

Plaza Gold Room
(2021) by Janet
Werner, courtesy of
Bradley Ertaskiran



Haute DISRUPTER

Canadian artist **JANET WERNER** has made a career of taking images directly from fashion magazines and distorting them into some of the most striking—and coveted—contemporary art.

By JOANNA FOX



PHOTOGRAPHY: DOMINIQUE LAPOND



Dallas (2020) by Janet Werner, courtesy of Bradley Ertaskiran

I'M SITTING ON A CHAIR in the middle of Janet Werner's Montreal studio. This is the first time I've interviewed someone in person since early 2020, and it's exhilarating—partly because I'm so overjoyed about being in someone's presence when speaking with them but mostly because this particular space is just as captivating as I imagined. Paintings on the walls are in various stages of completion; a stunning piece that is almost finished and will soon be shipped to a show in New York is front and centre. Off to the side, two large empty canvases are waiting for Werner to find the right inspiration. There's a long table covered with images and books, and old fashion magazines are spilling out of boxes and strewn about on the floor in an organized chaos that only Werner can decipher. Ideas are clearly in progress, with pages ripped out and strategically folded to distort images.

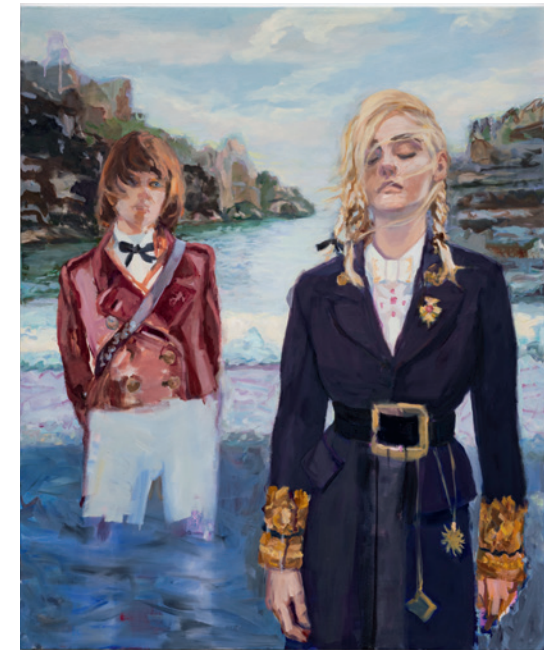
Werner is just coming off her most recent show, *There There*, at Bradley Ertaskiran gallery in Montreal, but she has no time to take a beat and reflect because she's preparing for a summer group show at Kasmin Gallery and an upcoming solo show at Arsenal Contemporary, both in New York. "It's a bit of an awkward moment right now because normally I'd be processing and relaxing, but I can't really stop," explains the artist. "Things are accelerating, in a nice way, though, with a lot of opportunities, which is wonderful—but it's pressure. You really need time. Fortunately, this painting was well under process." She points to a piece in front of us, which I later learn is called *Cliffs*, of two figures in high-fashion military-inspired clothing standing in water against a backdrop of steep cliffs. No doubt this is destined for someone's collection after its Kasmin Gallery appearance.

For fans of contemporary Canadian art, Werner's pieces are instantly recognizable. She works with predominantly

female images she finds in fashion magazines, distorting and recontextualizing them by splicing them together, playing with proportions and juxtaposing figures. It's striking, colourful, playful and dynamic work that has made her a household name in our country's art scene—a status that was further solidified by her 2019 show at the Montreal Museum of Contemporary Art, which was an overview of a decade of paintings.

"It's so multi-levelled—what's happening in the work is happening in the magazine itself," says Megan Bradley. She's half of Bradley Ertaskiran, along with Antoine Ertaskiran, Werner's representation here in Canada. Bradley has been working with Werner for about 10 years, so she's had the unique opportunity to see the artist's work progress and grow. "The most amazing thing is that Janet never ceases to change, evolve and surprise, and that is incredibly cool," Bradley told me as she walked me through *There There* in June.

Werner was born in Winnipeg and got her Master of Fine Arts from Yale University in 1987. After graduating, she taught painting and drawing at the University of Saskatchewan and eventually ended up teaching in the department of studio arts at Montreal's Concordia University for 20 years, until she retired at the end of 2019 to fully commit to painting. She was always interested in the idea of the portrait and in her early career would invent characters to paint. "I thought of them as psychological portraits—they were sort of anyone and no one, and they were also self-portraits," says Werner. It was only when she moved to Montreal that she began to look for secondary sources since she didn't want to paint real people. "The important thing is to be able to manipulate the image >



Cliffs (2020) by Janet Werner, courtesy of Bradley Ertaskiran

and play with it so that it's not about a likeness of someone but more about a psychological or emotional life," she says.

When she discovered Multimag, a Montreal magazine-shop chain, Werner suddenly gained access to an archive of hundreds of thousands of images of potential subjects. "Models from fashion magazines are also anyone and no one, so they're empty vessels for projecting fantasy or stories onto," says the artist. "I was thinking a lot about beauty and seduction and desire. Also, having just moved here, I had no family and no friends—just a job. Somehow, having these images gave me a sense of something I could refer to and hold on to. It anchored me in some way."

From there, Werner started exploring, and her practice evolved. She introduced collage, which shifted her work from being about beauty, seduction and desire to being about disrupting. "Initially, I started intermixing heads and bodies, and that just opened up a whole amazing terrain," says Werner. "I started sliding different backgrounds among the figures, and when I intercut heads and bodies, those distortions started happening."

Werner's most recent work takes her exploration of the human figure even further by almost removing it from the painting or bisecting it against different types of backgrounds—including bedrooms and landscapes—for more complex compositions. "The cuts are sharper, and there's a layering that's more intense," says Bradley. "And sometimes it's more about a singular figure, but the singular figure is energized in a different way."

The irony of Werner's work is that in spite of its fashion-magazine source material, she really doesn't know anything about fashion. "It's all just fantasy," she says. "It's about the abstract qualities—the shapes, the colours, the textures... all that stuff that fashion designers play with. Marc Jacobs talks about storytelling, and there's this interesting crossover between fashion and art and how they feed each other."

With recent exposure in the U.S. and representation at Anat Elbgi gallery in Los Angeles, Werner is at a career high; after painting for almost 40 years, she has never been busier. "I do think an artist, especially one who gets to a certain point in their career, could easily just do one thing all the time—people *do* do that," says Bradley. "What I really respect about Janet is that she always pushes it further and she doesn't necessarily have to—but she wants to."

As I sit with Werner, I can't help but notice an intricately folded piece of paper that she has casually placed on top of a pile of books on a wooden crate next to me. She has taken out the two pages from the very centre of a magazine and made folds on both sides, bringing together four different images in a way that is fascinating and appealing. I can visualize it on one of those blank canvases. "When I imagine trying to paint that, it seems impossible so [I feel like] I'm going to fail," she says with a smile. "The question is: When I'm failing, is it going to work out?" ■



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Suite (2020) by Janet Werner, courtesy of Bradley Ertaskiran