

Art

ARTIST OF THE MONTH ERNST YOHJI JÄGER

With a cultural heritage spanning both Germany and Japan, the 31-year-old figurative artist conjures up a mysterious, oneiric vision that is inspired as much by classic painters of the late-19th century as by the graphic imagery of manga. For his first ever interview, Ernst Yohji Jäger told *Numéro* about his hopes and inspirations.

Interview by Nicolas Trembley

Though he was born in 1990, it is to painters born in the second half of the 19th century that Ernst Yohji Jäger looks for some of his references, more specifically the work of Felice Casorati and Helene Schjerfbeck. But there is a duality to his canvases, since he also turns to manga for his figures and their attitude, an oscillation between two cultures that can perhaps be explained biographically: his mother is Japanese and his father German. A classic millennial, Jäger, who also wanted to be a sushi master, doesn't worry so much about art history since, thanks to the Internet, it's all there all at once without any imposed chronology or hierarchy.

between symbolism and magic, his rich palette conjuring up a secret, mysterious parallel universe.

NUMÉRO: Where did you grow up, what's your background?

ERNST YOHJI JÄGER: I grew up in Frankfurt, Germany. My mother is Japanese and my father German. When I was younger, I'd spend long summers in Japan at my grandpa's house. Even though Frankfurt is a pretty international city, the fact of looking different and having an additional cultural background has been a big influence on my art. For example, the question of what kind of figures I would depict – what kind of faces they'd have. I have always

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Last year, at 15 Orient in New York, the world discovered his astonishing solitary figures, which he has since exhibited at Croy Nielsen in Vienna, the city where he now lives (he'll be coming to Crèvecoeur in Paris next year). His oneiric scenes, in which pale chrysalis-like figures seem to await the moment they will emerge into our world, hover

felt alien in Germany as well as in Japan, and in my painting I'm trying to find and carve out my own place. A place betwixt.

Do you remember your first encounter with art? What made you want to be an artist?

I clearly remember standing under the legs of a *Maman* by Louise

Bourgeois at a very young age, as well as being totally overwhelmed by the blueness and texture of an Yves Klein painting, seeing it with an unfiltered pureness. But by far the most intense encounter was at Moerenuma Park, which was designed by Isamu Noguchi in Hokkaido Japan. A park as sculpture. It was absolute bliss to be there as a kid. I learned to value this joy that art can awaken even in, or rather especially in, a child who does not yet know the word “art.”

What were you looking at then and what are you looking at now?

I was obsessed with Japanese sub-culture, trying to find the weirdest music, manga and films. My work is heavily informed by this. Especially how figures are depicted in a kind of universal abstract way in manga. As for painting, I always come back to Helene Schjerfbeck, I think for similar reasons. These days I often look at catalogues of work by the photographers Sarah Moon and Josef Koudelka.

Do you always know in advance what you will paint, or is it sometimes spontaneous?

I can very much connect to Sarah Moon, who wrote: “I look out for what I didn't plan, I wait to recognize what I've forgotten, I undo what I've made, I hope for chance and I wish more than anything to be touched at the moment I take aim...”

What are the image/content sources for your paintings?

Since I was able to afford them, I started collecting catalogues. I don't have that many yet, but they feel like reliable allies and friends that I can turn to for advice, and I'm constantly flipping through them. Equally important are things from a non-art context: manga, games, memes, etc. A lot of content comes from working with the medium itself and from memories, not necessarily lived memories. Daily life, seasons, light, music...

Can you talk about your palette?

I often ground my paintings with glue and mix in a very vibrant bright pigment like cadmium red. I'll build up darker layers of colour in a two-steps-forward-one-step-back kind of way, scratching and scraping. Often you can still see remnants of this search or failed attempts transformed into a different meaning – an



eye becomes the moon, the sea becomes hair. A bit like rhyming too. I like the idea of painting as a container of layered time and a process for making sense of the past. The parts where the first layer shines through are the brightest.

Is the way your work is displayed important to you?

I do care about the frames. I work on them with tea and rust to simulate an oxidation process, artificially aging the wood. Besides the fact I like the grey of oxidized wood, I chose this process because it obscures time: framing paintings this way is like taking them out of a

regular timestream and distancing them from myself too.

Do you feel any association with a community or movement?

I think what I share with a lot of artists my age is a wish to go beyond cynicism and masquerade, a yearning for intimacy and a re-enchantment of the mundane. It's such a complex theme, but one of the uniting factors for younger artists could be growing up with the Internet, where everything is getting more accessible ever faster, more coldly and more anonymously. The retrieving/inverting quality Marshall McLuhan saw in the media makes

us rediscover these values in a new light – like how Spotify brought back interest in vinyl and even tapes. For me, one of the benefits of the Internet's having become a huge part of your life is that art history has totally collapsed. Everyone can string together their own history and give value to overlooked positions, and in doing so overcome a canonical hierarchy. I find comfort in surrounding myself with catalogues of artists I admire, figures both respected and overlooked from all fields. They become reliable allies I can consult for advice. If my work could become an ally to someone else, I'd be overjoyed.

Ernst Yohji Jäger, *Untitled 3 (Shoreline)*, 2020. Courtesy of Croy Nielsen, Vienna. Photo by kunst-dokumentation.com