Tapestry of identity: In conversation with Joline Kwakkenbos

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Photo by Joline Kwakkenbos
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CULTURE

Stepping into the home and studio of Dutch painter Joline Kwakkenbos, one is instantly witness, if only for a moment, to a delicate tapestry of her artistic domain. Art, as in life, is a convergence of experience woven into the fabric of an artist's being, and as such, her walls stand adorned with vibrant tapestries, meticulously crafted by her grandmother, Oma, a testament to generations of the artist's wisdom flows, furniture, and the soft garments she wears. Every surface, every crevice, every particle of air bears her signature, rendering a true artist's abode. The Dutch landscape, with its flat meadows and quaint villages, served as the backdrop of Kwakkenbos' upbringing. A conservative environment coupled with the liberating power of creativity shaped her artistic style from a young age, transcending the mere act of dressing to become a profound form of her artistic inclinations blossomed in the simplicity and serenity of nature. Kwakkenbos' creative endeavours began in fashion design, where her love for making garments evolved into a passion for crafting textiles and ultimately, painting. The tactile nature of fabric and the intricate worn therein served as a catalyst for her self-expression. The transformative power of a garment, particularly historical ones, acts as a medium for Kwakkenbos to explore the many faces of her individuality. Queerness also lies deep at Kwakkenbos' core, but rather than exploring queerness as a theme, she sees it as a natural mode of her artistic expression. Inspired by media, intimate moments, and the vibrant tapestry of contemporary life, her work delves into the fluidity of identity, a harmonious dialogue with queer individuals throughout history, resonating with the community's struggles. Kwakkenbos, deliberate in her paint strokes, gentle and precise with her words, and generous in her grace and hospitality, invites us to explore her history, creative process, and identity through a reflective Q&A.

Aaron Mitchell: How has your background in fashion design influenced your approach to painting, especially in the realm of self-portraiture?

Joline Kwakkenbos: In a way it certainly was. My work and studies in fashion design was a totally different kind of expression for me than painting. Although I love making garments, I was more focused on the design process, the conceptual ideas behind the garment and less focused on the execution, details and material. Over the years, my love for those special garments continued to grow and I started collecting them. In the strength of these garments lie characters that I explore in my self-portraits. In doing so, I am able to find a diverse authenticity in a world that is becoming increasingly universal.

AM: Can you share how your queer identity informs or inspires your artwork, particularly in the context of your portraits?

JK: I think all the work I make naturally qualifies with my queer identity because it is made by me. At times, I feel my queer identity more strongly in presence and it can even inspire me. This may be the case when I am making a portrait of someone who identifies as queer. My work is also related to the queer community but it may also be through the intimacy I experience with others or the beauty of free expression in clothing. When I feel inspired by being queer, I incorporate it into my work, for me it's one of the greatest sources of power to be able to express myself and feel connected to queer people from history and the beautiful peopleround me.

AM: Are there specific themes or messages you aim to convey through your work and how has this evolved over the course of your artistic journey?

JK: In my working process, I do not consciously work with themes. I try to think as little as possible about what I want to paint and instead let intuition do its work. Being surprised by what may arise is part of the process. Although I do not consciously work with themes, I feel that my work in painting I see an ongoing search, to find a way to express myself and give a place to beautiful and difficult feelings. I feel a lot of injustice has been done to women in painting, how they were used as objects and how women artists were treated. I feel a strong need to represent beautiful women artists because of their gender. I feel an opportunity to put both in a new context, as a reaction, to be allowed to decide for myself what my naked and clothed body means to me and because I can and do take my freedom as an artist.

AM: In what ways do you see your Dutch heritage influencing your artistic style or choice of subjects in your paintings?

JK: Well, I grew up in a small farming village near Utrecht. There I had few references to the art world but I felt the need to escape within my fantasy so I started drawing. I grew up in a typical Dutch village, with lots of cows and flat meadows. For a child, it was a playground with lots of nature. I notice now how much it meant to me to grow up in such an environment. There were not many things going on over there so I got to know my own power to fantasise and create. Although I felt very free, I also felt welcomed there, growing up in a small Dutch village is as big a part of my identity as my sexuality.

AM: As a woman in the arts, have you faced any unique challenges or triumphs, and how do these experiences shape the narratives within your paintings?

JK: For almost a year now, I have been researching female painters in history who use themselves as subjects in their artistic work, for personal, social or political reasons. Jennifer Higgie's book The Art Of Being Female, has been a great inspiration for me. In the process of researching itself, I have come to realise even more consciously that I am inseparably connected to history. I am fortunately not confronted with the challenges women faced in previous centuries but I feel connected to it. It is so inspiring to see how many women still achieved success or choose a life for art, despite all the setbacks. This is a huge motivation to keep going and I am therefore grateful to be a woman and to love women!

AM: How do you navigate the balance between personal expression in your work and creating art that resonates with a broader audience?

JK: In my studio, I work in a way that is intimate. I love the being alone, together with my painting. I feel connected to my painting and I feel free to express myself and give a place to beautiful and difficult feelings and for me that is what painting is all about. The moment the artworks have this intimacy and up in a new environment, for instance a gallery or in someone's home, I feel a mix of feelings: I am grateful that this allows me to invite others into the intimacy with myself but it also hurts sometimes because it breaks up the working process, it feels like an end, like a final moment. I feel very free in my studio and I feel very free with an audience during an exhibition, only in my studio or during the work process do I feel like an artist.

AM: Are there particular emotions or moods you find yourself consistently exploring in your work, and if so, what drives you to these themes?

JK: Amazement, wonder, frustration, sadness, anger, joy, happiness and ecstasy!

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