

# Found in Translation

*painter Elise Ansel interprets the Old Masters with a modern female voice*



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**“I took this work by Titian and I turned it upside down.”** Elise Ansel is sitting in her studio in Portland’s West End, the walls covered with her large-scale abstract paintings. Pinned by some are small reproductions of works by the old masters: Titian, Michelangelo, Tiepolo.

She picks up an image of Titian’s *Tarquin and Lucretia* in one hand, rotates it and sets it alongside a catalog photo of her painting *Scarlet*. At first glance, it is hard to recognize the relationship between the two works. Linger on them, however, and the corresponding compositional structure becomes clear. Ansel has captured the essence of Titian’s painting—its color, light, movement and energy—in a few broad, gestural brushstrokes.

“Titian is one of my very favorite painters,” she says. “But the story of Tarquin and Lucretia is one of violence against women: He rapes her and then she commits suicide. I wanted to acknowledge that there were good things about this painting, but that I didn’t like the narrative. So, I overturned it.”

Ansel is a visual translator. She takes paintings by the Old Masters and renders them in a contemporary artistic language, shifting them from figuration into abstraction, transforming their meaning and message.

“I’m trying to move them away from the literary narrative into the purely visual and then have them reemerge as a different story,” she explains. “They reemerge as a different story because I’m a different author.”

The fact that Ansel says “author” as opposed to “artist” is not accidental.

When speaking about her process, she regularly uses the terminology of comparative literature, which she studied at Brown before receiving an MFA from Southern Methodist University. “It has to do with translation and transcription,” she says. “In comp lit, there’s translation between languages—say, French to English—but also from ancient to modern.

“I’m also transcribing the male voice into the female voice,” she adds. “Every woman has to do this all the time.”

Here is where Ansel’s cerebral approach takes an emotional, as well as political, turn. By applying her contemporary female perspective to centuries-old male works of art, Ansel, 57, is addressing the continued gender inequality in our society. “I’m acknowledging that there’s a point of view in these paintings—the male point of view. It is still so pervasive in our culture that we don’t even acknowledge that there’s another point of view.”

She draws again from comparative literature to describe her artistic process. “I’m really involved in deconstruction,” she says. “And I’m deconstructing sexism.”

Ansel never planned to be a feminist artist. For decades, she created abstract paintings of the natural world, with as little human interference as possible. But no one seemed interested in showing her work. “When I was working from nature, I was working from the female voice,” she says. “Nobody took it seriously. It was too feminine, which is still considered inferior.”

Then in 2007, Ansel tried an experiment. She took an Old Master painting and approached it using the same gestural, abstract style that she’d been employing in her nature paintings. “I had first tried this when I was in graduate school,” she says, “just as a sort of exercise. But I didn’t know at that time how to fully apply my own voice to someone else’s painting. When I started interpreting the Old Masters in my own language, suddenly I was creating a capacious object that contained both the male and female voice.”

Ansel liked the results—and so did the galleries. By 2013, she was being invited to do solo exhibitions exclusively of that work. In 2016, Ansel’s show at Bowdoin College, *Distant Mirrors*, put her on the Maine map; solo shows at London’s Cadogan Contemporary and Danese/Corey in her native New York City followed. Last year, Ansel’s work was chosen for the Portland Museum of Art’s Biennial.

“In my mind, I’m always planning on going back to nature,” she says. “But the Old Masters are so rich and varied; it’s really working for me.”

Not all of Ansel’s paintings stem from content as violent as *Scarlet*. “A lot of times what I’m attracted to initially has to do with the color and the composition,” she says. She points to a Titian reproduction on her wall. “That’s *Bacchus and Ariadne*. It’s a beautiful, bacchanalian image. I try to have a broader reach because it’s too much to always be dealing with disturbing content,” she explains. “But it’s a very important subtext. This is the meat of the work that, on another level, could have a life simply as a beautiful form.”

It is this balance between social statement and painterly process



Titian  
*Tarquin and Lucretia*, 1571  
74.4 x 57.1 inches  
Oil on canvas

Large study for *Lucretia*, 2017  
50 x 40 inches  
Oil on linen

**“*Lucretia* overturns a narrative of violence against women. Western art and culture are laced with this narrative. The images people absorb do affect the way they think and act. I flip the orientation and use abstraction to interrupt a destructive narrative and transform it into a revel of color, movement and asymmetrical balance, building on what’s already there to create something new. My paintings are not a critique of the Old Masters but rather a use of their depth and resonance to shine a light on disparities that plague our society today.”**

that gives Ansel’s work its compelling combination of depth and accessibility. Her political message may be strong, but it never overshadows the sheer beauty of her paintings. “I’m always going for conceptual rigor in a lush object,” she says. “My work is about having a dialog.”

The dialog isn’t only between artist and viewer, but also artist and artist. She keeps up a conversation with the Old Master paintings from which she works, often creating dozens of interpretations of a single source over decades. “I don’t fully understand these Old Master paintings until I start to paint them in my own language,” she says. “They become like a great novel: meanings unfold with each new reading.”

Ansel first creates small, spontaneous studies from the original artwork and uses them as the structure for her larger pieces, which she works out on a grid. Sometimes she references the entire composition; sometimes she enlarges and abstracts a single detail. The multiple renderings build upon themselves. Ultimately, the large paintings completely move away from the source material into what Ansel calls “complete abstraction.”

On the back wall of Ansel’s studio hangs *Europa*, an exploration of Titian’s *Rape of Europa*. A 52- by 60-inch canvas full of moody blues and browns, rich shadows and bright light, it reads like a sensual seascape. To the left is a much smaller interpretation; a copy of the original is pinned beneath it for reference. “Painters





Titian  
*Bacchus and Ariadne*, 1522-23  
 Oil on canvas (applied onto conservation board, 1968)  
 69.5 x 75 inches

*Bacchus and Ariadne* (Unpopulated), 2018  
 Oil on linen  
 60 x 72 inches



"I mine Old Master paintings for color, structure and meaning. I was attracted to the unbridled energy and sense of dynamic movement in Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne*. Titian's painting depicts the moment in the myth when Bacchus, the Roman god of wine, agriculture and fertility, intercedes and tragedy is transformed. In both my painting and Titian's, narrative is the engine that drives the work."



Rachel Ruysch  
*Flowers in a Terracotta Vase*, 1723  
 Oil on canvas  
 15.5 x 12.4 inches  
 Courtesy of the Kelvingrove Museum, Glasgow

*Aperture (Dutch Flowers I-3)*, 2018  
 Pigment print on Hahnemuhle museum etching,  
 mounted on dibond  
 44 x 35 inches

"In the pigment prints, I add another link to the chain of transcription by using digital media to enlarge details of my own small paintings. The prints appear as dimensional as bas-reliefs. Viewers want to touch them. Paradoxically, my intent is to use digital media to highlight the importance of primary sensual experience obtained through the five senses."



Titian  
*The Rape of Europa*, 1560-62  
 Oil on canvas  
 70 x 81 inches

*Europa*, 2018  
 Oil on linen  
 52.5 x 60 inches

"Sometimes just a few elements from an Old Master source can provide enough material for an entire painting. Here, landscape is the focus. Figures are either omitted entirely or lightly suggested. Reversing the traditional hierarchy between figure and ground enables me to shift the meaning and the read. This is the *Rape of Europa* without the rape, a celebration of consensual erotic activity."

**FAVORITE ...**

- Artist(s) living or past?** Gerhard Richter and Titian.
- Drink?** Water.
- Maine restaurant?** Green Elephant.
- Place you've traveled to as an adult?** Venice.
- Shoes?** My black Nike sneakers.
- Way to relax?** Walking on the beach.

of that era used mythological content to explore eroticism," she says. "It's not really a rape—it's sex by the sea. My attack is on sexism, not on sex. I just pushed the appealing aspects of the painting, the sea and sky, and took the negative part away."

In fact, despite the importance of their conceptual underpinnings, Ansel often exhibits her paintings without their Old Master counterparts, preferring to let her work stand on its own. "This," she says, gesturing toward the Titian on the wall, "may deepen your understanding, but it's not essential."

"My hope is that, on some visceral level, these things would be beautiful objects to people and that the layers would unfold slowly. Then they could open up."

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