

# BEAUTIFUL BIZARRE

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# MARY JANE ANSELL

PEACE BIRD

[maryjaneansell.com](http://maryjaneansell.com) // interview by Andrea Kovacic



**left**  
*Naissance I*, 2019  
 Oil on aluminium, 24" x 20"

**right**  
*Passiflora II*, 2021  
 Oil on aluminium, 15" x 15"

**opposite page, top left**  
*Passiflora I*, 2021  
 Oil on aluminium, 15" x 15"

**opposite page, top right**  
*Papaver*, 2021  
 Oil on aluminium, 12" x 12"

**opposite page, bottom**  
*Lamina II*, 2020  
 Oil on aluminium, 12" x 12"

**previous spread**  
*Asteria (The Lost Star)*, 2019  
 Oil on aluminium, 12" x 18"



Sweet liberty, a freedom we fight for but never receive – like a mirage on the horizon that disappears when dusk settles and the flags are lowered to half-mast. Mary Jane Ansell, based in the United Kingdom, is an oil painter known for her female portraiture that evokes sentimentalities of peace and power but also loss and surrender. This conflict becomes most perceptible in her paintings that display women dressed in military regalia, covered in medieval armour, or swathed in the royal blue, red and white of the British flag. The images seem to ask, "Are we victorious?" Perhaps not when the battles rage on and on.

There has always been the immortalisation of men in battle. Think of the marble statues in local parks, the grand tapestries hanging in castles, the old masters on display in the world's most glamorous art galleries. Women have not been visualised the same way in art history, especially during wartime. Mary Jane comments on this gendered dichotomy by subverting the narrative, clothing women in costumes not traditionally made for them. It speaks to the absence of women's rights in armed conflicts and the lack of battles fought and won in their honour.

But Mary Jane's work may also be partly interpreted as a memoriam to the growth in women's liberty over time, with subtle references to figures like Joan of Arc as well as more contemporary advances in women's political independence. Moreover, her paintings inspire a sense of soft regality through the composition of women in their bare strength, wisdom, and beauty. There is also a serenity to their features, as if they can weather all storms. This idea of endurance and survival, which is part of the female experience, is at the heart of Mary Jane's art-making. In this interview, she shares more about her painting practice and the history that inspires her work.

"THE NOTION OF FREEDOM HAS BECOME SO CORRUPTED BY POLITICAL ENDS; IT'S VIRTUALLY MEANINGLESS RIGHT NOW"



HI MARY JANE, HOW ARE YOU AND WHAT DOES IT FEEL LIKE TO BE ENTERING 2022?

Like a kite dancing in a hurricane. Oh no, wait, sorry – I've just watched the new Bond film and that line has stuck in my head. It rather covers it though, doesn't it?!

BRIEFLY DESCRIBE YOUR WORLD TO OUR READERS. INTRODUCE YOUR LIFESTYLE.

About five years ago, my musician partner and I moved to a hillside in a remote area of North Wales in the UK with our two black rescue cats. We're surrounded by rolling hills, big skies and, currently at least, distant views of snow-capped peaks. After 26 years of living in the bustling seaside city of Brighton, it is the polar opposite of life in the middle of a thriving creative community, but it is stunningly beautiful here and it means we can make as much mess and noise in our respective studios as we like with no distractions!

CAN YOU THINK OF ONE SPECIAL THING THAT HAS EMERGED OUT OF LOCKDOWNS?

Like so many other people through the pandemic, I've found an incredible comfort in, and deepened connection with, nature. As shelves emptied in supermarkets, we started growing our own produce. There was literally something primal in the drive to provide our own food, but it soon became much more about the pleasure of tending this garden. I've always loved flowers, the beauty and scent of them and the art they've inspired throughout



top right  
*Liberty Sleeping*, 2017  
Oil on aluminium, 48" x 32"

bottom left  
*Invincible III*, 2019  
Oil on aluminium, 23.5" x 15"

opposite page  
*Fortitude*, 2019  
Oil on aluminium, 31.5" x 23.5"



history. I started to grow more and more until they took up most of the garden. I started to wonder if I should start a small flower farm! It brought us so much joy and seeing the increase in insects and birds was an added wonderful benefit. My favourite Dutch flower paintings inspired what I grew and in turn those flowers inspired my work. Truly a circle of life!

**HOW HAS YOUR ART PRACTICE CONNECTED YOU WITH WOMEN AND WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNT FROM THOSE CONNECTIONS?**

In so very many ways. My work, inevitably, comes directly from my experience of being a woman, and as I've gotten older, I've realised how much that becomes a conversation with other women in a deep and often intuitive way. On a personal level, I've found some of my closest and dearest friends through my work or a love of theirs. From the encouragement of other women artists in group shows put on together early in my career, to the

women collectors who have supported me over many years, to the women who sit for me, and to online friendships – though I may not always get a chance to meet in person, these can be just as meaningful and important.

**SEVERAL OF YOUR PAINTINGS ARE INSPIRED BY THE RENAISSANCE. TALK US THROUGH THIS HOMAGE TO THE ARTISTIC PAST.**

As lockdown deepened, I struggled to keep any sort of focus and routine in the studio. Ironically, it was spending so much time in the garden that brought me back to my work. The garden literally gave me a rebirth of ideas – my own little Renaissance! But it also felt so apt to be looking at that period because, of course, the Renaissance in Europe emerged from a very dark time historically, coming hard on the heels of the Black Death plague in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Aside from the glories of its masterpieces, which will always be inspirational to me, it feels very fitting to pay homage to an era defined by the triumph of human spirit and endeavour after such a devastating time.

**WHAT DOES THE TERM "FREEDOM" EVOKE FOR YOU?**

I wish I could answer this question differently, but the notion of freedom has become so corrupted by political ends; it's virtually meaningless right now. Populist leaders around the world have found the concept of freedom to be an extremely powerful call to arms, and by convincing people that theirs is under threat, they've been able to bring in policies that actually reduce the very freedoms they claim to protect. One of the most disturbing by-products of this has been a fundamental undermining of scientific knowledge. As we face a perfect storm of some of the greatest challenges mankind has ever faced, this deliberate undermining for political gain is more disturbing than I can express.



**left**  
*Animalia*, 2020  
Oil on aluminium, 21" x 21"

**top right**  
*Antheia*, 2020  
Oil on aluminium, 21" x 21"

**bottom right**  
*Floralia*, 2019  
Oil on aluminium, 24" x 24"

**opposite page, left**  
*Naissance II*, 2020  
Oil on aluminium, 22" x 22"

**opposite page, right**  
*Beauty And Valour*, 2021  
Oil on aluminium, 12" x 12"



WORKS LIKE *LIBERTY SLEEPING* AND *ASTERIA (THE LOST STAR)* DEPICT WOMEN IN MILITARY REGALIA. HISTORICALLY, WAR IS GENDERED. WHY THEN HAVE YOU CLOTHED THESE WOMEN IN ROYAL BATTLE CRIMSON?

Women's experience of war is so often underplayed and if, like me, you grew up as an aspiring artist, walking through the vast corridors and great halls of museums and palaces around Europe, feeling dwarfed by enormous canvasses depicting the history of the world in battles and coronations almost exclusively populated by men, you might start to wonder where on earth the women were, too. I couldn't help but question this odd asymmetry and so when I saw Delacroix's *Liberty Leading The People* with its central character personifying Liberty in flesh and blood female form, it was really formative for me. My *Liberty* series features women in military uniform similarly taking on that symbolic role as an

agent of change, but I've also used her to explore wider ideas around country, patriotism, and personal relationships.

*Asteria* is another reference to the Brexit campaign. I was born in 1972 and have lived the whole of my life identifying as European, and so Britain's departure from the European Union profoundly affected me. '*The Lost Star*' refers to the constellation of stars in the European flag and to those who fail to recognise what they have lost.

DO YOU HAVE ANY THOUGHTS ON THE WAYS IN WHICH WOMEN HAVE HISTORICALLY BEEN USED IN PROPAGANDA FOR MILITARY CAMPAIGNS?

Absolutely! Certainly, in the UK and USA the Second World War brought about a huge change in the jobs women were able to do. Images like Rosie the Riveter became icons of female empowerment calling women to the



war effort. For many, it was the first time they had been able to work at all outside the home, and in roles that society had to that point been unwilling to see them undertake, bringing about some substantial changes in gender roles.

#### THE UNICORN AND THE LION. WHAT IS THE NARRATIVE BEHIND *FORTITUDE*?

*Fortitude* was inspired by the Brexit referendum of 2016. I was struck by the swagger and pomposity of many of the key players and put in mind of the swagger portraits of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Century but rather my character, like her *Liberty* counterpart, plays with subversions of gender roles and holds a pose displaying her nobility – in the face of adversity – her banner behind simply the scarlet colour of warning signs. She's holding an antler, one of nature's weapons, and wearing a breastplate as if preparing for battle ahead. On her armour is the Saint George's Cross of England along with the rampant lion and the unicorn – a reference made frequently in the media at the time to the mythical nature of the promises made by Brexit campaigners.



"THE IDEA OF ENDURANCE AND SURVIVAL, WHICH IS PART OF THE FEMALE EXPERIENCE, IS AT THE HEART OF MARY JANE'S ARTMAKING"



#### THE COLOUR RED IS RECURRENT IN MUCH OF YOUR WORK. IS THIS CURATION OR COINCIDENCE?

You know I think you could make the case that red is the most important colour in all of art history. From the red ochres of cave paintings in Lascaux to the cardinal reds of Papal robes and stately scarlet of Royalty and ceremonial costume, to Caravaggio's crimson swathes of fabric and the Pre-Raphaelites obsession with the russet hair of their beloved muses, Turner's fiery red suns, Matisse's red dancers, Rothko's red colour fields and Warhol's Tomato red Campbell Soup cans. Symbolic of love, danger, power, and passion, of all the colours the human eye can detect it from the farthest distance away. We physically respond to it making us hungrier, feel warmer, and our hearts beat faster.

"MY FAVOURITE DUTCH FLOWER  
PAINTINGS INSPIRED WHAT I  
GREW AND IN TURN THOSE  
FLOWERS INSPIRED MY WORK.  
TRULY A CIRCLE OF LIFE"



HOW DO YOU PLAN AND PREPARE A SCENE? DO YOU TAKE PHOTOS, SKETCH, VISUALISE, OR DOES IT COME TOGETHER MORE ORGANICALLY?

It's really a combination of all of that. The ideas come first, they can come from anywhere but a really fertile time for me is when I'm reading. If I'm stuck with a thread of an idea, getting lost in a great painting is often the answer – most effectively when I can have a dialogue with that painting in person – that's another reason I struggled with my work routine in lockdown, when gallery visits weren't possible! As the concept forms, I'll note down a few words, or very roughly sketch out a thumbnail of the idea in a really basic way – just to lock it in, then once I've sourced the costume and props and worked out the lighting and finally got my model in the studio, the idea comes to life. I'll take hundreds of photographs, usually selecting aspects from a combination of them, bringing all the pieces together alongside other elements that I might bring in later.



INTERESTINGLY, YOU PAINT OIL ON ALUMINIUM PANELS. HOW WERE YOU INTRODUCED TO THIS METHOD AND WHY HAVE YOU CHOSEN IT OVER MORE COMMONLY USED MATERIALS?

I've been painting on aluminium composite panels since around 2005 when I was commissioned to make a portrait for a family in Myanmar where the humidity was regularly 85%. That level of moisture is going to ruin works on most supports. So, after a bit of research, I reached out to the conservation department at Tate Modern – they have been using aluminium panels as a support of their collection for years and recommended that I try it. Initially, I mounted linen canvas to it but soon discovered that by priming and painting on it direct gave me an almost enamel like surface which I love, it also lets the brush flow so smoothly enabling the finest detail and you can use it in so many ways – plus it's tough, light, and relatively inexpensive which is always a bonus!

OIL PAINTING IS A TRADITIONAL YET CHALLENGING ART. WHAT MAIN TECHNIQUES DO YOU USE TO EXECUTE YOUR SOFT AND DEWY PORTRAITS?

I've been working with oils for so long now I actually find other mediums much trickier. Oils are so forgiving in the sense that I'll often take advantage of the fact that with oils you have the option to construct your painting in so many ways. I'll generally start a painting in an indirect manner, with a light graphite or charcoal sketch onto a light grey toned gessoed panel. Once that's complete, I will sand my drawing slightly to remove an excess pigment and wipe it over with a lint free cloth. Then, only using a little low-odour solvent, I'll generally wash in an imprimatura. In addition, and especially in some areas with a particularly tricky detail or shadow, I'll use a wipe out method to which is great for modelling form quickly and defining lighter areas right away. Once that layer is dry, I'll build up a series of full colour layers, finishing some broader passages in one or two further passes, or for higher detail areas I'll relish spending several more layers refining with ever softer brushes, softly scumbling and glazing until I have the effect I'm after.



**WHAT'S NEXT FOR MARY JANE ANSELL AND WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FORWARD TO IN 2022?**

In June 2022, I'm really excited to be part of the Contemporary British Portrait Painters Exhibition, held at Downstairs Brixton (London, UK). There will be around 50 of the UK's best portrait painters, including multiple BP Portrait Award prize winners all exhibiting for the first time together in one place. I'm also really looking forward to giving a painting workshop in Tuscany from 2 - 8<sup>th</sup> October 2022 with Art Escape Italy.

**EXHIBITIONS:**

GROUP - March 2022: *The New Romantics*  
Arcadia Contemporary, New York, NY, USA

GROUP - April 2022: Showcase of New Works  
Fairfax Gallery, Royal Tunbridge Wells, UK

GROUP - June 2022: *Contemporary British Portrait Painters*  
Downstairs Brixton, London, UK

GROUP - November 2022: *Halcyon Days*  
A Beautiful Bizarre curated exhibition  
Modern Eden Gallery, San Francisco, CA, USA

**this page**

*Naissance III*, 2021  
Oil on aluminium, 22" x 22"

**opposite page, left**

*Lenia*, 2019  
Oil on canvas, 16" x 16"

**opposite page, right**

*Eurosa*, 2021  
Oil on aluminium, 12" x 12"