

THE BIG DIG: CELESTE RAPONE



SENSUOUS ELABORATION: CELESTE RAPONE IN CONVERSATION WITH JOHN CORBETT

THE EDGE

John Corbett: I want to ask you about the idea of space in your work, the space that's proposed by the work and the constraint of the space suggested by the canvas edge itself.

Celeste Rapone: Using the canvas as a container for the whole body is something I've been playing with for a while as a way to not crop the figure. There's expanded vulnerability when the whole body is present as opposed to flattering cropping. One of the challenges I gave to myself when I made the paintings for the recent show at Josh Lilley Gallery in London was, okay, I'm going to move these figures outside, to ever-expansive spaces - water, air, fields. It's easy to create a container if the constraints of the canvas are the constraints of the floor of the room. You have a readymade container. I became really interested in figuring out how to maintain that without there being any actual containment within the composition. And that continued with these four paintings. They started like 'Side B' versions of the Josh Lilley paintings, where I was still interested in expanding on this idea of women outdoors and in leisurely positions, but then they tightened up and turned into women in survival mode and in a state of preparedness. But maintaining that sort of outdoor space was really important, in part because I wasn't experiencing any outdoors at that time. We were in quarantine and I was in second quarantine in my studio. Using that edge as a way to think about containing the figure, no matter what the space - and sometimes I don't even know what the space is going to be when I start painting - that has remained in this most recent work.

JC: You mentioned "expanded vulnerability" with the entire figure being there as opposed to cropping. Can you dig deeper into that?

CR: At its simplest I feel most vulnerable when all of me is visible, out in the world, not within the sort of camouflage of selfie cropping. Everything is there. You can't have multiple takes when you come in contact with a person in the flesh. That's one aspect of it. And with more of the body showing, it allows me the playfulness as a painter to work with body language, and the more body I have to work with... you know, it just might be reliant on one toe that tells the story of what the painting is.

JC: I'm thinking of the idea of cinematic off-screen space. Your paintings are not really like that, they're much more of a self-contained ecosystem. Everything necessary to read the painting is there, as opposed to being somewhere else that you can't see it or somewhere else you have to imagine it.

CR: I've actually never thought about it that way. It's interesting because seeing the paintings within the context of my studio, I see how much stuff from the studio gets into the painting. So there's a little bit of cross-pollination there. Something I look at every day and pay no attention to then all of a sudden becomes the resolution for a painting. I do really like sort of imagining each of the paintings as their own totally separate worlds. I always work four paintings at a time. I like for each of them to have their own separate spaces within my studio, even though each of them takes a lot from the unifying space.

JC: Having seen your paintings at early stages, I'm struck by the fact that what you said a little earlier seems consistent, which is that you don't always know where they're going in terms of what a particular element in a painting might be. Robert Barnes said something similar about his painting method; he's making paintings that are figurative, they're representational, they're narrative, they're actually even *dramatic* paintings, but the way he starts them is by making abstractions and then discovering a narrative or a scene within them. Is that similar to how you work?

CR: I don't start all paintings the same way. There are some I'll start with a narrative prompt and sometimes that narrative prompt stays as the image of the painting or sometimes it totally changes. Other times I'll start with a color problem. But usually, when I'm going to start a painting, I'll just start. With these four paintings, a lot of those narrative ideas started with the places. I wanted one to be an island/beach scene and I liked the idea of a backyard, a field – things I don't have access to right now. So that can be a starting point and then I mix color. One of my favorite things in painting is assigning a palette to something that has no color associations or color-coding system. I mean I'm a total formalist when I start a painting, because it's all shapes. I don't make preliminary drawings. A lot of the abstraction that occurs in the anatomy of the figures is really a byproduct of an arm, for instance, really existing as a shape before it exists as an arm. So there's this construction that happens and once that develops the paintings go through these secondary waves of development. I'll figure out who they are, why they exist. My husband Ian can always tell when it's my second day on a painting because that's my most frustrating day. I've got the composition blocked in, there's a freshness to it, it feels new and exciting, and then I kill it on day two by going in and making a decisive move. You kill that initial freshness, but you birth this new direction for the painting.



Full Crouch, 2018, oil on canvas, 68 x 50 inches. Installation view of "Celeste Rapone and Betsy Odom: Everlast" at Corbett vs. Dempsey, September 21 – October 27, 2018.



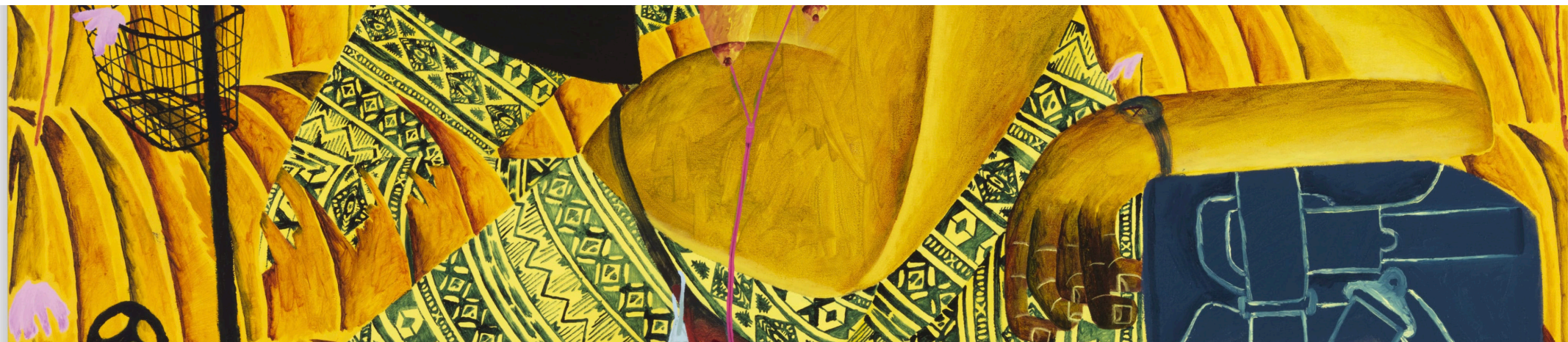
THE DETAIL

JC: One of the incredible pleasures of spending time with your work is that there are small things that are not instantaneously evident. It takes a while to notice them and then to see how they relate to one another. I'm curious about details and how they fit into narrative in your work.

CR: I could categorize the detail in two ways. One is the way the figures accessorize themselves, and the second is the heightened way I try to paint something. The first speaks to ways I start to construct the identity of the figure. It becomes about 'what would *she* be carrying? what would *she* have?' A lot of those objects are pulled from my personal history or things I'm using or thinking about right now. I made all these paintings during the height of shelter-in-place and all this crazy anxiety, but when I made the mermaid painting I was thinking about recreating an image I would have made drawing as a kid. It had all the things I would have put in a composition back then - a mermaid, rainbows, glitter, makeup, flowers. Jesus probably would have been in there somewhere when I was a kid (laughs), we left him out this time around. There was this anything goes quality to these paintings, for me; I had no expectations because nobody knows what to expect about anything, so, you know, I felt liberated to put things in paintings that in another time I probably would have been embarrassed about. I painted that rainbow, and then I stepped back, and I was like, I'm going to wipe that out, I can't believe I just did that, and then I just left it, you know? So I think a lot of those details tell the story of who the figure is, but they are little constructs of my personal history that I like to get into the paintings. In terms of the way I paint, I come from a hypertechnical, photorealistic background and there's very little opportunity now for me to really employ that specific skill set, so it's about rethinking the way I use the skills. Rather than painting an object illusionistically, I'm much more into simulating a specific surface or using that sort of detail-oriented quality to create a familiar kind of fabric or landscaping, like the grass in the eagle-hunter. I shifted the way I think about detail as a technician.

JC: Your use of detail has a cinematic quality to me. Like the close up or the cutaway, an object that gets you from one place to another in the narrative, or something that tells a secret, like a logo or a commercial object. Things with connotations. They help not just give flavor to the scene, but they also help move it along and deepen the character.

CR: One of the reasons this quarantine/don't-see-other-people has been weird for me (that I'm noticing now) is that I pick up so much for the paintings just by walking around and looking at people. I'll see anything – someone wearing something or carrying something, or a billboard, or a poster, anything, and it sits there in my subconscious and then it gets into the painting somehow. Having really limited access to seeing things and people has been a challenge for the way that I like to work.



THE LIMB(S)

JC: Let's talk about limbs in your work. The way you sometimes compact the figure seems like it creates a puzzle for you where in each case you have to figure your way out of the question of how this figure who will have 'x' number of limbs...

CR: Fingers, I paint a lot of extra fingers.

JC: ...and will express, conceal, or show them all. It becomes an enigma or an equation that you then have to solve.

CR: I'm equally confused while I'm painting it. Because they start from this place of just shapes. I love a good shape. I mean, shapes! I could talk about and look at shapes all day. That's where they start. I don't think of them as legs or feet or arms. I've seen my paintings once they're out of my studio in the world sometimes and been like, 'That doesn't make any sense.' Those are some things that are really the first moves in the paintings. I think if I took too much control over the anatomy or the proportions of the figure they would feel too controlled, I'm not sure. But it really just happens organically while I'm making the painting. I go back and wipe things down and change things all the time, but I tend to use some of that natural abstraction in the anatomy as an anchor, a compositional anchor for a lot of other aspects.

JC: Have you hit places in particular paintings where you couldn't solve an anatomy problem in a way that felt satisfactory to you and then you had to then go back and completely rethink?

CR: Yeah. But when that happens the whole painting gets wiped down. It's never about, "This arm doesn't work, I'm going to wipe down this arm." Because if I change that arm it changes the way everything responds to it. I'll completely wipe out pretty far into a painting. I like to get the bodies in one shot, and if it doesn't work, then I wipe it down and redo it because everything is connected to everything else. Even though I approach them abstractly, I am anatomically bound to a certain degree. My background is in observational figure painting and so there's also a little bit of, "Can I muster the imagination to take on this pose and make it convincing?" If I decide I want this foot to be doing something, I'll take off my shoe and sock and not look at my foot but pose my foot and try to paint the way that pose feels. The constraint or strangeness of it. There's a lot of my body in those bodies. It's the body I know and I see everyday.



THE SCENE

JC: How does the narrative premise in your paintings arise? I know in the past you've worked with a single overarching idea for a body of work sometimes.

CR: In these four paintings, the process operated differently than in my other previous work. I mean, with my previous paintings – okay, there were narrative shifts, there were changes along the way. But I started these four in early March and then I was out of the studio sick with the flu – maybe COVID, maybe not – for a couple weeks, and I came back to these already-started paintings in a completely different headspace in a completely different world. I could have just wiped them down and restarted from this new point of view I was in, but I was really interested in the challenge of taking on paintings in which narratives have already been constructed. I was painting an eagle hunter, and I had started a limbo painting – women, out in space, alone, relishing in their leisure – and took those initial narratives and shifted them to more or less represent what I was thinking about, which was, ugh, a whole lot of anxiety and terror, and I used that framework to make completely different paintings out of them. The mermaid whose face is all of a sudden totally blue because she’s holding her breath. The limboer whose feet are sinking because she can’t move. The eagle hunter who’s taking on some of the same facial anatomy as the eagle.

JC: And *Forage*.

CR: Yeah, the woman that’s chopping wood, which is something I used to watch my father do when I was a kid, all the time, and never participated in. I was thinking about suddenly being forced to do something like that for reasons of survival. It was really interesting to watch those paintings transition from one place narratively to a very different, darker place.

JC: I hadn’t thought about these as being survivalist paintings in that way. Like they’re kind of quizzical survivalist paintings in the sense that they’re not what we normally think of as being survivalist, in part because survivalism has such a patriarchally-loaded connotation...

CR: Yeah. Totally.

JC: ...and then also because some of these, like the mermaid painting, *Neighbor*, it’s such an interior painting. Composing within the edges seems to turn things inward, so that there’s a formal logic that reinforces the psychological aspect of this interiority, with things circulating amongst themselves within this one place. Because she’s looking down, there’s the water, the held breath – it’s this very interior painting to me, a lonely painting. COVID Survivalist.

CR: When I was making them I started thinking about them as women in different modes of preparedness for survival, but they’re still *fine*. They’re still in a totally privileged position and they’re fine. There’s a melodramatic quality to their survivalist mentality that’s brought on by themselves. I think putting it within that ‘COVID Survivalist’ framework is interesting because it’s a different kind of survivalism. It’s within this particular bubble, I guess.



JC: I mean, an eagle hunter wearing those tights...

CR: Yeah.

JC: ...that's a very funny image.



JERSEY

JC: Let's talk about Bruce Springsteen for a minute.

CR: Mhmm!

JC: I spent a formative period of my young life outside Philadelphia, and Jersey was a mythic place to us. Down the shore.

CR: Oh yeah. Uh-huh.

JC: I think Springsteen's ethos covered our terrain as well. Springsteen also uses details, all of the little images that pepper the songs, which are part of the drama, the super-melodramatic feeling that they have. I wonder if that's some kind of link here. How important is Jersey suburbia to your personal mythos?

CR: That's my whole history. So whether I want it to be there or not, it's there. And Springsteen is an interesting example because I hated him growing up. I was the black sheep in every way, but also because I couldn't get behind that Jersey-pride identity. I still can't, but I've grown more nostalgic for it now that I'm older and I don't live there anymore. It really wasn't until recently that I started to like Springsteen and really just the one album [*Born To Run*].

JC: Really? Just the one album?

CR: As a collection of songs, that's the only one I listen to (laughing). But I start to notice I allow a lot more things from that part of my culture to seep back in. I grew up going to Sunday dinner at my grandmother's, every Sunday, and I left for college and was like, "I'm never making red sauce. It's not gonna be me, ever." And two years ago, I said: "Ian, maybe we ought to start making pasta on Sundays." You know what I mean? Those cultural things, they end up in the paintings as objects, something I grew up with that I looked at all the time, or that my mother wore, that my father used, or that my brother used. And there are little nods in the paintings that connect them to more autobiographical content. Because on a very superficial level that's how I still view the paintings. I think on a different kind of level, growing up there is where my whole idea of anticipating crisis came into play. You know, we were Catholic. I was an altar server. I grew up in a really strict fear-of-God household, and there was a constant dark cloud. Even if something good happened, well, something bad's gonna happen right around the corner. You know? So I think that constant state of crisis has remained with me, and that's what fuels the work. There's the visual opulence, but I think there's a deeper, prepare-for-the-worst mentality, which is why all the paintings always feel to me like they're not really happening right now, they're sort of imaginations of the future. And that's why painting during the pandemic, right now, during a real crisis was so interesting to me, because it's not an invented narrative of worst-case-scenario, it's painting through a real worst-case-scenario. And it time-stamps the work in a different kind of way. There's an abstraction to the chronology in most of my paintings because I don't know if these things are ever going to happen. If they happen, they might happen in the future, but these four paintings are happening *right now*.

JC: Yeah. I hadn't thought about the Catholic aspect of your work. Just the opulence of the paintings, the way that *Mass*, for instance, has ostentatious pageantry as part of it...

CR: Yeah. Totally.

JC: ...even the structure of the garb that everyone's wearing, the robes and the use of gold as ornament, lots of different clashing colors, and so on as part of a sensory overload...

CR: Oh, yeah.

JC: ...but within a very compact, condensed powder-keg type situation. This isn't like Mardi Gras, right? Where it's all about joy and abandon...

CR: Right.

JC: ...this is about let's push it together, feel guilty about it, make it explosive.

CR: Constraint. On Good Friday you go to Stations of the Cross at noon, and then you have to spend the next three hours at home, in silence, fasting and not talking. Okay,

three hours without eating is no big deal, but my brother and I, we would come up with strategies to steal potato chips out of the closet, you know, *anything* to sort of push back against that constraint. In hindsight, three hours of quiet seems phenomenal right now, but that's exactly what it was. All this opulence, and then you go home and it's about constraint. In the past couple months I've been rereading a couple things that I really like, and I am rereading them through the lens of what's going on right now. Susan Sontag's essay "The Imagination of Disaster" talks about how we're so drawn to sci-fi horror films because of the arc of disaster and then a lack of moral obligation, because we can experience cruelty towards whoever the antagonist is and we can experience safety because the hero comes and saves everything. One of the reasons that we're so drawn to these movies is that they are this perfect combination of our two greatest fears: banality and death. And, you know, the banality is addressed through – I love the phrase she uses so much I wrote it down – "sensuous elaboration." I read that and I was like, oh my God, that's exactly what I feel like my paintings are; that's everything that I'm thinking about in making my paintings.

JC: I went to school at a Quaker school when I was young, and we had a similar situation except we didn't have any of the opulence, the whole thing was about austerity – you go to a stark, wooden, undecorated place, and there's like a hundred students of various ages...

CR: Can't even imagine...

JC: ...and you have to be silent for an hour. Hilarious.

CR: Yeah.

JC: And the weird thing is that we did that once a week for the entire time that I was in Quaker school, which must have been about seven years, and it was fine. Nobody went nuts. You didn't have tittering festivals. There is something about the fact that there wasn't the opulence and in the case of Catholicism and especially Italian Catholicism, I think opulence is a cultural birthright too, right?

CR: Oh, yeah.

JC: In small ways, in details, there is opulence within the home. There are shiny objects...

CR: Oh, yeah, totally. And it's all based on this sense of one-upmanship. I think there's a lot of one-upmanship in the paintings as well, from woman to woman. In Jersey it is not just religion, it's anything, everything. Cars, hair, nails, anything. Tans. They're paintings about trying hard. Nobody wants to see someone try, and I feel like all the paintings are looking right at someone trying. There's something kind of cringe-worthy about watching someone try. But, I mean, I grew up constantly watching people try. (laughs) Myself included, trying to fit in, even though it felt like a totally not-natural space for me.



PLATES



