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Celestial bodies: in conversation with Vivian Greven

Love is the subject of German artist Vivian Greven's work. In her ethereal paintings, which borrow visually and thematically from Classical art, the human form is an embodiment of divine beauty and love. For Vivian, beauty is bound to holiness, which is in turn linked to the universal balance between life and death. Working in restrained colours and accentuating highlights and shadows, Vivian's paintings are characterised by a glowing luminosity and interplay between surface and form. She considers the canvas a semi-permeable membrane separating these two forces moving within her work. Through her fluid brushstrokes, subtle colour gradients and use of negative space, Vivian breathes life into the creamy marble bodies in her paintings. Their cold stone limbs course with life. This corporeality draws the viewer in to want to reach out and touch, mirroring the contact and gestures within the paintings.

Vivian lives and works in Düsseldorf, Germany. The recipient of the STRABAG Artaward International in 2016, she has attended artist residencies in the USA, Germany and the UK. Her work has been shown at numerous international art fairs including NADIA Miami, Art Berlin and Art Cologne and in solo and group exhibitions.

The human body has been the subject of art since pre-history and notions of beauty have been closely associated with it. Contemporary body politics has created a dramatic shift away from 'classical' representations of the human body in favour of more inclusive and diverse portrayals of the body. For Vivian however, painting the body is a kind of spiritual process. Through the act of painting, she celebrates the celestial beauty of the body and the human form.

interview by Layla Leiman

Featured image:

Vivian Greven
Art
all my names
and a flower
photo: Ina Faller

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Vivian Greven
photograph by Olli Vahden

AMM: Hi Vivian, to start us off, please can you share your earliest art memory?

VG: My first memory might be me drawing a princess when I was about 6 years old. I felt something that is still connected with me. It is the intuitive knowledge that this drawing is a language of its own, and thus able to say things I can't as a person.

AMM: Have you always been interested in classical Greco-Roman art? What initially drew you to this as a source for your own art?

VG: I would say that I have always been interested in the artificial creation of bodies. That might be something which is also found in Greco-Roman art. When I drew this princess I made her have a slim waist and that felt good. It is cruel and fascinating at once.

AMM: The neo-classicists sought to portray perfect beauty. How does this idea relate to your work and contemporary discourse around body politics?

VG: Hah! Yes, that is right. I think it might be something which is rooted in the deepest consciousness of human beings in general and through all times. We are in a state of lack and thus always in need to fill it. The idea of perfect beauty is connected to the idea of holiness and holiness in turn is connected to the universe, where death and life are lovers. This seems to be something we have forgotten and it makes people suffer and neglect parts of themselves. Contemporary body politics has to deal with a severe loss of integrity.

AMM: Please tell us about your interest in representations of the human form. When did you first start painting the body? How has your understanding of the body changed through your work?

VG: I have painted bodies for as long as I can think. The question: "What am I?" has always been my driving force. I am deeply interested in the interaction of body and mind. During the painting process I gently stroke bodies into existence. Thus, I appreciate the body and try to overcome its cruel disregard in contemporary society. The body wants to be our most loyal companion but we want it to look and function like an electronic tool.

AMM: Your recent paintings depicted amorous interactions between figures. Is the subject of your work love? Please tell us more about the themes and ideas you're exploring in these works.

VG: Yes! Love is the essence. For my recent body of work I depicted the mythological narrative of Amor and Psyche. It is the ancient tale about a unity destroyed by Psyche's desire to see the real figure of her lover. As Amor withdraws from her, Psyche becomes a soulless body and dies in the end. Through painting I try to get as close as possible to my figures' inner psychology.

The "Area" series, for instance, observes Psyche's slow dissolution in Amor's arms and demonstrates the beauty and cruelty of love's devotion.

AMM: The figures in your paintings are for the most part androgynous. Can you tell us more about this?

VG: I like my figures to be representations of human beings in a universal sense. Gender distinctions seem to be too explicit, too narrow, too earthly.

AMM: Your paintings are simultaneously ethereal and sensual. What would you hope people experience when viewing them?

VG: A sense of contact.

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- Vivian Greven

AMM: Many of your compositions focus on intimate gestures of touch – an earlobe, lips, the nape of the neck, which are all very sensual and private parts of the body. Are you drawing attention to intimacy itself or is this perhaps a metaphor for something else?

VG: I did not think of these parts as especially private parts. But yes, it's certainly about intimacy. But not in an explicit sexual sense. It's more about being close to each other. It's about trust.

AMM: How do you use light, shadow and color in your work? How do these elements support the

themes in your art?

VG: I use these formal painting techniques in order to find the strongest analogy with each painting's essence. For instance, the color red is significant in the "Lamia" series. The title "Lamia" refers to the mythological story of a woman who drinks the blood of children to overcome the loss of her own child. These paintings symbolically analyze the mutual give-and-take in relationships. Thus, the color red signifies a stream of love and the subsequent warming of body and mind.

AMM: There is an interesting interplay between form and surface in your paintings. How do you heighten this tension and to what effect?

VG: I see the painting's surface as a membrane, like a skin. I can concentrate on its direct surficial appearance but also on the volume of the body, which moves underneath.

AMM: What is your process of working? Do you start with sketches and color tests or allow paintings to evolve organically?

VG: Usually, the starting point is an intuitive reaction to a certain trigger of my surroundings. After that, I have a time of research. I collect images and thoughts. Then I filter and focus often through writing and drawing. As soon as I know what needs to be painted, I search for its composition. I don't start a painting without a composition. The colors, I find afterwards.

AMM: Beside the neo-classical references your art is very contemporary. What are some of the things, artists, texts, ideas that interest you in this regard?

VG: I am living now. That means I am constantly surrounded by contemporary influences. It's highly inspiring that everything is always available through the digital screen on the internet. Thus, even the oldest relics of existence are as contemporary as a limited edition of a MAC glitter lipstick. There is no chronological order. Everything is now.

AMM: Recently you've made a few paintings of busts in profile on shaped surfaces. Please tell us about this new direction. Is it a development of previous ideas or the start of something new? What materials are you using, and what do the cutouts represent?

VG: The busts belong to a part of my work which reflects upon power structures in language and imagery. They represent different Venus portrayals. Each of them has a cutout in the face, showing different punctuation marks. We use punctuation marks to create emojis in order to represent our emotions when communicating via smartphone. The busts are stigmatized with these punctuation marks. This work is about the stereotypical reduction of a human being, inside and outside.

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AMM: Having been on a few artist residencies, how have you found these experiences have influenced your art?

VG: It's important for me to have a broad and solid mind. The residencies help to develop both: they broaden and strengthen my mind's borders.

AMM: What are your daily creative rituals?

VG: At the moment I start with a glass of hot lemon and a meditation in the morning. Then I walk to the studio, prepare a teapot and try to listen to the silence. When it feels right I start to paint. I like to do a short nap in the afternoon. Then I go on painting often till late evening. When the silence is getting too loud, I like to listen to Podcasts. In the evening I walk the same way back to my flat.

AMM: What are the hardest things for you to get "right" in your art?

VG: An open heart.

AMM: What keeps you awake at night and why?

VG: There are many things. I am not a good sleeper. But for the most part it's fear and love.

AMM: Do you have any new projects coming up? What's next for you?

VG: I am very excited about the next year because I have many new challenges. My work will be shown internationally and my heart is full of joy that the paintings build bridges between people.



Image:
Vivian Greven
Gratia II
oil on canvas
43 x 31 cm



Image:
Vivian Greven
Gratia I
oil on canvas
43 x 31 cm

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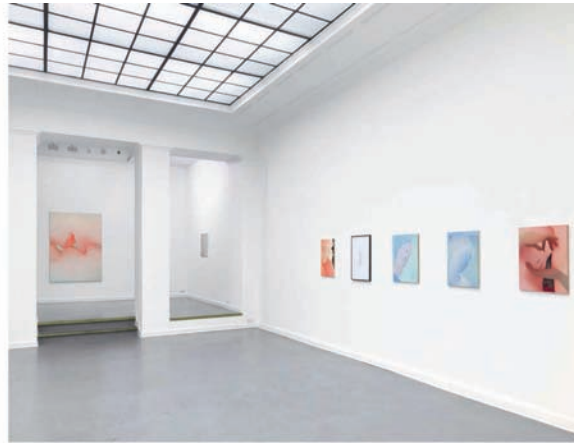
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Vivian Greven
2018
oil on canvas
100 x 100 cm

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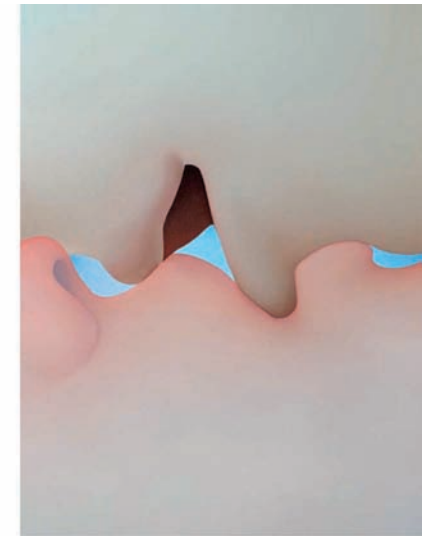


Vivian Greven
2018
oil on canvas
100 x 100 cm
photo: Layla Leiman

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Vivian Greven
2018
oil on canvas
100 x 100 cm



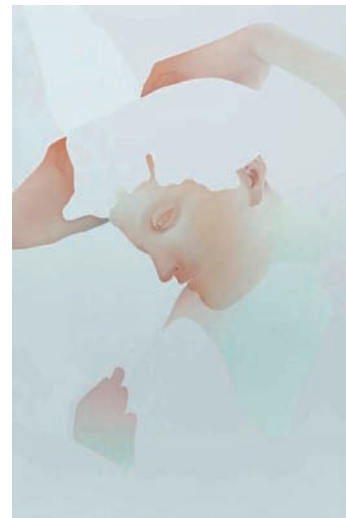
Vivian Greven
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oil on canvas
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