

From: **Günther Oberhollenzer**

Massy Bodies, Enquiring Faces, and Sexual Beings  
The Gripping and Merciless Human Portraits of Albana Ejupi

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The painter must be solitary and consider what he sees.  
He must converse with himself.  
He must select the quintessence of whatever he sees.  
He must act as a mirror that changes into as many colors  
as there are things placed before it;  
if he does this, he will be as a second Nature.

Leonardo da Vinci

1.

We are living in a time in which there is a great desire for credibility, a need for the “real” and the “unfeigned”. Especially in a society of the superficial and illusions, we search for “authenticity”, thus a behaviour not determined by external influences but rooted in ourselves. Artists, in particular, are expected to be authentic in their works. But for them, such an endeavour can often be quite a challenge. Which artistic path should they follow in order to be successful? Which works are selling well and which style is the latest trend? Albana Ejupi doesn’t worry about such questions. She paints because she has to paint. An unconditional desire, painting as an innermost necessity. True, sincere, and convincing.

“I want to understand what it means to be human,” says Ejupi—her complete oeuvre seems to revolve around this central question of our existence. The painted world that results is intimate and emotional, provocative and challenging, but also uncanny and mysterious. The young artist has already developed an unmistakable visual language for exploring herself and the human condition. The themes—the pleasures and burdens of corporeality and sexuality, the beauty and pain of age and decay—are as old as humankind. The painting technique testifies to expertise and precision, but also an openness for artistic experiments (for instance, the elaborate use of sand as a painting material). Ejupi’s painting invents an own reality, condenses the real world; or more precisely, it is a daring venture to fathom the hidden essence of a body or face and lend it artistic form.

## II.

The intuitive and sensual experience of being-in-flesh drives Ejupi, but also the pursuit of identity, the fight against the limitations of the body. It is almost physically tangible how the artist struggles with the constraints of being human; her images speak of the desire to fragment and reimagine the body, to transcend the borders between self and world, between the own and the other. Mighty bodily forms fuse with one another in sexual union, a new creature seems to emerge from a pair of lovers, lying or sitting female bodies fill out the image plane, spread legs reveal their sex, the torsos without head blur with the pictorial surroundings. The woman manifests as the bearer of fertility and creator of new life, but also as a sexually connoted being.

The human body is fetish and erotic obsession. Raw and explicit, sometimes brutal and shocking, too, Ejupi shows its becoming and decay, the histories of passion and suffering of the flesh, the inadequacies it bears as well as its sensual fascination and sexual power. “The completely intact human, the inviolable, beautiful human, is probably totally uninteresting. For me, it has no meaning,” emphasised Austrian artist Adolf Frohner. “Only when I show this human, who is going through something, through my desire to misrepresent, distort, caricature, only when I make him scream, does he, in my eyes, have the capacity of being human.”\*

## III.

Natural body forms, beyond the idealised ones in the media, possess true beauty for Ejupi. They have a narrative surface on which the experiences of life have left their traces. In contrast to many contemporary artists who draw upon media images and rework them in painting, Ejupi confronts herself directly with the living model. In her studio she makes photographic sketches of old people, naked in front of a mirror, so that the body is visible both from the back and the front. Ejupi has an idea in mind, but her actions are open and free during the painting process. Hence, the paintings undergo an unexpected development, tells the artist, new paths emerge and guide her way.

The intrinsically existential is also central to the realisation process. The intensity of a brush stroke and a densely spackled form conveys equally as much power as the image motif itself; through parallel work on several paintings, the intensity of the representation seems to heighten in waves. A vibrant red and yellow, a dirty brown and ochre along with black and white are the predominant colours. Ejupi expertly blurs the borders between figuration and abstraction, between pictorial plane and three-dimensional sculpture. The sand she uses originates from Kosovo, the artist’s homeland. It imbues the picture with an unusual object-like quality, casts body parts, makes them seem “more real”. The spackled sand reliefs surmount the flat delimitations of the canvas and almost step out towards the observers. The materiality and expressivity of the works can only be captured in an art book to a certain extent. In order to truly experience them, one needs to see the originals. As paintings, as reliefs and objects, they enter into a dialogue with the surrounding space and invite us to inspect the dynamic gesture, the drips of paint, the grainy surface up close, but then again take a look from the distance, to view the whole picture from the front or the side, and circle around the work in the space.

#### IV.

A recurring motif in Ejupi's art are segments of faces of elderly people with alert eyes and demanding gazes. In form and expression they join the canon of common figurative portraits, yet these too are fragmented, somehow incomplete, or wildly painted over as well. The portrait is a sujet with one of the richest traditions in art, and its dual portrayal of physiognomy and inner life continues to inspire fundamental questions about reality and depiction, realism and abstraction. The face is a sign of identity, a carrier of expression, a place of representation. However, a good portrait is never just a snapshot of the seen, but always an interpretation at the same time—it is both an encounter with the person portrayed and with the artist herself and a vessel for her world view.

Every portrait is also a self-portrait, and in the best case an image that harbours something universal about humankind and their time, their world—as Ejupi's pictures impressively demonstrate. The reproduction of an individual face is not of importance, rather the reproduction of a countenance exposed to matters of human existence. The artist consciously searches for new forms of representation, such as the face segments, the incomplete painted passages, or also radically gestural overpainting. In this manner, she challenges us to think the image further. Precisely these voids in the images make them complete, while leaving ample space for our imagination and fantasy.

#### V.

Like how a mirror reveals the backside of a body, Ejupi looks behind the apparently obvious, under the beautiful surface. The major, radical theme in her painting is humans at the mercy of their physical existence, their reality in flesh. Grand emotions are prevalent in her work, the existential and the sexual, the eternal question of the beautiful and ugly, the solitude and depravity of humans, the knowledge of the finite nature of all being. We must only indulge in the perhaps challenging visual language, and form and colour, the tender and the harsh, the powerful and the fragile will begin a dialogue with us and come alive.

Visual arts make the claim to defy transience, to have the capacity to exist and take effect beyond the moment. Arguably, this is the intention that Ejupi admits into her painted works. She tells of the desire that drives us, time and again, to visually freeze a thought, an idea, to create a relevant (human) image and thereby evade our finitude. Herein resides the fundamental power of painting—a captivating potential that Ejupi takes full advantage of.

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\* Adolf Frohner in conversation with Friedhelm Mennekes in: *Liebe und Tod*, catalogue from exhibition in Galerie Hilger, Vienna 1989, 7–15, here 15.