

Pilar Corrias

Conversation #2

Sofia Mitsola & Henning Strassburger



Henning Strassburger, *Untitled 8* (from the series *Alter Ego: Alphakenny*), 2023

Sofia Mitsola The first work of yours in this show that I saw was the painting with the two figures hugging, fucking. And I saw the corn and I thought, oh my God, this is such a great coincidence. I have recently been reading Nabokov's book, *Ada* (1969), where the protagonist talks about the 'husk' and 'husked'. And how this word 'husked' is the most beautiful word in the English language because it can mean two opposite things. In botany, it means it's covering something. And if you think about the word in relation to bodies, when you say that a body is husked, it means that it's stripped, it's revealed.

Henning Strassburger Really? Wow.

SM So I thought, okay, these are definitely two bodies being husked.

HS That was planned! Actually, the story of the corn started on the wall where I paint in my studio, which is in a rural area in northwest Germany. There's a tiny window that faces a cornfield. The most dramatic thing that happened while I was there last autumn was when they harvested the

corn one day. It was a real spectacle. They started at six in the morning with these big machines, and all the kids were excited because it's this Corn Day. And I made a painting where I included a corn plant. I didn't have my glasses, so I just painted it the way I thought corn looks. And then this six-year-old kid came to the studio and said, 'The corn plant is wrong'. I said, 'What's wrong? It's just the way it is'. And he says, 'No, the fruit itself is never on top on the plant'. I painted it on the top. He said, 'It's always at the bottom'. And he ran out of the studio, took an axe, went to the field, and just brought a whole plant to show me. And then he came back every day just to check that I had it right. Then, back in Zurich, I started painting these corn plants because it was this innocent, comic figure, but with this corn plant it just looks like the most sexual thing somehow.

Is there a way that you usually work – how and when do you decide which direction a painting will go?

SM I think my most successful paintings are the ones where I have made a lot of drawings, watercolours or smaller paintings to really understand where it's going. But it's important that you leave room for change, and that when something is happening you allow it to happen, because that's what keeps the painting alive. What about you? Do you plan a lot or do you go straight in?

HS A lot of the time I have a concept. For this latest body of works I had this idea of taking a figure and just squeezing it into the canvas. So the edge of the canvas has to touch the top level of the head and another part with the shoulder. And I go with the flow of the idea and think okay, whether it looks bad or ugly, I have to use it.

SM I noticed that the figures are constricted in the canvas, but I wasn't sure if it was just the pose of the bather. In my work I've also been thinking about bodily freedom: what is freedom, where it stops and how you become constricted. And then you have in your paintings – I don't know if it's something I'm projecting – windows or cells that the figure is curved within, but then beyond there's this paradise world of palm trees and exotic landscapes and utopias.

HS Wherever the figure touches the corner of the painting, I do a little shadow with spray paint as well, so that it becomes a figure that's really squeezed in. A real figurative painter would never do this. It was as if I was always doing the wrong thing – shit, the shoulder touches the corner! When I saw your works, I had this idea that the figure itself shapes the whole composition. They are so dynamic at first sight you don't recognise that the whole painting is constructed from the figure itself.

SM Exactly. I've been looking a lot at art deco jewellery and the way that they made compositions with the stones or chose a central stone and worked around it. This has influenced how I've been thinking of the figure. The way the

Pilar Corrias

figure poses, or the way that it's composed in the picture – this gives gravity to the painting, makes it lighter in some other places.

HS It's all new for me. I would say it's my first year of figurative painting. I made abstract paintings, exclusively, until I had a show in Korea in 2021. I felt I had reached the natural end of something. But then I thought: I don't want to do this anymore because it doesn't feel honest.

SM That's the thing: you cannot lie with painting. I think that's what I liked about your paintings when I saw them. They're very in the moment, like a calligraphy painting. I feel close to you in this sense because it's very important that when I start a painting, it's like a performance. For me, it's also very important to make a lot of drawings – you need to prepare to have a good performance!

HS Yeah. I don't really prepare the paintings themselves, but I do a lot of drawings. And I always hope that once I touch the canvas, I'm prepared because I did all these drawings.

SM I mean, because you said it's just a year that you have been working with the figure, I guess it's a very abstract painter thing to do – to let it happen in the process.

HS My favourite comment I've read about my paintings was one on a self-portrait where I took some parts of my face and modulated it on a Justin Bieber head, when he had pimples and longer hair and a Hawaiian shirt. I called it *Self-portrait as Ugly Justin Bieber with Pimples and Hawaii-Shirt* (2021). Someone commented, 'Oh my God, this is so ugly. This is anti-art. This is the worst.' And I thought, okay, I've reached the goal somehow.

SM I saw the work. I love this idea. It's like the idea of the protagonist as not necessarily the hero, but the anti-hero.

HS All your girls are versions of your imaginary self, right? Strong women in a new world.

SM A lot of people say, 'Oh, this is you.' For me, it feels like I'm an actor and I'm playing a character. I'm lending my body to the character. And while I'm performing, I become them; when the performance ends, I move myself back and just observe them. But I mean, they are invented characters, and of course they look like me – I think most painters who invent characters, physically they look like them. Also my sister has posed for me a lot over the years, so all of the women in my paintings look like her.

HS I am super impressed by the way you use transparent colour. You stand in front of one of your paintings and it's just this glow of colour, and the blue interacts with the red in an incredible way. I don't mean this theoretically, but how do you choose these transparencies and combinations?

SM It's interesting you mentioned the transparency because I think only painters can understand this. For years I had these beautiful, transparent colours in my palette that I was never using pure. I was always adding a lot of white, and as a result the paintings became dim. I was trying to imagine how I would paint landscapes. I come from a place where you look at the sea all the time, and there's a lot of light. I'm a Greek – it's not possible that I don't know how to paint a sea! So I was trying a lot of different methods and thought, okay, I need to paint a sea, but in a very Mediterranean and Aegean kind of way: transparent and very, very light. I did a lot of tests and realised that some colours, especially Indian Yellow or Manganese Blue or even Ultramarine, if you allow them to really do what they're able to do without interfering with the way that they're made – their nature – they give you the most vibrant light.

HS The way the light shines through is super impressive. And you can tell you're not correcting. The first touch is the thing, the way it is. There's no lie.



Sofia Mitsola, *Jalousie*, 2023