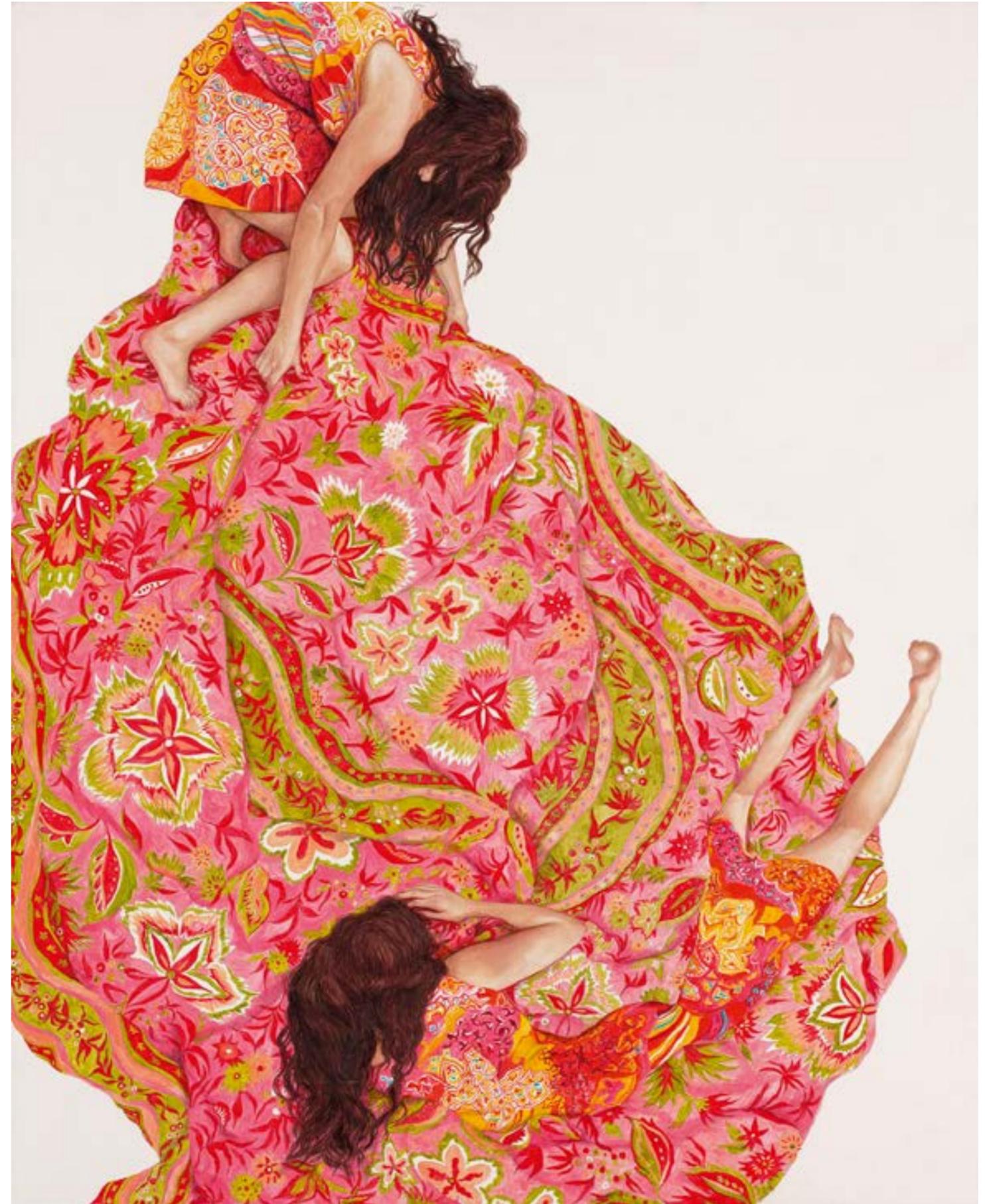




MONICA ROHAN

INTERVIEW LUCY STRANGER

Monica Rohan's energetic patterns push and pull the eye through the picture plane in their enticing blend of realism and abstraction. Adding to this intensity are tumbling figures that twist through layers of fabric – are they whimsical or overwhelmed? With two sellout shows within a year of graduating, Rohan has successfully caught the public's eye and held it. Monica Rohan speaks to ARTIST PROFILE about the motions within her practice that produce such emotively embodied works.



I UNDERSTAND YOU grew up in a rural area in Queensland?

My dad's a dairy farmer so I grew up on a property in the Kerry Valley in the Gold Coast hinterlands. I spent a lot of my childhood and teens just wandering around the hills, having free rein there. My parents let me go to art lessons, and I was always pretty focused. I could spend hours and hours drawing all the time. I was also the youngest; my siblings are quite older than me so I had a lot of time left to my own devices.

Who has influenced your practice?

Particularly one painting, Édouard Vuillard's 'Interior, Mother and Sister of the Artist', 1893. In the work there are two figures, especially the sister who is standing and stooping, and blending into the wallpaper. There is this really intense pattern behind her, I think that was a pretty major revelation to me. As well as that, Amy Cutler, an American artist, has also done weird figures with patterns.

Your practice focuses primarily on re-negotiating the self-portrait. What appeals to you about this format?

I think it started mainly just from wanting to paint figures. I was a ready subject, it was easier to have control and less awkward than to ask someone to be in a painting for me. In my third year of uni, that was when everything began to get more serious. I started to take my career trajectory more seriously, and think maybe I could do this. So I started looking at theories around autobiography and narrative.

What does the narrative allow you to achieve?

I think looking into autobiography led me to critical self-examination, really exploring my vulnerabilities and limitations. Figurative painting has a certain narrative aspect that allows me to express these feelings. I exaggerate the space the figures occupy with colour and pattern as a kind of extension of inner emotions. There isn't a narrative in a traditional sense but the work speaks of personal experiences.

There is a duality underlying your works balancing between being quite playful and whimsical, to a growing sense of being overwhelmed. What inspires a work?

Without having words to say what I mean or how I feel, my practice lets me find a way to express that pictorially. The pattern does come to represent kind of everything blowing out of proportion around you, and the feeling of being overwhelmed or unable to communicate or truly grasp what is going on. The patterns are very emotive to me. They suggest a psychological depth that is both familiar but difficult to express. This appears sometimes as a struggle between the figures and their surrounds, and sometimes as surrender. While the patterns are drawn from everyday things such as foliage and clothing, I get consumed in the details, pushing them toward the limits of reality.

Your detailed rhythmic and pulsing patterns play with the depth and form of the picture plane. What informs this approach?

I guess there is always the intention of pushing the pattern beyond reality just to make it other, or unreal. And I think that is what makes the figures uneasy, or creates a sense of unease when you look at them. That has always been an intention with the pattern and how they came about. The pattern is so meditative, I'm kind of sad when it is over. I think "that's it then, I have to start again".



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How do you begin a work?

It varies a little bit. Sometimes I often start with a vague idea of what I want to do, and then a really rough sketch. I set up some photos with the fabric or the hedge, or whatever I'm using. Often in that stage as soon as I start physically performing what will be in the painting everything changes. I think that performative element lends a sense of believability, like it is easier to relate to. It's not just collaged in, it's actually happening, I'm actually hiding in the hedge. So I start off with sketches and photos, and push things around a bit. I then transfer them onto a board once I have decided what to do.

So, is physically performing your initial idea critical to developing a work?

Yes definitely. When I was an undergrad I used friends a couple of times. I talk about art with my friends all the time because most of them are artists as well. So I started using friends in paintings, but it comes from a mutual understanding between us, it is still about me even when I am drawing someone else. It's important to capture the poses in a certain way. They need to have the awkwardness and tension of real bodies. The process involves a lot of trial and error, but I find photos reveal



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subtleties in the figure that I wouldn't be aware of if I was just sketching. This 'performance' during the planning stages is absolutely vital.

Is this form of engagement important in developing your practice?

Painting my friends is fairly new to me, but I'm really excited by the potential. I think it's already strengthened my practice just by allowing me to get outside of my head and respond to another person. There's definitely a level of trust and understanding that comes not just from being friends, but from years of supporting each other's art practices. Despite this, it is a surprisingly awkward process. Happily though, this awkwardness translates into the finished works in interesting and unexpected ways. Individuals seem to emerge in their own ways through the painting process. ■

Monica Rohan is represented by Jan Murphy Gallery, Brisbane

www.janmurphygallery.com.au

Monica Rohan, photographer Llewellyn Millhouse

- 01 Yeah right ok, 2014, oil on board, 77 x 60cm
- 02 Bluster, 2015, oil on board, 60 x 45cm
- 03 Doubt it, 2014, oil on board, 70 x 50cm
- 04 Awkward, 2015, oil on board, 60 x 80cm
- 05 Flung, 2015, oil on board, 60 x 80cm

Courtesy the artist and Jan Murphy Gallery



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