

**this page**  
*The Garden Of Earthly Delights*, 2017  
Oil on canvas, 90 cm x 60 cm

**opposite page**  
*Temptation*, 2022  
Oil on canvas, 100 cm x 70 cm







# AGNIESZKA NIENARTOWICZ

## TATTOOED SECRETS AND BELIEFS

[agnieszkanienartowicz.com](http://agnieszkanienartowicz.com) // words by Matthew Burgos

In Agnieszka Nienartowicz's artistic realm, secrets lie behind her subjects' backs, underneath their dresses, inked and ingrained into their skin like tattoos. The Polish artist employs women in their utmost sophistication as the subjects of her paintings. Take *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (2017), her recreation of Hieronymus Bosch's artwork of the same title, where Agnieszka borrows the centre panel of Bosch's triptych, repaints the depiction of human fate and the concepts of sin, paradise, and hell behind a woman's back, and cuts the dress to look like a waterfall, an echo of humanity's chaos. Using the added details, the storyline of the original painting shifts as Agnieszka toys with metaphors and layered elements, establishing her contemporary presence in the historical artworks.

Before sowing her artistic style from the roots of art history, Agnieszka's fondness for the creative industry grew within her household. Agnieszka was raised by parents who graduated in Polish philology, and her mother led cultural meetings and curated gatherings for the revered Polish figures such as Tadeusz Różewicz, dubbed as one of the greatest contemporary Polish poets, and Olga Tokarczuk, a Nobel Prize winner Polish writer, while her father worked as a journalist at a local newspaper, writing long-form stories on current events and even wrote a novel titled *Plac Czarownic* ("Witches Square"). Purveyors of their daughter's creative influences, Agnieszka's parents fostered her cultural development by taking her to theatres, museums, and galleries to witness various forms of art, and



by cultivating her reading skills in literature, thanks to the collection of books in different genres nestling on their home's shelves.

Piecing together everything she picked up from her earliest memories in art, Agnieszka forged her own path in understanding the depth of her style. She studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk and Wrocław and learned a great deal from the works of the Great Masters, not only by studying their backstories and the underlying themes but also by adapting their techniques and perspectives to immerse herself into their way of thinking. "When I was a student, my boyfriend and I travelled all over Europe and visited all the most important museums and galleries. We did not have much money, but I had such a desire to see the Great Painters' works in person that we just packed our backpacks and hitch-hiked to Paris or London. It shaped me and my artistic style. At some point, I felt that I had already soaked in too much of the old ages and I needed to shake off the dust of the Old Masters. I do not go to museums that much anymore. Today, I often choose to visit galleries with contemporary exhibitions," she says.

The way Agnieszka paints resembles meeting a stranger and having the desire to peel back the layers of their stories and personalities. The women in her artworks exude grace and elegance with their physique and posture while hiding the fact that they treasure secrets only the fortunate ones can uncover. She places



women in the light of intimacy, exposes their painted backs to her viewers, adds darkened areas on the side to let her artworks shine, and invites anyone who gazes at her paintings to halt their tracks and scrutinise her eye for detail. She may be reproducing the style of esteemed artworks of the past, but she also injects her personal voice into the context. Agnieszka uses no digital techniques during her creative process, just patience in oils to emulate the images of the paintings she refers to from scratch. She sits down in her studio and spends hours perfecting the strokes as if the masters from whom she draws her influences are incarnate within her, a mentor meeting their mentee and passing on their knowledge.

**left**  
*Saving The Princess*, 2022  
Oil on canvas, 90 cm x 60 cm

**right**  
*Immaculata*, 2020  
Oil on canvas, 100 cm x 65 cm

**opposite page, left**  
*The Unveiling*, 2021  
Oil on canvas, 100 cm x 70 cm

**opposite page, right**  
*The Triumph Of Death*, 2020  
Oil on canvas, 100 cm x 70 cm







Katsushika Hokusai painted *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* in Prussian Blue, a depiction of the force of nature and the fragility of humans to fight the innate prowess of Mother Earth. In Agnieszka's eyes, she draws the tsunami waves of *The Great Wave* (2018) on the back of a woman wearing fur clothing, her braided hair dangling over the claw-like tips of the water's ripples. She embodies the force of nature and withstands tribulations and trials regardless of their weight and size, a defiance of the original concept of the painting. Agnieszka consumes the classics both for the air of timelessness and for an infinite source of new discoveries the paintings inspire within her. "Many artists of the past centuries had perfectly mastered their craft, and their works give me so much excitement. You can stare at these works for hours and always find something new. At the same time, these paintings seem a bit dusty and covered with a patina of time. I am in this moment where I look for modern twists to incorporate into the old classics," she says.



"RELIGION'S  
TRACES, MARKS,  
AND SCARS  
ARE INDELIBLE,  
JUST LIKE  
TATTOOS"

---

Religious themes and biblical references also step inside Agnieszka's sacred ground. Growing up in a Catholic household and country, religion is ingrained in her identity and runs through her artistic veins. Yet her experiences with Catholicism show how personal choices alter the way one perceives faith, religion, and beliefs. "As a teenager and a young person until my mid-20s, I was very much in touch with the Catholic religion and was deeply immersed in the Catholic faith, which later transitioned into the Protestant Charismatic Christian movement. After that period, I walked away from religion and what I had grown to learn. Today, as an atheist, I see how much religion and my upbringing have left their marks on me. Religion's traces, marks, and scars are indelible, just like tattoos," she says.



"AGNIESZKA MAY BE REPRODUCING THE STYLE OF ESTEEMED ARTWORKS OF THE PAST, BUT SHE ALSO INJECTS HER PERSONAL VOICE INTO THE CONTEXT"



**left**  
*Celestial Bodies*, 2020  
Oil on canvas, 70 cm x 50 cm

**right**  
*The Last Judgment*, 2021  
Oil on canvas, 120 cm x 80 cm

**opposite page, left**  
*The Great Wave*, 2018  
Oil on canvas, 80 cm x 55 cm

**opposite page, top right**  
*A Beautiful World*, 2021  
Oil on canvas, 100 cm x 70 cm

**opposite page, bottom right**  
*Mary Magdalene's Tears*, 2021  
Oil on canvas, 90 cm x 65 cm

Agnieszka interprets *Immaculata* (2020) by dressing up the woman in a Renaissance-style black gown, but with an inverted lachrymiform hole at the back. Inside the cut, angels surround Mary with the infant Jesus in the style of an Old Master's Immaculate Conception, wearing a deep purple robe and holding Jesus in her hands to present to the world. However Mary shuts her eyes to the celebratory commotion around her, wearing a solemn expression on her face as if already aware of her future grief and her son's gruesome death.

Another image of Mary appears in *The Unveiling* (2021), but this time her head tilts as she wears her two-tier golden crown. The sun has risen and shines brightly behind her, her sombre look wrestles with the joy her environment elicits. Mary gazes below her and rests her hands on top of her chest. She seems to be on the verge of crying but holds her tears in as she braves her emotions. Agnieszka insets the painting inside the silky green dress of a woman with her head in profile. Cloaked in the dark, viewers can still see how the woman's eyes are downcast even while she is holding her head high, reflecting the emotions of the tattooed painting on her back. The



Polish artist made the woman look as if she was lowering the zip on her dress, revealing more of the image of Mary, and her own pain and joy at a time of vulnerability.

Agnieszka understands the permanence of tattoos, the way they mark the skin and linger there either to reflect a meaningful story for the wearer, adorn the body with a beautiful design, or both. When asked if she has any tattoos, the artist says she does not have any. "I do not think I will ever decide to get one. I have no reason to do this. I do not want to define myself, and I want to always have the door open to change. Tattoos are permanent and stay on our skin for the rest of our lives, I would say it is an extreme declaration of belief. I like tattoos and how they look, but I do not think I would ever choose to have such a seal on me." Instead of reclining and feeling the prick of the needle into her skin, the Polish artist chooses to be the tattoo artist herself. She grips her brush with confidence and inks the women with their

rightful stories and secrets. Whether she touches on religion, history, or psychology, Agnieszka Nienartowicz adds a new layer to appreciate in her already emotionally charged paintings.

#### EXHIBITION:

GROUP - March 2023: *Secret Longings*  
A Beautiful Bizarre Magazine curated exhibition  
Corey Helford Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, USA

