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ii

ODA JAUNE

ZOO, 2011



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top and skirt *Louis Vuitton*

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dress *Mami*

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earrings *Sonia Rykiel*
dress *Bottega Veneta*

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blouse *Marc Jacobs*
skirt *Sonia Rykiel*

Stylist: *Ilene Hacker*
Hair: *Ramona Eschbach @ Artist using Orbe*
Makeup: *Yacine Diallo @ Artist*
Model: *Oda Jaune*

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INTERVIEW ODA JAUNE

An interview with Bulgarian painter Oda Jaune

by Jan Kedves

Oda Jaune speaks in this interview with *Zoo Magazine* about her childhood in Bulgaria, her psychological approach to the bewildering bodies in her paintings, and the importance of contrasts in art.

As much as for her art, the painter is also known in Germany as the young wife of Jörg Immendorff, the controversial yet celebrated German neoexpressionist painter who died in May 2007.

Born Michaela Danowska in 1979 in Sofia, Bulgaria, it was Immendorff who gave her the pseudonym Oda Jaune while she was his student at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. Jaune moved to Paris four years ago to focus on her own career.

Jan Kedves: Oda Jaune, what makes a good painting?

Oda Jaune: That is very difficult to put in words. I always say a painting is good if it has a soul. The soul is what makes it a painting. But this is achieved only rarely.

JK: Could you describe this further? It sounds rather esoteric.

OJ: I know, but there is no other way than to feel it. A good painting must have a certain kind of vivaciousness, whereas a bad painting only pretends to be a painting, while it probably was painted for all the reasons that paintings should not be painted for. To please, for example.

JK: A painting should not please the viewer?

OJ: Of course it should! Whenever I paint I hope that people will love the work. But this hope must never push itself to the forefront. If a painter only paints out of a wish to please—then that is very bad for his works.

JK: Is it permissible if a painter makes a work primarily for his or her profit?

OJ: Personally, I believe that a painting that is produced as a merchandise cannot be good. Paintings are not products. Of course they are sold and traded; there is the art market—which at first seems like a contradiction. But painters have to make a living, too. But if money is the sole purpose for painting—in other words, if a painter loves wealth, fame and all these things more than painting itself—then the soul is at risk.

JK: Two years ago you participated in an episode of the TV series 'Durch die Nacht' (Through the Night) on the French-German channel Arte. You

and the Berlin actor Lars Eidinger spent a night in your hometown Sofia where you visited a fortune teller...

OJ: Yes, why do you bring it up?

JK: Fortune tellers are said to be able to look into souls. Can they also look into the souls of paintings?

OJ: It was not my idea to visit this old lady, if this is what you are aiming at. I had totally different ideas for our night out in Sofia. I sent the producers several proposals, but they only picked up some. Instead, they held a few surprises for us—a visit to this fortune teller, for example. I did not know this woman.

JK: And she did not seem too gifted. When she read Lars Eidinger's palm she told him he would marry soon—while overlooking the wedding ring on his left hand.

OJ: (Laughs) I still have to say I did appreciate the encounter—it was my first experience with a fortune teller. People say fortune tellers are good psychologists. My mother, for example, is really into fortune telling. Probably this is why I have always kept a certain distance from it.

JK: You come from an artistic family?

OJ: Yes, my sister is also an artist and my father is a graphic designer. When he was young he wanted to be an artist too; he made sculptures. But he had a big family to support, so he opted for a more secure income and became a graphic designer. He was very successful in his job, but he never returned to sculpture or painting, although he still loves art. To this day his opinion is very important to me.

JK: So your family has shaped your understanding of good art?

OJ: Definitely. I remember that when I was a small child my father always rhapsodized about the great painters—Picasso, for example. The next day I went to school and told everybody about this fantastic Picasso, as if he were big news. But nobody showed any reaction, nobody shared my enthusiasm. I found that very disappointing. But my understanding of art has not only been shaped by my family; Bulgaria was also very important—or to be more precise, the icons in Bulgarian orthodox churches. As a child I loved to look at them for hours.

JK: Officially there was no religion in communism.

OJ: Right, for 40 years services were prohibited in Bulgaria. Religious people were forced to practice their faith in private, on their own. But nevertheless the old churches stood open. You could walk in and look at the icons—marvellous paintings!

Bulgarian icons are very reduced, you know, they radiate absolute clarity. For me these paintings were magical. Such power! Such warmth! When I stood in front of them I almost felt like they were returning my gaze—as if I was not only looking at them, but as if they were looking back at me. These Bulgarian icons are charged with centuries of gazes, centuries of hope, prayers, even kisses. When I was a child, kissing the small foot of the baby Jesus was always the climax for me. And then I lit a candle in front of the painting. After that I always left the church filled with anticipation, expecting something great and good to happen.

JK: Do you still think about paintings in this manner?

OJ: I still believe paintings have the force to bring about something great. I guess this is why to this day—when I start a painting—I still have problems seeing the canvas and the wooden frame only as material. I have so much respect for this white surface because it contains so much power.

JK: You often show nude bodies in your works. Are these inspired by icons of Jesus hanging on the cross, bare, except for a small loincloth?

OJ: No, the icons in Bulgaria are very different from imagery in Western European churches. There is no nudity, everything is covered. But I have always been interested in the human body, already as a child. You can see this in my earliest drawings. Even back then, I was fascinated with the body—I guess because it was more difficult and much more exciting to paint than, for example, trees or flowers.

JK: The bodies in your paintings are often shaped in strange ways. How do you come up with these forms?

OJ: It is not my goal to paint bodies realistically, as you can see them in photographs. I am more interested in painting the parts of the body which are invisible—but which are nonetheless there.

JK: The soul for example...?

OJ: Exactly. What is hidden inside belongs to the body as well—the soul, feelings, thoughts. All these things have no physical form, they are invisible. In my paintings I try to integrate them in the body and that is why I let its shape grow accordingly.

JK: Often, your bodies appear very sexual and phallic. You emphasize and exaggerate mostly the fingers and the tongues...

OJ: This impression is not intended. I guess the sexual connotation stems from the fact that there is a lot of skin in my paintings. The skin is the actual

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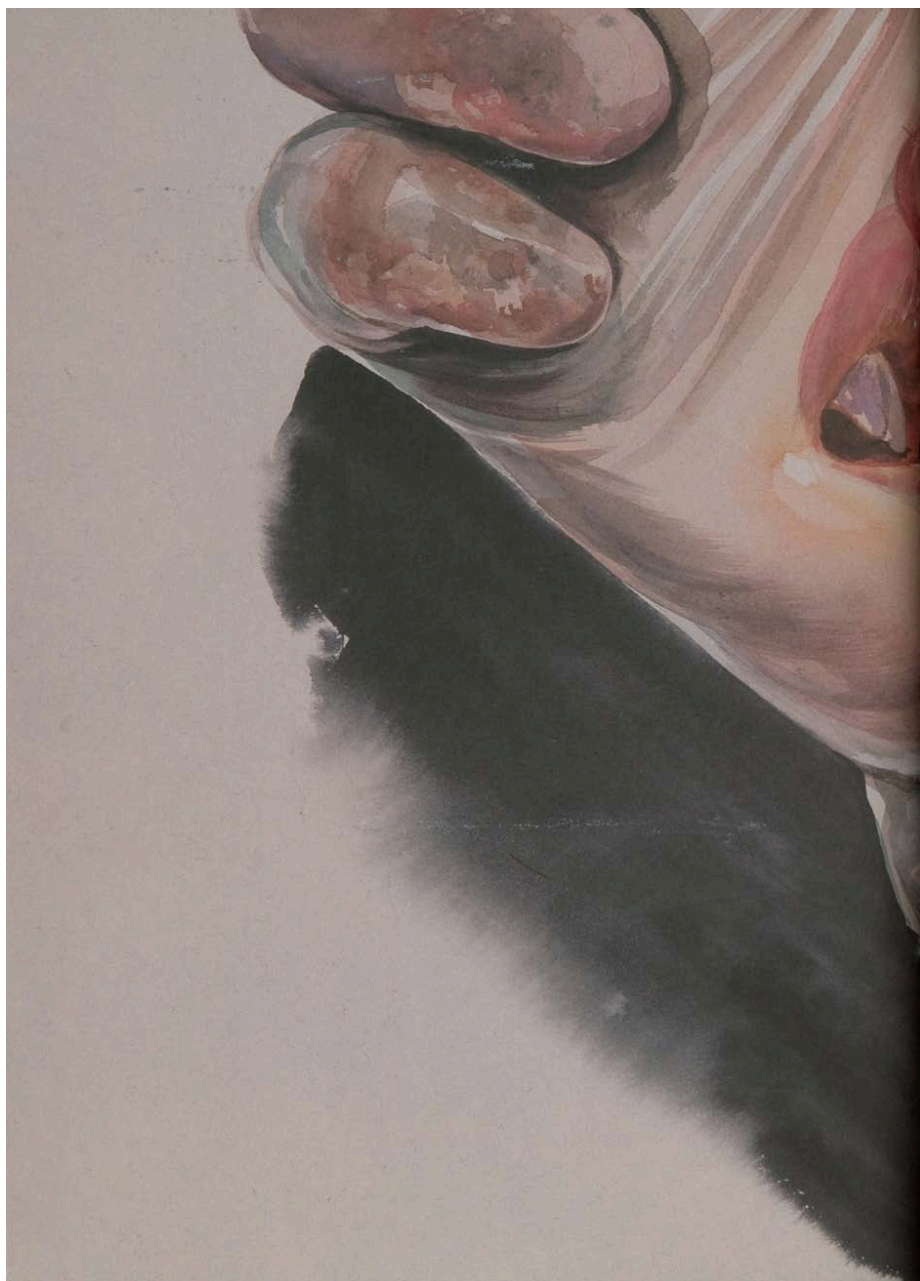


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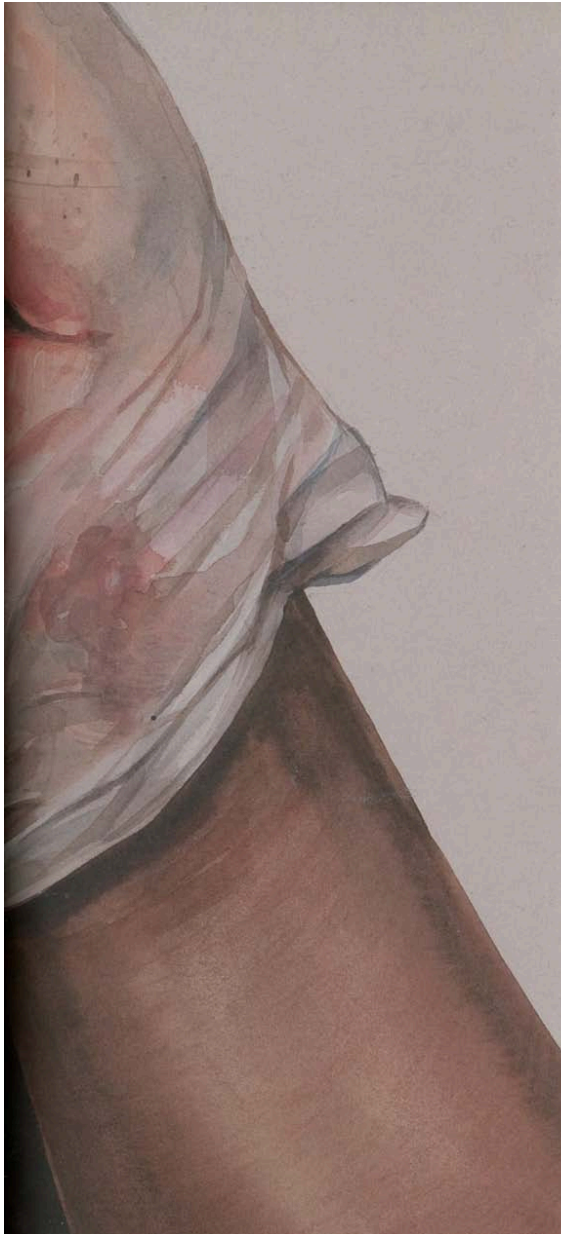


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INTERVIEW ODA JAUNE

Untitled, 2010
watercolors, 35 x 45 cm

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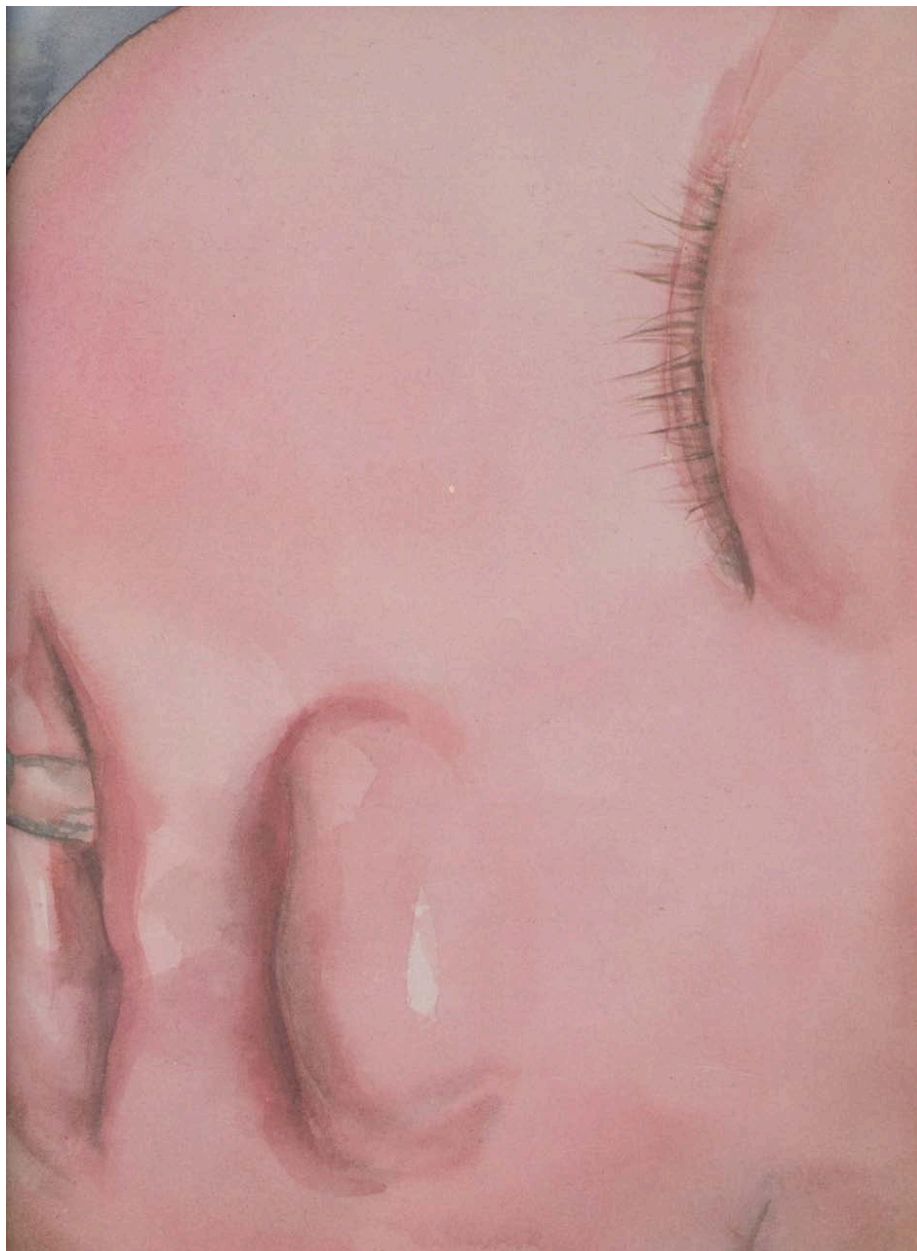


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II

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INTERVIEW ODA JAUNE

clothing of humans, but we are not satisfied with this skin, so we wear textiles, we put on make-up, we do whatever is possible to acquire additional skins. So whenever there is a moment in which the true skin shows, we are deeply shocked.

JK: The German professor of literature, Winfried Menninghaus, recently published a book, 'Wozu Kunst? (Why Art?)', in which he re-reads Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and presents the idea that the visual and performing arts of our present day, including painting, are still linked to our ancestors' rituals of sexual courtship through some kind of archaic memory trace.

OJ: You mean art emerged during mating season? That is an interesting theory. I myself have never thought of sex in the artistic context, to be honest. But I have often thought of creation. For me, art deals with life and eternity. Art is eternal, and that makes me very happy because I hate the fact that man is finite. It is so easy to imagine things differently—that life could be eternal, that there is no death. Art is immortal, it is a victory over the end.

JK: For a long time you did not title your paintings, but two years ago you suddenly began giving them names. Why?

OJ: At a dinner in New York, I sat beside an artist who kept making me compliments. I was very happy, because I admire his art a lot. But suddenly he asked me why I did not give any titles to my works. I replied that I wanted to leave the spectators their freedom and that I did not wish to interfere with their interpretation of my work, because everything I have to say is already contained in the painting itself; that is why my paintings go without words, no titles, also no signature. The man replied, "But I assume your paintings are as dear to you as your own children?" I answered, "Of course!" And then he asked, "And you do not name your children?" That got me thinking. He also wanted to know my favorite painting. I said it was Picasso's Guernica. And he replied, "Ah, so you know its title!" Since then I always give titles to my works.

JK: The titles you now choose—'Touched,' for example, or 'For All to See'—all seem to be kept intentionally as vague as possible.

OJ: Yes, they should be very simple. I do not want the titles to function as a key to the paintings, they should just denote the works.

JK: Nobody could know better than you how decisive naming can be. Your artist's name Oda Jaune was chosen for you by your deceased husband Jörg Immendorf.

OJ: Oda Jaune the name is also very simple, and that is what I like about it. I am not saying that I did not like my birth name, but Oda Jaune is the name that is related to my art. I have really taken on this name; I have literally become Oda Jaune.

JK: What was it like being christened with a whole new name by your own husband? That is almost incestuous, isn't it?

OJ: Why do you think so?

JK: Normally a man only christens his own daughter, but not his wife...

OJ: I never thought about it this way, but actually it is quite a nice notion. I see the name as a present. Back then when I wanted to have a new name in

order not to be confused with my sister, who is also an artist, I had difficulties coming up with a name myself. So it was very nice when my husband took over and found this name for me.

JK: Let us talk about music. Is it true that you often listen to music when painting in your studio?

OJ: Yes, I like music a lot. I usually listen to the same record over and over again until I know it backwards.

JK: How do you make sure that the contents of the record do not creep into the painting you are working on?

OJ: I do not even notice the lyrics. The only things I pay attention to are the melodies and the oscillations in the mood of the music. I know that musicians do not necessarily like to hear that people use their work as an acoustic backdrop, but well, I am not the only one who listens to music this way. I like many different records. Just recently, I played a lot of Velvet Underground, for example. But I not only play music in my studio. I also put on audio books and have novels read to me. I am a big fan of Thomas Mann. Just recently I listened the whole way through 'The Magic Mountain.'

JK: 'The Magic Mountain'? My goodness!

OJ: I loved that book! It is a big ordeal and almost endless, but in a beautiful way. The novel describes an almost limitless inner world. I really enjoyed that. In my understanding, 'The Magic Mountain' deals not so much with illness but more with self-love.

JK: In this book, Thomas Mann describes the bodily symptoms of love, the fever of falling in love which can effectively be measured with a thermometer—psychosomatics, in a way.

OJ: Yes, and to be honest, I still have not fully understood whether the protagonist, Hans Castorp, is really sick or if he only imagines being sick the whole time until the end.

JK: You just said that in music you mostly pay attention to the oscillations of the mood. The 'Magic Mountain' also relies on oscillations—between fever and coldness, between the plains of Hamburg and the high summits of the Swiss Alps. In your paintings, the beautiful can often be found bordering on the very ugly, vanitas motifs stand right next to something silly. Are such contrasts crucial to your work?

OJ: Yes, contrasts are very important. Not only in music and literature. Contrasts also make a painting exciting. They emerge when opposites approximate—so close that they border on each other. Right on this line where opposites meet a lot can happen; things can tilt in one or the other direction. That is the reason why I think that lines, separating light and shadow or separating different colors, always are the most interesting aspect of a painting. A line is much more exciting than the area which is enclosed by it. A line always represents a potential, it leaves open a possibility.

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II

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ZOO, 2011



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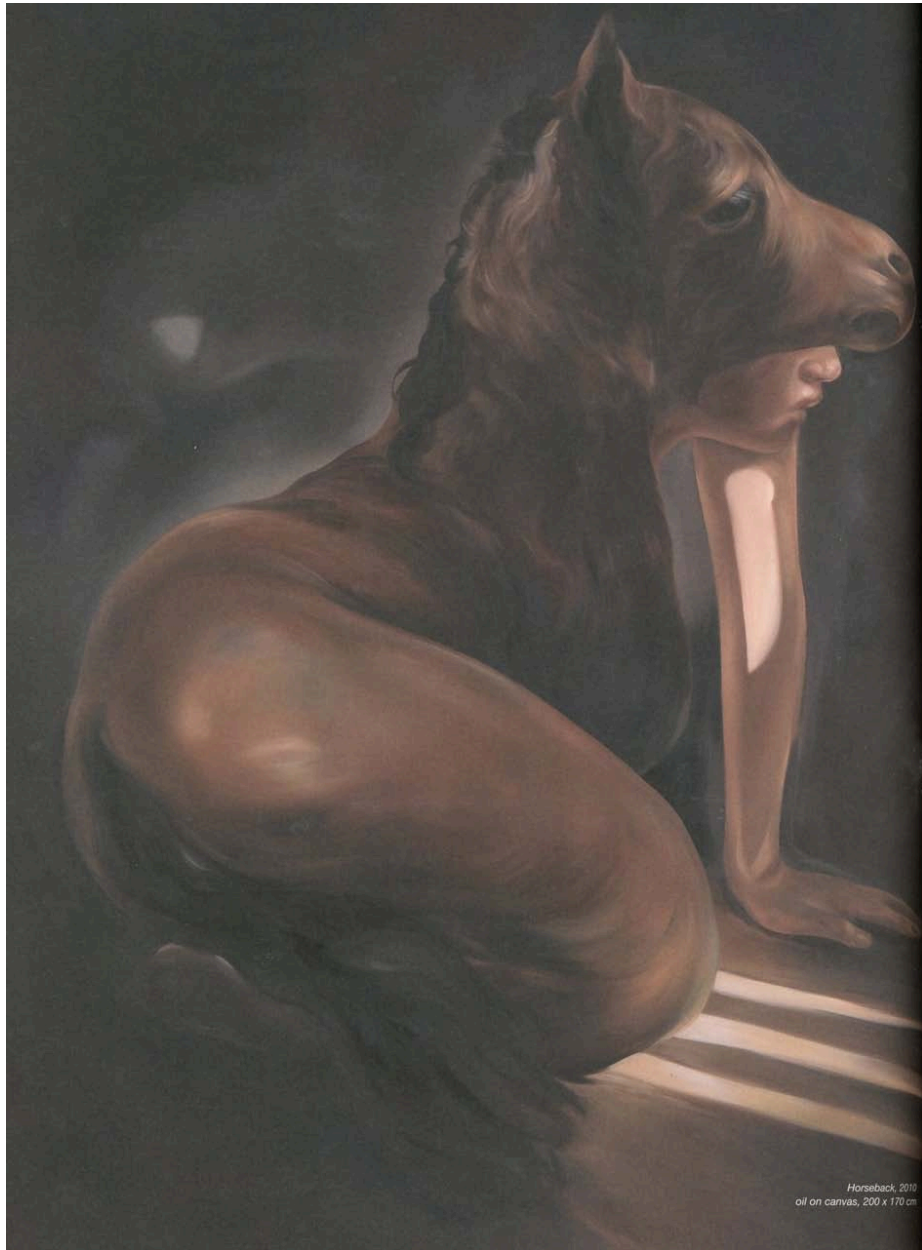


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II

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