

JEANETTE MUNDT

*Smart and Bold*

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# Touching, Tearing: Notes on Jeanette Mundt and Edward Hopper

Jesi Khadivi

A painted woman stands facing me, her hands tentatively pulling at her abdomen. Her gaze doesn't meet mine. No, instead she seems fully occupied with her own flesh. The figure appears calm, grounded. Oblivious, or at least impervious, to the sinuous flames that flicker menacingly just behind her left elbow. No, she remains cool. She doesn't break a sweat.

"With paintings," Siri Hustvedt writes, "when you look hard and keep looking, once in a while you begin to suffer a feeling of vertigo, and that is a sign that the world may be turning upside down." I can't shake these closing lines of Hustvedt's canonical essay "A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women" while looking at Jeanette Mundt's expansive new work *Smart and Bold*. In the panel of Mundt's multi-part painting described above, a female figure, based on a series of selfies, stands before us nude. She appears like an apparition in a tumultuous landscape whose dramatically foreshortened perspective upends all conventional notions of space: water, fire, air, and earth mingle seamlessly. Forces that would typically destroy or tear each other apart hang in a sense of uneasy suspension. And amidst it all, a woman stands there: refusing. Refusing to look, refusing to be crushed by water or touched by fire, refusing to touch anything other than herself. Or so it seems. One could certainly consider Mundt's painterly practice solipsistic, as consumed as it is with the replication and manipulation of her own body. Yet in fact, Mundt is touching everything: diverse time periods, different media, art historical references, religious iconography, popular culture, digital images. And she also touches things that don't want to be touched, filling them up with her own body.

In 1951, the American painter Edward Hopper completed his painting *Rooms by the Sea*. This work, arguably amongst Hopper's best, depicts an empty room with a door that opens directly onto what appears to be deep water. Bright light sluices through the space, which is completely devoid of human figures, but nonetheless contains traces of their presence. What is shown here is an impossible, almost supernatural space—a room that literally floats on water. An icon of postwar ennui and alienation, capturing the *mood* of empty space had captivated Hopper, who was said to have engaged in marathon conversations with friends about what an empty room might look like when no one was around.<sup>1</sup> Mundt reworks this room twice in *Smart and Bold*, and this time someone is around. The living room in the background of Hopper's original composition disappears and all that remains of his "rooms" is a wall, the rhomboid-like patch of bright light cast upon it, and the mysterious door to the sea. Poised on all fours facing the wide-open door, two iterations of Mundt's own body occupy Hopper's empty space. These figures could be marking their territory or plotting their exit. In fact, half of one figure's head is subsumed by the dividing line between threshold and sea.

Hopper's room appears again in another panel, the calm cerulean seascape replaced by a menacing orange glow. Placid waters give way to dark depths and a sense of foreboding, a heaviness, pervades the canvas. Mundt appears again, this time in triplicate—yet the effect of her overlapping

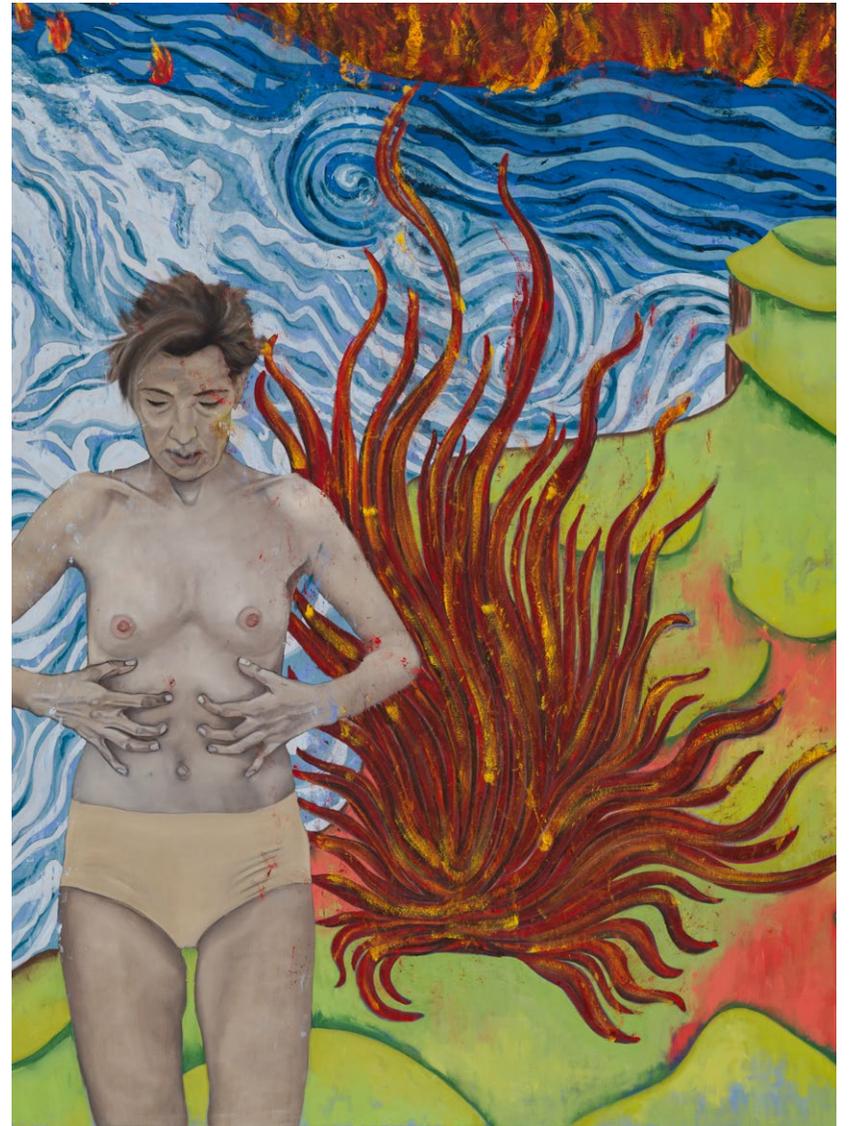
limbs gives the impression that there is even more of her. It's like she has duplicated her own image, which she then rotates and layers as if she were copy-pasting herself. Curves of shoulders, breasts, and buttocks nest within one another, while her many feet recede into other parts of her body. Mundt could be doing many things with this multiplication of her image: formally indicating motion or the passage of time, conveying a psychological state of rupture and estrangement, or calling attention to the fact that the pose itself is borrowed from a painting by Toulouse-Lautrec in which he depicts a nude woman prone on a bed.

All and none of these scenarios could be true. Or perhaps the multiplication of the figure indicates a battle: between subject and object, between gendered codes of looking and being looked at, all played out in the tension between Mundt's body and Hopper's room. Unlike the other panel, where the two Mundts breezily occupy the space like sly interlopers, in the orange iteration of the scene, the floor and brooding sea have literally descended onto the figures' backs. The wall from *Rooms by the Sea* rests precisely on the crown of the left-hand figures' heads while their counterpart has been overcome by water. These women are no longer in the room and instead engage in a struggle with it to exert dominance over the picture's ground. Spectral, yet nonetheless overpowering, this iteration of *Rooms* disquietingly hovers above the crouching figures supporting it—as if they were literally bearing the weight of art historical reference, of masculine space, of the male gaze: a weight that Mundt handles lightly, even nonchalantly. I prefer to read this multiplied figure as a kind of visual stutter, a glitch, a strain that might break through the floorboards, that might tear this room apart.

<sup>1</sup> Of his fixation on light and space, Hopper is quoted as saying, "I guess I'm not very human. All I really want to do is paint light on the side of a house."



244.8×182.9×4 cm  
96 1/2×72 1/2×1 1/2 in  
Oil on canvas



304.8×244.8×3cm  
120×96 1/2×1 1/2 in  
Oil on linen





244.8 × 304.8 × 3 cm  
96 1/2 × 120 × 1 1/2 in  
Oil on linen



244.8×182.9×4 cm  
96 1/2×72 1/2×1 1/2 in  
Oil and graphite on linen



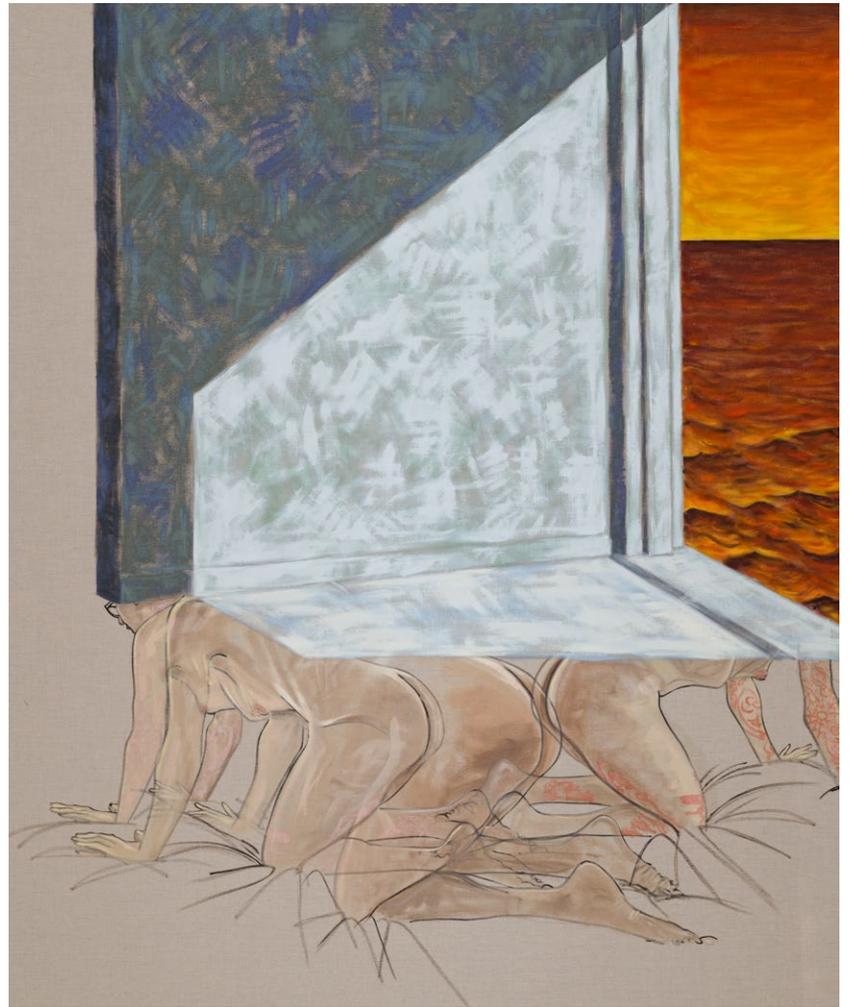
244.8×182.9×4 cm  
96 1/2×72 1/2×1 1/2 in  
Oil and graphite on canvas







182.9 × 152.4 × 4 cm  
72 1/2 × 60 × 1 1/2 in  
Oil on linen



182.9×152.5×4 cm  
72 1/2×60 1/2×1 1/2 in  
Oil on linen

# Jeanette Mundt in conversation with Kerstin Brätsch

Berlin, May 2022

Jeanette Mundt: I'd rather take a more conceptual approach because I am not interested in giving too much out. A different approach is fine with me.

## **Kerstin Brätsch: Does it matter that it's a self-portrait?**

In the end it does. When I first started painting this body—I call it “Climbing”, this body on all fours—it is taken from a Henri Toulouse-Lautrec painting of a prostitute on a bed (*Red-headed Nude Crouching*, 1897). I made a painting of that, in 2016, and then I thought, I might as well just make this a painting of myself, in the same position as the woman in the Toulouse-Lautrec painting, because there is all the tension between the female painter, the female gaze, the female body, lifting it from the male gaze, blah blah blah... So, I thought I'll just start using myself. Then I wanted to increase the number of figures, but I didn't know how to use somebody else's body. Why would I do that? Why would I use a model? Who would I choose? etc. I don't want to play any games in that weird decision-making hierarchy. I wanted to avoid all of that. So, I just began painting myself. So, I think when I made the initial decision it did matter that it was me on all fours. Then, when I wanted to paint more bodies, it *didn't* matter. But when I continued painting myself, I thought, oh no it actually does matter because of the denial of decision making. Do you know what I mean? It is a self-portrait in the end.

**Because it's like this multiplication of the self. It's not about the individual, it becomes a template. I think with the multiplication or this crosshatching you are doing, suddenly it becomes less and less about exposure or vulnerability. The**

**position of the prostitute in the original, where again it becomes about the gaze, whereas here there's a strange twist happening. I find it interesting that the human figure could be an animal, that for me is the tension in the picture. We might know the reference of Edward Hopper or Toulouse-Lautrec, but then what you're doing with it, there's some awkward inability to place this space and the figure. The tension you are talking about, you're denying the figure because the figure is cut up by the landscape. The landscape obviously doesn't follow any logic either.**

Yes.

**Suddenly on the right, the female bodies are actually crawling under the landscape in an impossible way. And on the left, the landscape is pressing onto the bodies like a burden. I think the way you painted it, this dry application and the sketchiness of it, you're taking the authority back, or the vulnerable position of the female body, you're taking that back. So, there's all this potential power emerging.**

Absolutely.

**It's strange what happens for the viewer. Because I am somewhat displaced myself...**

But that's where I want you to be.

**Yes, and it's unusual that the painting has the power to do that with the viewer.**

Is it? Do you think so?

**Yes, because we are looking at this reference and my intellect tells me that**

I know what I am looking at. I know the image, I know the reference. But then the way you actually translated it, combined it, and repeated the movement, which makes them slightly different from each other, suddenly I question my own gaze.

That's good...I mean I think that's good.

**The image comes from Hopper but the brushstroke looks more like this very dry encaustic Jasper Johns crosshatch.**

I definitely understand. When I first made the marks I understood a viewer would see a reference to Jasper Johns, but that was not the point. The point was just to get colour onto the linen. Because it's reverse stretched, so the gesso is on the back. So, the surface is raw linen and it's really hard to actually get paint on there.

**From up close it looks like you're using the (painted) body like a palette.**

Yes, totally. I feel like it's a constant for me. I mean you know this: you make a mark and you think, 'fuck this is the worst mark I've ever seen, I have to figure out how to hide it'. And then you keep doing this over and over and over again. Then you end up with whatever zone this is—the body-as-palette zone.

**It's so weird, it's really brutal...**

Yes.

**It's really brutal because it denies all logic there is, or every thing one thinks, one understands and knows. I mean, what about the fingers? They look like Barbie doll fingers, these weird rubber hands that don't fit the body.**

There's so much fight in everything. I was talking to someone, and they told me, the way you can tell if someone is a skilled painter, you have to look at the hands. If a hand is painted well, then they can really paint. And I thought, that doesn't mean anything at this point in time, at this point in the history of painting. So, I painted weird rubber Barbie hands.

**It's really great that you painted them like this because these fingers would never be able to carry that weight of the body.**

No! Yes, so the whole thing is *deny, refuse, and fight*.

**From faraway you don't even notice that.**

Yes, exactly.

I mean I like how much burden there is in this work, how much weight. This weird architectural space, the weight of it, and how light the figures are. When you so say it's a repeated image, what do you discover from the translation? Does it act like an encore?

There's a lot of them. I think it's a lot of things but at the core it's formal. This is kind of boring but looking at what happens when there's a blue and a green underneath a white. What happens when there's a yellow underneath a white? What changes? You have these basic elements, so you play with them a little and massive changes can happen. It's these formal exercises in painting that are interesting to me, that carry a lot of weight. But obviously, historically we *know* all the answers but I'm going to go through them. Does that make sense?

**Exactly. You know the answers, but the way you are proposing it, you are making me aware that I actually don't know the answers.**

Yes. That's good.

**Because I think I know but then, with these shifts we talked about, the way the fingers are painted, the way the body is treated, or how you break the logic of the architecture suddenly, what does that mean then? The heads that are searching underneath the waves. That is in the end what makes them so compelling, and so intriguing because you are suddenly forced to engage and to be stuck with the image and its slight variations.**

Good! That's great.

**But maybe you can talk a little bit more about how you work in general, because it seems like you have groups and you go back to the groups, pick up from the past, and then remodel them.**

Yes exactly. For the most part I work very intuitively. I work best when I don't know what I'm doing. I will work on a series and I will get to the point where I am sort of finishing the sentences in my head and then I have put it down. But that doesn't mean I'm done with it. It just means that I got to a place, you know, when you're like doing scales and your fingers are just going, and at some point you have to say "wait, stop." Then when you go back into it you change an element, you know change one of the...

**Parameters?**

Yes, so then all the sudden I don't know exactly where I stand or what I'm doing. And then things are left more up to chance or accident and that sort of shifts things around. The other thing is, some series take up a lot more space physically and mentally, because it's more time-consuming painting, or you know, making colours, or whatever it is. Then there is only so much bandwidth I have for those works. So, I do those more intense works for a little while and then I have to put them down and walk away. Then I will have a serie that sort of breaks it all up, like these smaller paintings of humming birds fighting—I'm going to put more layers on them soon—but I have them all going in the background so when I have exhausted something over in this body of work, I can go do this other body of work for a second and then come back, and so on.

**They are basically like commas and semicolons.**

Yes, the changes basically let me take a breath.

**You said before, the brush stroke was just there to get paint on that surface. The surface you chose is extremely resistant, uncomfortable to work with. Where does that decision come from? Which surface to**

**use, and which way to apply the paint onto that surface? It's very different from each painting we are looking at.**

Yes. Again, it is a matter of putting myself in a place where I don't know what I'm doing. I'm not good at imagery in my head. I was thinking about space and depicting space. I was looking at Francis Bacon and Edward Hopper paintings—interiors—trying to figure out how I can make a space that is not concrete, not calculable. I was making these paintings where there was this kind of eye thing happening, which is just me not knowing how to paint a Francis Bacon background basically, but it ended up like this—very voyeuristic. And I really liked it. So, I was applying paint in one way, as I tried to figure out depicting the space. Then, when I got some handle on the construction of the space I wanted to play with the application of the paint. Bacon paints on reverse-stretched linen, so I wanted to try to make space on a reversed-stretched linen too, and see how it changed the construction of the paintings. I moved from the abstract Francis Bacon idea of space to Edward Hopper's room from *Rooms by the Sea* (1951), specifically because the rooms in that painting are not architecturally possible. So, you have this kind of abstract space that is really far more solid than the Francis Bacon interiors, but it pushes back on the current demand for painting to be accurate—like the hand conversation from before. So, that's how those decisions came to be, if that makes sense. That's how I work generally, it's pretty intuitive. I do something and it's like whatever, it's not genius...

**But you are taking Francis Bacon's brushstroke...**

Right, I couldn't figure out how he was making the marks that he did. It wasn't that I was trying to make his marks necessarily. I was trying to think about his communication of physical space, because he was not a great draftsman. I was trying to make these sorts of spaces that are clearly not well conceived. It wasn't so much the brush stroke as it was the space that I was thinking about. I was thinking about how Jana Euler makes space,

how René Daniëls makes space, and so on. But then I also wanted to leave all this linen, so you have this romantic idea, this beautiful romantic idea of the painting is in there also—the surface, the space of the painting itself.

**The ornaments come—from medieval tapestry? Or how landscape is depicted in an abstract form but not seen immediately as abstraction, this in-between space?**

Yes exactly, and then that same approach to the depiction of the movement of water, the movement of fire, in a still, painted image.

**That background has some something very immediate, it could be...**

A tribal tattoo.

**A stencil, or it could be...**

A woodcut.

**It's also interesting that you will still paint the tattoos or draw the tattoos on the figures.**

Yes.

**There's also this tension between the marks on the body, and the reverse logic going on again in the background abstraction along with the figure in the foreground.**

The figure—I'll put another layer on the body. Then the tattoos will go on top of that, so that tension you're speaking about will really be heightened.

**What's she doing?**

She is pulling at her abdomen. Pulling it apart. But it's not breaking, but she's pulling it apart and observing it.

**On the one hand you think, obviously because it's a naked figure, it's somewhat an exposure of vulnerability. But it's really imposing. It's also such a male gesture actually. Guys at the gym are always feeling their stomachs, feeling their**

**abdomens. I find this is really compelling, how you've managed to be able to hold that tension—it's somewhat of a male pose, but then it's really intimate through the expression of the female figure. Like, is she looking at herself? What is she thinking about? And then you think, 'great, what's happening in the background?'**

Yes, exactly!

**This strange correlation between her hair and the flame.**

I know! Yes, because that play is sort of good. It's good that it goes between male and female. Sometimes I look at it and I get a little nervous that it's too female. But it's not.

**It's background or foreground or it's the pose itself or the accessories depicted, which contradict the pose: why is she still wearing her glasses? Maybe she needs exactly these glasses? So, there is a contradiction I think that really heightens the tension. It's also in the brushstroke, in the Edward Hopper ones, the brush stroke itself enhances that. But I think also, on the tapestry background there's the choice you made to use a brushstroke almost like it's a mural painting. It reminds me of Kippenberger's *Lieber Maler, male mir* (1981).**

That's good.

**The choices you make with each image are confrontational: how you use not just images but how you actually translate them. How you use your hand manipulate your hand to do that.**

I think that makes sense.

**It might also be completely unconscious...**

Yes, exactly, but I think it's there. It's also that same thing that I said before where you make a mark and you think, "what the fuck, now I have to fix that."

**Yes, but on one level it's a self-portrait, but on another level its painted like you haven't even painted it yourself. You're almost putting yourself to work in order to paint something, which just happens to be yourself. That's why I think of Kippenberger, he extends his hand with somebody else's...**

Labour.

**Yes, but then you use your own body, or a depiction of the body, to go through these declinations. And there, again you have the contradiction, or this friction, going on in between. Is it a self-portrait? Is it just a template? What does it oppose? Is it us being witness? Or is it this labour aspect? I could see that, putting yourself at labour in order to achieve something. And then what does that prove? All of this is a hierarchy that is collapsing and being staged again and collapsing. It's really good. It's the same function as the fingers, you think you understand, and then in each painting there's this little moment, be it conscious or unconscious, that throws the entire image in a different direction.**

I mean, that's great.

**And somehow you leave it open. What you mentioned before, that it's very densely (laboured) painted, but then you intentionally left a moment that actually is escapable, it kind of reveals that, "actually, I didn't mean it like this", or that "it's just a sketch".**

Yes.

**What about the flowers?**

The flowers are a way to access the back of the head. The flowers allow for this expressionistic approach, where I can kind of just go. You know, we've all looked at enough flowers in our lifetimes—I can paint the shape of a flower. And so, then I can confidently move through that space and allow for most of my head to turn off and go into this trance-like place.

**Also most like a doodle, you mean?**

Yes, doodling. I was looking at Hyman Bloom's work a lot. He painted the sea through fish scales and this visual metaphor *blows my mind*. So, I try to think of ways I can access this kind of moment, this kind of thinking. Also, when I saw that film, *Midsomer*, where Florence Pugh is in the flower costume, I thought this was a path to that kind of visual metaphorical thinking. It kind of worked and it kind of didn't. I don't really know. But there's something really compelling in the doodling process, the go-go-go-go-go mind. It's just a completely different way of painting that I don't fully understand. Again, it's another way of accessing a different approach to painting, a starting place where I don't know what I'm doing exactly. Then, of course there is the play between the foreground, the background, the surface of the painting, the raw linen, it's on top, it's behind, you know? All these formal conversations again. And of course, they're flowers—so you have the whole history of painting in the subject matter.

**I think the flowers are really somewhat of a second surface, that again enacts this aggression, this brutality, because they are more alive. They almost feel like they are eating up the figure, so the figure doesn't have any colour, any signs of life.**

Yes, she's the color *white*.

**Totally ghostly.**

Yes, I mean that is what will happen on that painting too, those flowers will almost completely subsume him.

**He's like 'Help me!'**

Yes. He's the Emily Dickinson poem, *Not Waving, but Drowning*.

**These flowers are actually kind of evil.**

Yes..

**They are really aggressive, even though they are painted softly. Their shapes are soft, but they feel like this weird amorphous mass attacking the figure.**

Yeah, that's what they are doing.

**That's what they are doing. And then it feels very eery, everything is actually fucked up. It feels like they are moving in slow motion, coming from behind and approaching from the front. The flowers are really bodily. I would say an amorphous mass, a slow-motion uncanniness which is overtaking the figure. Looking at the figure, which is suffocating with the flowers attacking him, his mouth is almost not open enough to gasp, he's in between enjoying it and being killed.**

It's very *The Wizard of Oz* like that.

**I love it. Is he breathing out or is he breathing in?**

Yeah, so there will be flowers where the brown is.

**But the black stays? The open space?**

No, I'll leave some of it black, but most of this will have flowers on it. And then this will stay. And then these are...what are they? Chrysanthemums?

**Yes, chrysanthemums.**

Right? Monet painted them.

**Oh, so you use literal references?**

Literal references, yes, like Monet. Some are mine. Those are mine and this is Courbet, that's Rousseau, Odilon Redon, this will be Mary Cassatt. Super literal references and then mine on top of them, or around them: history, man, painter, gaze, etc., blah blah blah, so much painter stuff.

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