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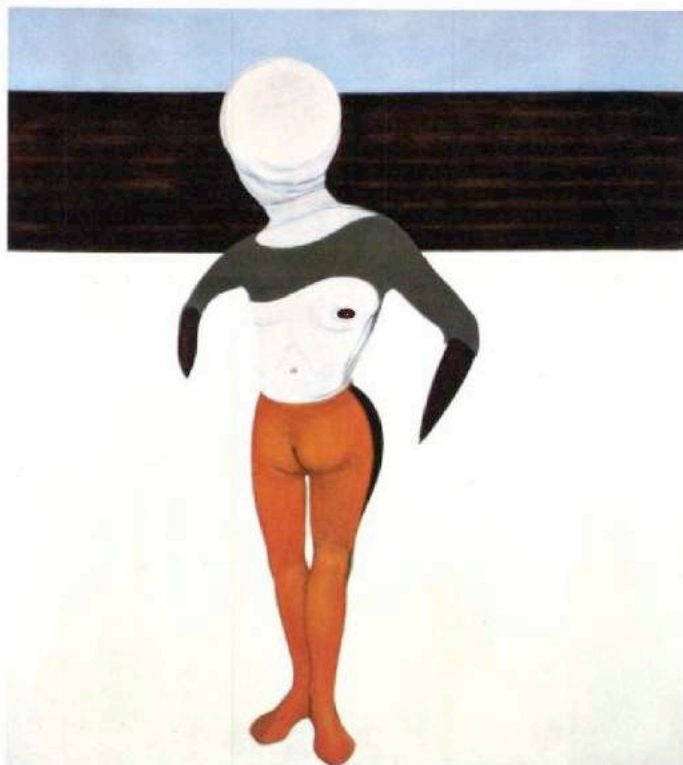




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## INTHESTUDIO



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IT'S OFTEN SAID that Nicola Tyson's work explores gender, sexuality, and the body. But it doesn't so much explore these issues as cannibalize them, excreting heady, unnerving images filled with playful invention and excoriating humor.

Born and raised in London, Tyson relocated to New York in 1990, where she became known for her paintings of anatomically scrambled, acid-hued figures—often, though not exclusively, female—in various states of bodily ecstasy and disintegration. Known primarily as a painter, Tyson is putting down her brush for the time being, preparing drawings for her upcoming show at Friedrich Petzel's uptown space in New York, which runs March 2 through April 9.

The artist's rustic, Shaker-style farmhouse in New Paltz, New York, is outfitted with multiple work spaces to accommodate her protean practice, which over the years has included photography, film, sculpture, writing, and performance. Off the hallway is Tyson's "drawing depot," where the walls and worktables are covered with variously sized works on paper teeming with alien landscapes and willowy creatures. Downstairs is a painting studio where the artist is experimenting with acrylic works painted onto glass and transferred to paper. In a freestanding cottage a stone's throw from the main house, Tyson has a wood shop, where she is working on five larger-than-life anthropomorphic sculptures made from wood salvaged from a felled apple tree, the stump of which is still visible in her front yard.

Tyson's home and studio seem worlds away from New York City, though they are only a two-hour drive north. In front

of her house is a barn where she keeps donkeys, and the dining room windows look out onto a brook. When I visited in December, Tyson showed me photos of the spot where an enterprising beaver had recently constructed an architecturally imposing dam.

Tyson's surroundings are undeniably

Clockwise from top: *Figure and Ploughed Field*, an oil on linen, 1994; *Pre non snow storm self-portrait*, in graphite on paper, 2015; the basement studio where the artist is perfecting her monoprint technique.





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idyllic, but there's nothing at all quaint about her drawings. Some of her characters are hulking and tuberous, with oversize hands and feet; others are spidery and attenuated. Playing on the outskirts of figuration, these creatures are imbued with a strange liveliness. "I really try to have the drawings be somehow sentient, even if they're not clearly a recognizable thing," she says. Tyson's golems and grotesques seem suspended in Brownian motion, an effect achieved through her fast-paced, improvisational working method.

"When I start drawing I don't know what's going to happen," she explains. "I want to stay ahead of the decision-making, rational mind, of language, of anything that's

her relationship to drawing, something she used to conceive of as a private practice. "There's a slightly performative aspect to it now. It is no longer this reclusive thing that I am doing alone."

Downstairs, Tyson is revisiting the monoprint technique she started experimenting with in the early 2000s. Working rapidly with acrylic, she paints directly onto a glass plate and then uses an ink roller to apply the image onto paper using varying degrees of pressure to achieve different textures and effects. Her early explorations of this technique culminated in a series of emotionally raw, physiognomically unhinged portraits shown at Petzel in 2003. Several of these "Portrait Heads" will be included in her upcoming

show there. Revisiting this method, with its combination of fast-drying paint and lack of preparatory drawing, allows Tyson to remain intuitive. "I'm a colorist, too," she says.

**Tyson's golems and grotesques seem suspended in Brownian motion, an effect achieved through her fast-paced, improvisational working method.**

about naming things or directing me. I have no idea what I'm going to draw until something starts to appear." In order to avoid fussiness and pedantry, Tyson starts and finishes her smaller drawings in one go. "One of my rules is that I do it in one sitting, and that is that. There is no going back in."

In early 2015, Tyson began posting one of her drawings every day on social media, and she even made a group of square drawings to accommodate the Instagram format. "Social media was a way to share them and have a conversation beyond the gallery," she says. Moreover, the experience transformed

In the cottage, Tyson is fashioning the sculptures out of the apple tree wood. These twisted, carbuncular figures, which will be freestanding once they are finished, could easily have walked out of one of Tyson's drawings. "Apple wood is so expressive and beautiful," she says. "It's pink, and all the bugs that were underneath have made these tracteries." Enchanted with their natural textures, Tyson is assembling the lumber pieces—many of which already resemble torsos and limbs—into deliberately crude skeletons, manipulating her raw materials as little as possible. Building on the delicate

Preparing a suite of works for the upcoming show at Petzel gallery.



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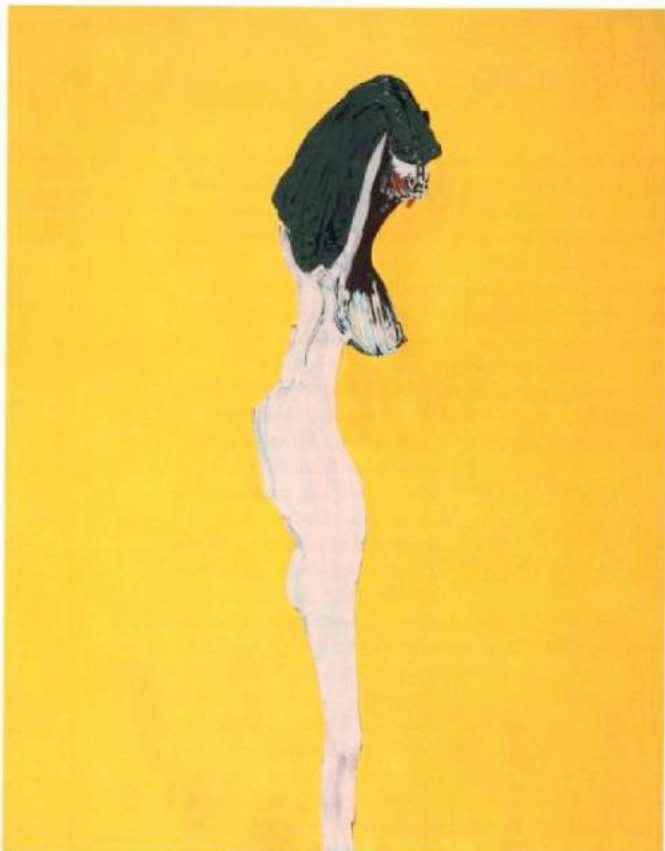
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A collection of "Portrait Heads" from 2002-03, right, being compiled for inclusion in the catalogue for the exhibition at Petzel. Below, from left: Tyson's explorations of the figure include *Nude*, a 2005 oil and charcoal on linen, and *Kiss*, a 2015 graphite on paper piece.



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avian sculptures molded from Crayola Model Magic (a lightweight, fast-drying children's clay) that she exhibited in 2011, the timber sculptures are Tyson's first serious foray into making large-scale objects. "I don't want to be pigeonholed as a painter because I actually want to develop sculpture now," she says. "I really want to make things in space."

In 1979, at the age of 18, Tyson enrolled at the Chelsea School of Art in London to study graphic design. Just before enrolling there, she began photographing the nascent postpunk scene surrounding Billy's nightclub, a gay dive and discotheque in the Soho neighborhood. Exhibited at White Columns in New York in 2012 and at Sadie Coles HQ in London in 2013, her snapshots of London's young, broke, and glamorous—including a teenage Boy George—document a transitional moment in British subculture, as the dark nihilism of punk gave way to the sartorial theater of the New Romantics. "Punk had gone mainstream and most of the big players were off touring," Tyson explains. "The younger fan base, people like myself and Boy George,



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wanted that energy. So it became about dressing up." Tyson would sell her photographs back to her subjects for beer money, but she remained merely an observer of the pagantry. "I didn't dress up like they did," she says. "It came out later in my painting. I'm interested in reinventing the body, but that comes up in my work rather than in my appearance."

After a year in art school, Tyson dropped out and fell in with London's underground art and music scene, freelancing as a music photographer, making Super 8 films ("posey, early-'80s things" she calls them), and playing backup percussion in an art band. "It was a performance thing," she remembers. "We used to enrage people at clubs. There's this Gertrude Stein poem called 'If I Told Him' that's several minutes long, and the front man, Bertie Marshall, would recite it and I'd just be banging a cymbal or something."

"It was all really exploratory," Tyson says of this period. "I wasn't working within any kind of artistic framework. There was just a lot of aesthetic indulgence and general mucking about." Before the era of Saatchi, Tate, and the YBAs—when "art became the thing that truckloads of

people were coming to see"—this unofficial underground scene offered an alternative to Britain's small, sclerotic art world. "There wasn't really an art scene in London. It was really fusty," she remembers. "Art schools were churning out all these people every year, but there was nowhere to go because the art scene was so tiny and academic. All the energy was in fashion and music and design." Meanwhile, Britain's art establishment still

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constellated around two towering male figures: "this weird, old-fashioned, cliquy, alcoholic, gay world around Francis Bacon" and "the horrible straight world around Lucian Freud and his many children and women."

In 1986 Tyson returned to art school to study painting at Central Saint Martins. There, she had a generative encounter with feminist theory in the writings of Judith Butler, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray. "It was like discovering a new continent," she says. "Instead of that weird feeling of having

The artist in her monoprint studio. Tyson began developing her monoprint technique in the early aughts, and has recently revisited the process—one that enables her to make decisions intuitively.





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to work in the margins of men's worlds, to be an honorary man and work out how you can make a little space for yourself in 'the big argument,' suddenly this whole thing busted open."

Tyson has engaged with feminism throughout her career. Since her first commercial show in 1995, her work has been regularly compared to that of Bacon, Egon Schiele, and Hans Bellmer, famous male modernists known for emotional histrionics and corporal dismemberment. Keenly aware of this irony, over the past several years Tyson authored a series of witty, often scathing first-person letters to dead male artists, among them Pablo Picasso, Edouard Manet, and Bacon. Tyson has read these missives aloud as a performance and collected them in *Dead Letter Men*, a limited-edition book published last year by Petzel and Sadie Coles HQ.

Put off by Britain's parochial, male-dominated art world, Tyson left London for New York in 1990, shortly after graduating. With the patronage of a girlfriend, she opened Trial Balloon, a project space exclusively showing female artists, out of her downtown studio loft. "It was an all-woman space, but not in an old-school feminist way," Tyson explains. "It was a kind of punky, British 'fuck you'—taking the feminism to an excessive extreme to make it more rebellious. It was cheeky. We were having a good time, and we weren't going to waste time promoting men, because they have already had enough breaks." The space became a hub for New York's then emerging scene of lesbian artists and writers, among them Nicole Eisenman, Patricia Cronin, and Tyson's current partner, writer Laurie Weeks.

After three years running Trial Balloon and



Right: *Self-Portrait Singing*, 2002, one of Tyson's first monoprint works, from the "Portrait Heads" series. Below: A selection of work on paper.



showing other artists, Tyson returned to painting, struggling to find "a way of writing the body," as she puts it, that was informed by feminist theory and politics without being overdetermined by them. "When I finally stopped doing the gallery," she says, "I found that I was wanting to work in this completely unguided way, to clear away the language to see what would come in."

Today Tyson is counted, in the company of the late Maria Lassnig, her contemporary Eisenman, and the younger painter Dana Schutz, in a group of female artists who have revitalized figurative painting from what was once seen as a dowdy anachronism to a seemingly bottomless source of creative expression and experimentation. After a 1998 solo exhibition of Tyson's paintings at the Kunsthalle Zurich, her work has been acquired by major art museums including



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Below: *Untitled* (sketch book page) #35, 2006, which was completed in a single sitting, as are all of Tyson's smaller drawings. Right: At work in the studio.

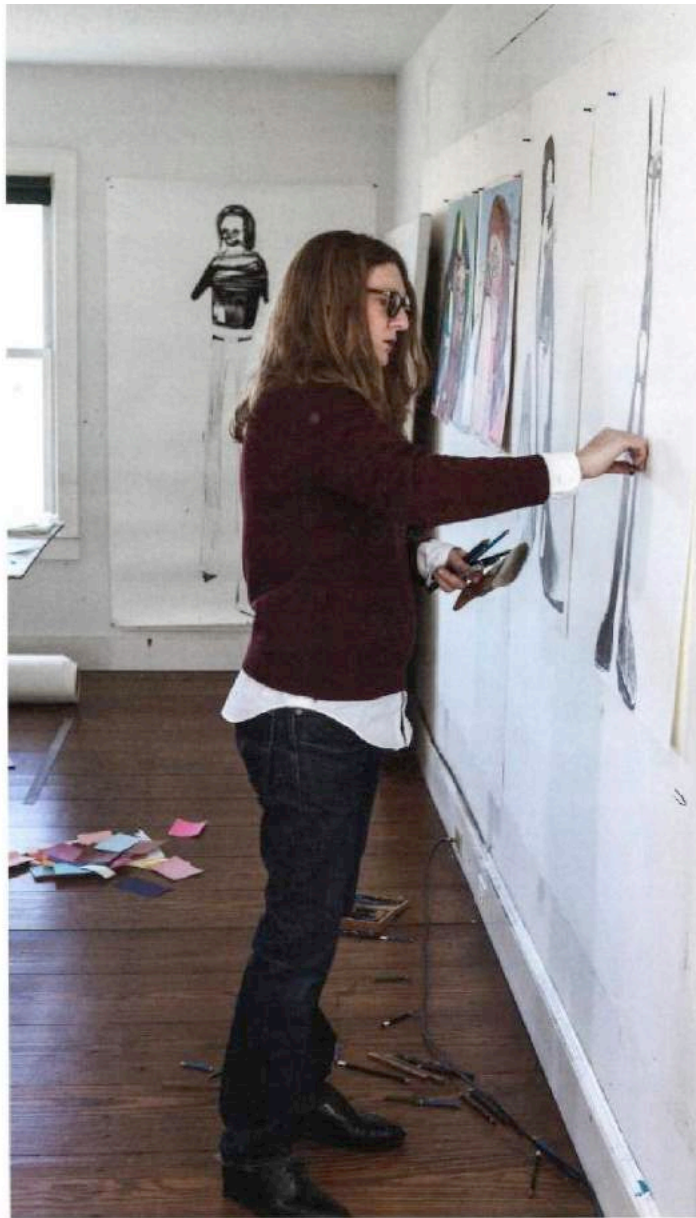
the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and Tate Modern in London. She shows regularly in New York and

London and has exhibited extensively in museums and galleries worldwide. In 2014 she joined Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects and had her first solo exhibition at the gallery, "Trouble in Happiness."

In the early 1990s, however, Tyson's anthropophagic figuration was hardly a recipe for commercial or critical success. "Painting was uncool, and autobiography and expression were also considered completely redundant," she remembers. "I thought it was suicide in a sense, and I thought nobody would be interested commercially, but I ended up with Friedrich Petzel because he happened to come to my studio and was really interested in some of the weird things that were going on in the images."

"I was incredibly intrigued by her paintings, which seemed so enigmatic and inaccessible to me," says Petzel, who began representing Tyson in 1995. "Painting was almost invisible in those years. She was not only one of the first artists I asked to join my very new gallery, but she was certainly the first successful painter in my program. We had many discussions about women artists in those years and she encouraged me to visit Lassnig in Vienna."

This inexhaustible weirdness is what keeps Tyson inspired, whatever her medium. "Figuration can so easily go wrong," she says. "I like that kind of risk of embarrassment. With abstraction, to do it really well you have to be really good, but at the same time there's sort of a set of moves that are familiar. It's this game where you do really well or you fail, but with figuration you can keep inventing and pushing it. It can easily be hokey or just crap. Walking on that edge is fun." ▣



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