intellectually?

I paint as a way of processing and dealing with my experience of the world. It's a compulsion. A particular problem or issue that is annoying me, sometimes on a subconscious level, will usually be dealt with in a painting. Most painters are lured by a love of 'paint' as a material and I am no exception. It may not be the most attention grabbing of today's media but I find it to be one of the most articulate.

As for influences in artistic terms, I look to contemporary photographers from both the art and fashion worlds – people like Cindy Sherman, Steven Meisel and Miles Aldridge. For technique, El Greco is my main influence right now – his marks, colours and distortions from 400 years ago look perfectly contemporary.

Your paintings are made in a richly traditional mode and stylistically reference historical periods yet present contemporary subject matter – a fusion of the Baroque with fashion magazines. In a world obsessed with speed and immediacy, you use oil paints in an Old Masters fashion to present your contemporary ideas. What effect does this have for you and your paintings?

The term Old Master says a lot about how our society regards this form of representation – 'old' as in outdated and 'master' meaning male expert. It is simply a method of depicting form in space that closely resembles the way that we see. I am attracted to art forms that could be seen to be unfashionable. What we reject is very telling.





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For me, there is something comforting about this mode of representational image making, like putting on an old shoe. We hear a familiar language and can listen to what is being said without having to focus on the 'grammar'. I believe there is more potential to be subversive within a form that is loaded with historical baggage than with a brand new technology. There are more rules to twist and manipulate.

You use the figure in your pictures, and mostly the female figure, placed in surreal places, engaged in peculiar acts, or displaying physical oddities. What role does the figure play in your pictures? Are the figures real or imagined, or a combination of both?

I project myself onto my characters, so the works could be seen as disguised self-portraits. There is always a twist or humorous quirk to my women – they are actually meant to be more funny than serious.

The paintings begin as thumbnail sketches of imagined scenarios. I then use models and props to set up the scene, taking a series of reference photos. Virtually every image of a woman published in a magazine today has undergone digital surgery, so I subject my photos to similar 'corrections' but push and pull them in less palatable directions. The finished painting bears only a vague resemblance to my source image.

And what about scale – you paint physically large canvases but also place the figure in disproportion to its surrounds and dominating most of the composition. How important is the size and scale of your painting, and why?

I want to empower my women, so size is everything. I deliberately paint the figures considerably larger than life size so that they dwarf the viewer. If small scale they would feel far more benign.

In literature and mythology, giants are almost always male, whereas giant women are hardly mentioned and feel like an aberration. I enjoy upturning these conventions. Some of the rare accounts of female giants are in Norse and Baltic folklore, part of my cultural heritage. The Norse giants' roles and identities revolve around nature. Fire giants, mountain giants and frost giants have influenced my latest works.

Australian-born of Estonian descent, you moved to London after finishing art school in Adelaide and completed a Masters at Chelsea College of Art before moving to Montpellier in southern France where you now live and work. How have these moves affected your work or the subjects and characters in your paintings?

Before arriving in London in 2007 on a Samstag scholarship I was painting images of ceramic figurines superimposed onto backgrounds sourced from Old Master paintings. My work totally changed by the end of that year. During visits to the Wallace Collection and The National Gallery I was drawn to 17th century Dutch paintings of women engaged in 'women's work' and began to produce contemporary adaptations of these scenes. These were my first giant women.



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Now in France, being able to make multiple visits to art museums (I make day trips to the Louvre, for example) and slowly absorb information, has enabled me to research historical painting methods and focus on particular artists. I've now begun to incorporate what I've learned into my work. Before, as a tourist, I felt compelled to cram in as many museums as possible.

Your solo exhibition with Helen Gory Galerie at the Melbourne Art Fair investigates the plight of the individual in times of global crisis. To what extent do you insert humanity's experiences of struggle and survival into a painting?

Here in Europe one can't escape being bombarded with increasingly troubling economic news and apocalyptic predictions of the 'end of the world as we know it'. Global crises inevitably lead to individual crises, and it is the individual struggle that I am interested in.

In the current series of paintings harsh landscapes serve as a metaphor for physical struggle and survival. They also mirror a characters' internal emotional state that may not otherwise be evident. I have invented somewhat playful (and futile) survival strategies. A silver heart necklace doubles as a shield, a retro-style telephone is adapted for outdoor communication, new sources of lighting are proposed, and kitchenware is transformed into weapons for self-defence. ■

Chris Aerfeldt is represented by Helen Gory Galerie, Melbourne.
www.helengory.com

EXHIBITION
Melbourne Art Fair
1 to 5 Aug
Helen Gory Galerie, Stand C47
www.melbournartfair.com

01 Photograph: Marc Lafon
02 If you are experiencing, 2012, oil on linen, 130 x 190cm
03 Pretend its the very last time, 2012, oil on linen, 130 x 162cm
04 Are you tired of living with feelings of suffering, 2011, oil on linen, 140 x 120cm
Images courtesy the artist and Helen Gory Galerie, Melbourne