

# Marie Jacotey: Menstruation, Satin Bedsheets and Henry Miller

by Anna Columbine



Through her delicate crayon and pastel drawings, artist Marie Jacotey defines and documents the contemporary female experience with insight, honesty and original creative expression. More poetic than political, her stylised pictures depict intimate diary-like stories, imagined or overheard; women and men in relatable situations; sexuality, the female body and everyday relationships. Like a comic

strip, each image conveys a sense of narrative through accompanying fragments of text, which the artist draws from myriad sources; the books of Henry Miller through to snippets of conversations overheard in cafés or between friends. Sometimes the imagery is also borrowed from elsewhere; especially Instagram, which is interesting considering how female experience is portrayed and lived out on social media. Often asked if her work is autobiographical, Jacotey describes it as being closer to auto-fiction “or something... It is very often derivative from my own autobiography, but in a very imagined way.”



*Be Young, Be Wild, Be Desperate* , coloured pencil on paper, 60 drawings, install shot, 2014

I first encountered her work in Liverpool at Bloomberg New Contemporaries 2014 when, like Jacotey, I had just recently graduated from art school. I remember feeling surprised at the number of screens that occupied the exhibition that year. It therefore felt unexpected and immensely refreshing to turn the corner and find *Be Young, Be Wild, Be Desperate* (2014) – a wall of 60 drawings. The female body featured heavily; subtle crayoned tones simulating the skin of limbs and faces, picking out highlights in the intricate folds of clothes and bed sheets surrounding her figures. The images were organised into a simple grid and presented in what I thought were basic clip frames, edges sealed with thin brown tape. A subtle but relatively unseen framing method, which also fitted in with the DIY, millennial-graduate aesthetic which was a running thread through New Contemporaries that year.





*I love*, coloured pencil on paper, from series *Be Young, Be Wild, Be Desperate*, 2014-2015

Like many, I have followed Jacotey's career ever since, and it has been several years of back-to-back shows and opportunities for the French-born, London-based artist; culminating with a solo display at New Art Dealers (Miami) and a solo exhibition at Belfast's Naughton Gallery titled *It Was A Night* at the end of 2018. Jacotey is one of many female artists making work in response to the resurgence of feminism at the moment and her approach feels timely given how much attention is currently being paid to gender roles and expectations. Yet for me, it is her inclusion in Drawing Room's recent group show *From the Inside Out* (Sept-Nov 2018) which situates her practice among that of the most notable female artists of recent times.

Here she presented new and existing pieces alongside paintings and textile sculptures by Emma Talbot, drawings and collages by Nilbar Güreş, and mixed-media sculptures by Athena Papadopolous in an exhibition that pivoted around tales of loss and grief, sexual encounter and self-objectification. Jacotey's centerpiece was a new work titled *Gloria in Excelsis* (2018) – a large-scale triptych made up of a series of 14 provocative drawings, which together depicted a very particular taboo female experience: a women's recollection of sex (a one-night stand) whilst menstruating. It is a social act that would be considered daring by many, and is a brave subject for Jacotey to approach. Within the text accompanying the work, her protagonist writes openly and unashamedly about the experience in vivid detail and with a sense of glory.



*Gloria in Excelsis*, dry pastel on tissue paper mounted on mirror, frame design by Soft Baroque, triptych, 2018



The images provided us with fragments rather than a whole scene. Fabrics and faces floated and could not be placed; women were unnamed and wore white, non-descript clothing; a shocking red book (*Henry Miller: The World of Sex*, 1940) sat upon satin sheets. Snatches of handwritten text tailed off in places or reached the very edges of the paper as if the writer was time-pressed to make a record of their thoughts. The colours were very flat and bold, making the work feel solid and direct. The aesthetic was raw and natural, like the situation: the thin Japanese paper, cut or torn into shape, containing rips in places where the penciled text and colour had been applied with vigour.

The drawings were placed in mirror-backed frames; grouped depending on their part in the story. Framing has always been a carefully considered component of Jacotey's work and is one of the first things that caught my interest. In early December 2018, I was lucky enough to be able to ask her about this unusual aspect over coffee; Nordic Bakery in Golden Square London providing a casual setting. She was conversational and friendly, generously unravelling stories about how pieces came into fruition. Speaking of the work she showed at New Contemporaries, she explains: "So, it's a combination of mounting board glass and then tape that makes them look like a really fine wooden frame... It's an old-school approach, like you'd see in dated biology drawings or plant pictures, stuff like that."

The bespoke framing technique used in *Gloria in Excelsis*, however, comes out of a collaboration with artist-duo Soft Baroque (Sasa Stucin and Nicholas Gardner). The mirror panels used in the frames lent the piece an immersive quality, with the white space of Drawing Room and other works included in the exhibition reflected back on the surface of the triptych. The mirrors also provided the viewer with a self-portrait, pushing for inward contemplation around the represented subject matter.





*Comme tu m'as regardé comme j'en tremble*, dry pastel on Japanese paper, frame design by Soft Baroque, 2017, featured in *Morning Defeats*

Friends from their time at the Royal College of Art (2011-13) Jacotey also worked with Soft Baroque on her 2017 show *Morning Defeats* at Hannah Barry Gallery to create dreamy, very fragile glass frames sealed with silicone. The silicone sticking the surfaces together looks like a peachy glue, or makeup, even, suggesting something bodily and hastily applied. She recounts how it took a few intense weeks of experimentation and an extremely lengthy, nervous process to insert the delicate works into the equally fragile glass frames.

Reading lists were provided by each of the artists included in *From the Inside Out* and published on Drawing Room's website, offering a further insight into where their ideas may have originated and crossed over. Jacotey's was the longest list with 24 books. "It mostly includes male authors like Bukowski, John Fante and strong male voices like Henry Miller, who are all quite sexual and provocative," she tells me. Several of Miller's novels initially drew controversy due to the explicit nature of his writing. *Tropic of Cancer* (1934), for example, was banned in 1938 in the United States, and not released back into general circulation until 1964 – a time seen as the beginning of a sexual revolution. A contemporary of Miller, Fante's males, meanwhile, often look at women in a derogatory manner.

The male authors on Jacotey's list are partly counterbalanced by a number of female authors from when she was younger, however, and who all write about female sexuality. "When I was 15, I fell in love with Marguerite Duras' writing," she reflects. "I could cry reading her books. They were so intense and always depicted some sort of love relationship told from these strong female perspectives. I don't think I saw her writing as being feminist back then, but..." Talking of *The Lover* (1984), based on a relationship between a 15-year-old girl and a 27-year-old man, she adds: "I fell in love with the book through the strong connection I felt with the female character, who was also growing up, discovering sex and stuff like that..." Sexuality is a mysterious realm at the age of 15 and is a constant exploration throughout life: this is the centre-point for Jacotey's art practice and could perhaps be what fuelled her initial interests in making art of this kind.

I was interested to discover which of her works resonated with her most: "I think – maybe because they are my latest – the ones I have the most fondness for are my dry pastel drawings made on Japanese paper. Though, it's strange; I always feel like my next piece is going resolve my whole practice, but it never does." By this, I imagine she means the ongoing process of developing materials and methods that will convey her message in the best and most sensitive way. But maybe her answer also applies to the wider set of themes with which her work deals. How we navigate

social situations and relationships can't easily be figured out but creating art about it helps to unfold them. Jacotey's preferred protagonists (women) continue their right to explore sexuality and navigate themselves through everyday life and its encounters as they choose. Judging by our conversation, there are plenty more artworks for Jacotey to create, and an endless pool of content for her to draw upon.



*U so pretty*, dry pastel on Japanese paper, 2018, featured in *Wild Love Me*

Jacotey was awarded a New Contemporaries Alumni residency at Hospitalfield House in September 2018 and her inclusion in an exhibition with established artists such as Talbot is an exciting step in her career. She notes how she's increasingly working on larger-scale projects over longer timescales: her exhibition *Goodbye Darkness* (October 2018) at Ballon Rouge Collective in Paris, for example, was bigger and bolder than initially planned, comprising of a huge textile installation with drawings on beds and curtains of creamy satin. This year she will spend six months collaborating on an animation project with filmmaker Lola Halifa-Legrain in France. (I wonder if the animations will retain the lo-fi, handmade element that exists within her drawings and which draws me to them?)

Crucially, these developments signal an artist who is thinking more long-term and is breaking out of the 'emerging artist' bracket. As more time and funding becomes available to develop ideas further and delve into new subjects in unexplored formats, the next few years should be every bit as exciting for Jacotey as the last.