JESSIE EDELMAN'S MUSE: A MAVERICK POSITION

by Michelle Grabner

Just over twenty years ago, painter and critic Mira Schor's *Wet: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture* occupied a notable position within contemporary painting discourse. Albeit mostly in academic circles, this text emerged at a time when painting's authority was still based in its histories and political potentials. It was a time when the monetization of the language was not its propellant nor the justification for its innovations. Schor's *Wet* was also a feminist treatise that foregrounds gender representation in artworks and in critical theory.

In *Wet*, Schor assuredly states that "My own charge to myself is to bring a feminist analysis of my own body experience, of political events, and of art history, to painting, using visual language not just to illustrate temporal political battles but also to offer an empowered, expanded example of what a feminist gaze would produce… I want to engage with the language of painting, with the metaphorically expressive possibilities of the materiality of painting, trusting in the complexity of the visual language in painting, in order to reinvest painting with the energy of a different politics, a politics of difference, and a different eroticism than that of the monocular penis."[1]

Jessie Edelman epitomizes a new generation of young woman painters who occupy the wake of Mira Schor's critical and political advocacy. Edelman is also advancing a genre of painting forwarded by Karen Kilimnik, Jenny Watson, Pam Butler and others who relish in the freedom of fantasy, myth, and the archetypal. "It is significant that the avant-garde continues to focus on representations of youth by young woman artists, if anything privileging a regression to 'teenage girl art' in terms of its sources, content and style," Schor claimed over two decades ago.[2] Also underscoring the political necessity for creative independence, the critic Griselda Pollock undercuts what she calls "passive identification" traditions by arguing for a richer field of "dis-identification practices."[3]

"Dis-identification" is exactly what Edelman is taking on with her new series of spry and wide-eyed paintings. This collection of boldly graphic figures contoured organically in ebbing black outlines float, lean, and lay in guileless blue-skied landscapes. Each figure is a goddess and a muse. They sport identifiable attributions that evidence their cultural gifts: a musician, an artist, a historian, an astronomer, a dancer, an author. Yet Edelman's muses are *all* woman. Their hair, clothes, and varied skin color are generic and thus universal. This is the disruption of specificity and an embrace of ecumenical power. And it is a risky position in a contemporary culture that often disavows the generalist position, the whole, and the global. For example, the specific and namable figures that populate the canvases of Aliza Nisenbaum, Amy Sherald, Njideka Akunyili Crosby, and Jordan Casteel underscore a cultural need for literal and namable representation in portraiture. Yet equally important I would argue is reworking of the symbolic, the iconic, and the allegorical.

In Edelman's "Muse Pantheon" (2018), nine female figures gather under the canopy of two fruiting orange trees. In a nearly symmetrical composition the muses are distributed across the picture plane as an animated force, a wealth of acumen, acuity and intuition that together signify undeniable beauty and power. Indeed, we are witnessing a cultural moment where depicting heterogeneity is a political

necessity, yet Edelman's paintings remind us that disrupting and repositioning the cultural narratives that promote inequality is also an artistic obligation. With her new series, Edelman cleverly twists the creative myth of the muse into new gender realignment, but also creates a feminist coming of age story. In her introduction to Wet, Schor writes "A maverick position is sometimes harder to commodify than a dogmatic party line, but it can be inclusive and usefully speculative."[4] By remaking and reembracing a classic motif, Edelman has become Schor's maverick.

Jessie Edelman, *Muse Pantheon*, 2018, Oil on canvas, 80 x 130 in/203.2 x 330.2 cm

Michelle Grabner is an American painter, conceptual artist, curator, and professor. Grabner holds an MA in Art History and a BFA in Painting and Drawing from the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, and an MFA in Art Theory and Practice from Northwestern University. She joined the faculty of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1996, and became Chair of its prestigious Painting and Drawing department in the fall of 2009. She is also a senior critic at Yale University in the Department of Painting and Printmaking. Her writing has been published in *Artforum*, *Modern Painters*, *Frieze*, *Art Press*, and *Art-Agenda*, among others. Grabner also runs The Suburban and The Poor Farm with her husband, artist Brad Killam. She co-curated the 2014 Whitney Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art along with Anthony Elms and Stuart Comer. Grabner was the artistic director of FRONT, a triennial exhibition in Cleveland, OH and the vicinity in 2018.

[1] Mira Schor, *Wet: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 169.
[2] Ibid. p. 75.
[3] Griselda Pollock, *Vision & Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art*, (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 84.
[4] Schor, *Wet*, p. xiii.