



Margaret Carrigan, "Polychromatic Clairvoyance", *Blouin Modern Painters*, May 2017.



POLYCHROMATIC CLAIRVOYANCE

MIRA DANCY'S PAINTINGS EXPRESS
A TIMELESS—AND TIMELY—ENERGY
IN TECHNICOLOR HUES

BY MARGARET CARRIGAN

OPPOSITE: MIRA DANCY



Mira Dancy in her studio with one of her latest works, *Herfume//Her Truth*, 2017.

“I’VE BEEN TOTALLY OBSESSED with this one since January, when everything happened,” Mira Dancy says excitedly from a swivel-chair perch in her Brooklyn studio, on a visit in February, as she looks toward a then in-process painting, unofficially titled *Herfume//Her Truth*. She doesn’t offer any further details as to what she means by “everything,” but she doesn’t need to. Certain landmark events of January 2017 played out on the world stage for all to see, namely the installment of Donald Trump—renowned for his degrading behavior against women, among other marginalized demographics—in the Oval Office. Of even larger note was the swift public display of dissatisfaction with the new leader of the free world, which was exemplified by the global Women’s March that took place the day after the inauguration. In her attempt to reckon with these political developments, Dancy—whose oeuvre has long revolved around colorful and confrontational representations of the nude female body—turned once again to the canvas.

At a commanding 10 feet tall, *Herfume//Her Truth*—now on view in Dancy’s most recent show at Chapter NY gallery, which runs through June 2, portrays a standing woman, her body in a three-quarter view with her right arm powerfully extended toward the sky. Outlined against a largely black background in deep pinks and purples, vibrant teals, and electrifying neon yellow, the woman is imperious; waves of color emanate down the left side of the canvas from her outstretched hand. She stares sternly past the viewer, as if she sees something more pressing further afield.

Her Fever Fume, 2016. Acrylic on canvas, 64 x 58 in.



MIRA DANCY AND NIGHT GALLERY, LOS ANGELES

“WOMEN ARE SO VISIBLE IN OUR CULTURE, AND THEY’RE SO OFTEN SELLING SOMETHING—A PRODUCT OR AN IDEAL.”

“This image has been in my mind for a while, but it never seemed like quite the right moment—until now,” Dancy says. The figure is based on the iconic painting *La Verité*, 1870, by Jules Joseph Lefebvre, which the artist saw when she last visited Paris’s Musée D’Orsay. Struck by its imagery of a nude woman striding forth, holding a lantern high, she immediately made a drawing of it and painted from that. Creating *Her Truth*, however, has been a punishing experience, according to the artist. “I wanted it to impart this sense that it was time for a fight, which is why I liked the strong vertical energy. When I started it, I felt like it had this Statue of Liberty quality. But then it started to look like Melania Trump to me, which I found frustrating. I don’t see her anymore—but she’s in there.”

The ability to embody multiple aspects of femininity has always been a strength of the artist’s work. Her aesthetic, which mingles a bright, Lisa Frank-like rainbow of colors with sexy, inky blacks, and often incorporates neon light installations, has a film noir feel to it. Indeed, she sees her paintings as tableaux



ABOVE: Installation view of Dancy’s 2015 exhibition, “Yes,” at Chapter NY.



LEFT: *Aries Red Moon Calendar*, 2014. Acrylic on canvas, 66 x 55 in.

“I FEEL LIKE I’M COMMUNICATING WITH SOMEONE ELSE IN THE ROOM WHEN I’M WORKING; IT’S LIKE A SUMMONING.”

Installation view of “FUTURE WOMAN// remake me,” 2017, at the Yuz Museum in Shanghai.



or scenes through which her female characters move. As a cinematic genre, film noir relegates women to two roles: mute Madonna or femme fatale. Dancy, however, asks her subjects to contain both of these identities and then some. She draws on the grand tradition of nude painting hewn over the course of centuries by mostly male artists like Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, Lefebvre, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (and the list goes on). Yet Dancy’s women are in full possession of themselves; as *New York Times* critic Roberta Smith remarked in a review of Dancy’s 2015 show, titled “Yes,” at Chapter NY, “It reflects an artist giving herself permission to look back to German Expressionism while setting her sights on female nudes who don’t have time for the male gaze.”

The gaze may not limit Dancy’s subjects, but the artist certainly doesn’t sugarcoat the pain of patriarchy. The “Herfume” series—which *Her Truth* continues—riffs on jargony advertising language. “Women are so visible in our culture, and they’re so often selling something—a product or an ideal. I started thinking about perfume ads and whatnot, like how these products are meant to make you more womanly,” Dancy says. The title of *Herfume Perfume*, 2014, conflates the idea of femininity with an aroma; womanhood becomes something intangible yet consumable.

The feminine as commodity is a theme that permeates the artist’s work. In keeping

with her interest in advertising, many of her paintings, like *Red Garden//Pink Repose*, 2016, are large in scale and billboard-esque. She began incorporating neon installations into her practice to further underscore a woman’s marketability: Neon is most commonly experienced in delis or shops, from simple “open” signs to brand advertisements. Dancy notes that neon signage is also a staple at strip clubs, further compounding the saleable qualities of the female form. “The neon is meant to invite you—to lure you.” It’s literally a bright front to something figuratively darker inside.

Darkness, however, is what gives Dancy’s imagery its potency. The artist believes there is a certain trauma to being a woman because it requires having to locate oneself between two selves: the woman you think you are and the woman historically male-dominated society says you should be. This prompts a psychological strain that isn’t easily expressed through language, which is why Dancy turned to visual expression. “People have read my work as ‘joyous,’” she says, miming air quotes. “But when they say that, I think, ‘oh no, I’m doing it wrong!’” There is something celebratory about the vivid, brazen flesh of Dancy’s subjects, who are frequently set amidst foliage. But this energy is not necessarily benign; it’s more like the frequency for potential and the power that imparts. “Yes, of course I want to celebrate femininity. But it’s not all fucking good. A lot of it is really scary.”

The naked woman in a landscape trope immediately recalls the tale of Eve in the Garden of Eden—ostensibly one of the oldest and scariest stories of all time. Eve’s Original Sin, tempting Adam to eat the forbidden fruit, forced her and her partner to be cast out of paradise and brought shame and pain on all of humanity forever—or so the story goes. For Dancy, the women of her paintings are archetypal, ancient, even otherworldly, and yet ultimately imperfect, like Eve. “I want to open the door to myth, to connect with something greater than this present moment. For me, the idea of time and image are related,” the artist says. She describes the power of images as ruptures in narrative time. “There’s a power in seeing something, even if it’s only a flash, for a moment. They can awaken; they can assault. They can change you. They can stick in your mind long after you’ve seen them.”

Given the shadowy, feminine mystique of much of Dancy’s work, it comes as no surprise that it’s often described as magical, witchy, or even goth. She takes no issue with this assessment, remarking simply, “Magic is an interesting thing.” Within the past couple of years, the artist has taken to doing preparatory drawings, which she believes helped her develop the identities of the women that emerge in her work. Before she paints, she lays out all of her drawings on the floor around her, as if to commune with these characters. She likens the process to reading tarot cards: The drawings provide a

MIRA DANCY AND THE YUZ MUSEUM, SHANGHAI

MIRA DANCY, NIGHT GALLERY, AND CHAPTER NY



Isis, 2015. Acrylic on canvas, 66 x 55 in.



Red Garden//Pink Repose, 2016.
Acrylic on canvas,
66 x 120 in.

meditative structure that requires interpretation. Reading them necessitates that you learn the age-old rules of the game but, in time, one develops a subjective decoding system and certain images begin to carry more import.

Some of her work makes a more direct reference to the magical, like the astrologically titled *Aries Red Moon Calendar*, 2014, or her “Psychic” series. Dancy doesn’t claim to be psychic—at least not about anything useful, she jokes—but she’s interested in how clairvoyance relates to painting. “I think to be psychic is just to be awake, aware, and available.” Resistant to the idea that an artist’s work is just a reflection of their life, Dancy prefers to think of her role as artist like that of a medium. “Sure, there’s some of me in my paintings, but I’m just a channel for all these other things that come out in them.” For the artist, painting is a way of harnessing energy and bringing it back to the world in a new way. “I feel like I’m communicating with someone else in the room when I’m working; it’s like a summoning.”

The energies Dancy channels into her painting shine through in her Day-Glo palette and sweeping brush strokes; her work is stimulating, almost overwhelming in person. Looking at *Herfume//Her Truth*, it’s evident that the zeitgeist of Trump’s anxious America is pulsing through the artist’s hand. It’s darker than a lot of her previous paintings, and the figure is less languid, more active—her outstretched arm demands the viewer stand at attention. “She’s still revealing herself to me,” Dancy says. “Is she subserviently saluting? Is she leading a charge? Is she casting a spell?” Whatever she’s doing, it’s not just symbolic. She’s awake, aware, and ready for action. MP