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*Kirsten Glass interviewed by Sarah Turner, Keiron Phelan on Henri-Georges Clouzot's Inferno
Jamie Holman on if....plus Kate Bush, Vashti Bunyan, Anselm Kiefer and more...*



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NIGHT SHIFT

Kirsten Glass talks to filmmaker Sarah Turner about how sacred geometry has taken her paintings in an exciting new direction, and how long nights in the studio are her greatest escape.

SARAH TURNER — Your studio is full of new paintings, all from 2014. The first thing that struck me when I walked in was the absence of any direct female figure, and also the stylistic unity of this new body of work, which feels like it's in full flow. I'm aware that a painting practice is always evolving but this feels like a big leap. Can you talk me through the change?

KIRSTEN GLASS — Well, as you say, I've been known for making paintings that feature models cut from magazines. When I was in my twenties the paintings were of that time in my life, and were of their time in terms of printed media being dealt with in the realm of painting – groups of sexy girls put to work in big, collagey, gestural paintings where I fetishized both the girls and the act of painting itself. Over the years, these models, which were my hostesses, if you like, became assemblage paintings, multi-panel constructions and eventually single figure portraits. With the single figures I became more interested in the process of recharging the girls – the idealized feminine construct – with a more complex subjectivity, a kind of psychic and material lived-in-ness, which happened through reworking the images so that simple readings were less possible. In my earlier work I found the glossy magazine image of a commodified human to be a really fertile starting point for some sort of post-commodity potential, but in the past year or so I've been watching out for something that might happen in the corner of the studio which might release me from the kind of trap that I'd set myself. I mean, I liked the trap because it gave me a starting point from which to escape into the painting process, but I felt I'd changed that media image in many ways and I was interested to see what would happen if I turned my back on it altogether.

ST — So what happened in the corner of the studio?

KG — Last autumn I brought some sketchbooks into the studio from home. They were full of doodles that I'd been making with a kids' geometry set as a way of filling time when I couldn't sleep. On the same day, I had a couple of friends over and I decided to throw the projector light on them and trace their silhouettes onto a big canvas. I was thinking of the myth of the first drawing – the story of The Corinthian Maid who traces her lover's shadow on the lamp-lit wall before he leaves her.

ST — And the insomniac geometry sketchbooks?

KG — Later, when my guests had left, I began working into their silhouettes with charcoal and primer – erasing and rebuilding. At some point I picked up an oversized set of compasses to draw a kind of veil over one of the figures as a way of partially erasing her, but then I got hooked on the compass work and started to make more paintings out of this pattern on its own, without figures.

ST — I recognize the compass pattern. It's the Flowers of Life, isn't it? It comes from sacred geometry and I seem to remember Leonardo Da Vinci used it in many of his studies. What hooked you into this particular pattern?

KG — Firstly I love that it's so easy – it almost makes itself – and it's infinitely repeatable, like a screen of code that can give rise to a multiplicity of atmospheric compositions, transforming variously into veil, setting, grid, flow or form. The pleasure I take in easily reproducible forms links back to my student paintings which were entirely made out of stencils, layered up until the boundaries (of the namable shapes) gave way to material overflow.

ST — This idea of screens of infinitely repeatable code is something Laura Marks talks about in her book *Enfoldment and Infinity...*

KG — Yes, I'm interested in how she talks about Islamic patterning as being screens of geometry that perform infinite growth and simultaneously act as an interface with the unknowable realm beyond language or image.

ST — Speaking of screens, if this was a film I'd want to ask: How does the formal system you're referencing here develop the work's themes, or even story?

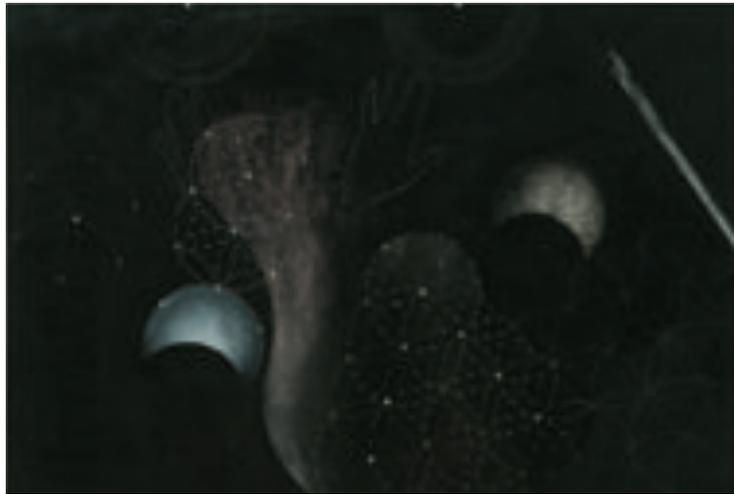
KG — Well, narrative can be played out in so many ways in a painting practice. I find, in my work, that I'm feeding this ritual geometry into the paintings and at the same time watching for moments of transformation, when the painting begins to gain presence – a pulse or a vibration – beyond design. I find verbally expressible meaning a real turn off, so I cancel anything that settles into coherence. In these paintings, when the geometry becomes a setting, there's a recurring bird that could be the holy dove from the Annunciation, or it could be marking a way through the place of the painting. Three of the bird paintings, for example, are titled *Bird (Whitstable)*, *Bird (Summer Solstice)* and *Bird (National Gallery)*. These titles, then, make the paintings into particular places or times that the bird is moving through. I keep hearing that Paul Celan line in my head: "Bird flight, stone flight, a thousand inscribed paths" [from Celan's poem 'All Souls']. Other recurring elements transform right out of the geometry, which I prefer, often into a sexual kind of meditation. The important part, for me, is that the paintings hold, and at the same time withhold, a story. I mean, their story, the painting's story, is held and withheld.

ST — Yes, I was going to say... I find the paintings very sexual. Can you say more about that?

KG — My paintings have always been fuelled by the desire for an elusive 'something' that's just beyond the canvas. In my earlier work, I perhaps performed this idea of desire in a very literal way, although, for me, it was a desire for painting itself, as well as a play of desire coming from the girls and out towards the viewer, and from me towards the feminine construct. This play of seduction is fascinating to me. My favourite painting of all time, the National Gallery's version of Da Vinci's *Virgin of the Rocks*, has at its centre the gold drapery of the Virgin's robe which surrounds, even frames, a black painted void where her body should be. It's the strangest painting. It suggests the Virgin as a gateway into an unknown realm, literally just beyond the materiality of her robe, and performs perfectly that sense of something being simultaneously held and withheld. I guess the desire to get closer to something beyond the language you're using – to know something unknowable – is the same for every artist, and it really is the nature of painting. It's why once is never enough! But yes, the new paintings are libidinal and female and made between something sexual and something metaphysical. In this way they are love paintings.

ST — One of American avant-garde filmmaker Maya Deren's most beautiful quotes is: "As we watch a film, the continuous act of recognition in which we are involved is like a strip of memory unrolling beneath the images of the film itself, to form the invisible under-layer of an implicit double exposure." Do you think we experience this "double exposure" in painting?

KG — I think, in an earthier way than in film, painting resonates with a desired 'you' – the viewer it wants to find – because



Kirsten Glass
Cave Painting, (detail) 2014
 © the artist

Kirsten Glass
Engagement, 2014
 © the artist

of this meeting of two subjectivities, both of which are made from the dematerialized stuff of memory. I say it's earthier because the nature of film feels very close to mind-space, especially in your films which feel like entering into, and spending time inside, another human's psychic space – a labyrinthine, dematerialized space – whereas with a painting you're weighted, you're always working with materiality and the physical limits and the indexical traces of making.

ST — I'm struck by the difference in our processes: for example my films take two or three years to make, so, I'm actually envious that your process involves a daily routine of visceral engagement where you might have a series of micro-alchemical moments, or a great big macro sweep of catharsis when you finish a painting. Can you talk about our difference of approach?

KG — Yes, I was simplifying your process by thinking of it as entirely dematerialized when of course there are multiple processes and levels of reality and unreality that weave together in the process of making a film. I know you write, produce and direct so that demands interacting with the world and moving around in your own head in many different ways. You're lucky, though, because when you do hit the zone, the precision of your edit is on film and endlessly reproducible, so I'm jealous!

Painting, for me, is an everyday relationship, but recently I've also been working through the night for three or so nights a week. This has opened up a whole new sense of working outside of the demands that a regular day has on your thoughts, time and communication. I mean, nobody calls me between midnight and 8 am, and you're not expected to attend to emails, so it's a kind of freedom. I think my work has gone through its change because of this new routine – because I'm in an altered state of consciousness, kind of buzzy but in slow motion, and alive to nocturnal thoughts; or maybe it's a way of not thinking and being immersed differently. I am also aware that although I am immersed as a maker I can only expect maybe 30 seconds from a viewer; but in those 30 seconds, in that still rectangle, a lot can register, especially with the right person, which is what it's all about – that the painting could resonate with someone else. In my daytime sessions, the process is actually mostly frustrating. I often get to a point with a painting where it's nearly finished but it isn't. It kind of goes deuce, advantage me, deuce, advantage painting, deuce, and so on for maybe days, and then I lose it and the canvas gets put in the skip: game, set and match, evil painting. I really hate that. However, the alchemical moments are fantastic, like a drug addiction.

— **KIRSTEN GLASS, 'PERSEPHONE, QUEEN OF THE UNDERWORLD' IS AT COCK 'N' BULL GALLERY, LONDON, UNTIL 10 DECEMBER. THIS EXHIBITION IS KINDLY SUPPORTED BY WINSOR AND NEWTON. WWW.COCKNBULLGALLERY.CO.UK**

ST — Given the dominance and saturation of screen cultures, what do you see as the value of painting, or what is painting's intervention?

KG — Well, because painting began pre-language, and has continued through every new technology, I see value in its ability to be continually transformed by context. In our contemporary, digital age, the handmade nature of painting becomes suddenly amplified and so does its demand of a live encounter. I think painting is good at changing images directly and at producing alternative ways of imagining being. It behaves differently to social media, which is all about frantic contact, and it is still insubordinate to meaning or selling. But as you well know, an art film exists on a screen but is also made far away from commerce and entertainment, so we have that in common.

ST — Your current show is titled 'Persephone, Queen of the Underworld'. Does this refer to a turning away from mainstream culture?

KG — I chose Persephone to characterize some of the underlying themes and processes in the new paintings, because she is a mythological character who retreats into the underworld in autumn and re-emerges in spring. Her story is agricultural in that it reflects seasonal, cyclical processes, which of course is the pagan root of all religious metaphor around the death/rebirth theme. The themes, if you like, which I can see now have carried on through from my younger work, are female desire and continuous transformation, the latter of which could be a definition of painting itself; and, yes, the idea of retreat, personal retreat from constant distraction, for the sake of fertility, is central to that.

