

The Age of Empathy

An Interview with Emma Talbot

by Manuela Martorelli



“I shall speak about women’s writing: about what it will do. Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies- for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text-as into the world and into history - by her own movement.” - Hélène Cixous

There is a particular expression from Hélène Cixous’ “Le Rire de la Méduse”, reciting: “la nouvelle de l’ancien”, loosely translated the new old. As she speaks to women for women’s sake she explains: “Since these reflections are taking shape in an area just on the point of being discovered, they necessarily bear the mark of our time -a time during which the new breaks away from the old, and, more precisely, the

new from the old [la nouvelle de l'ancien]. Thus, as there are no grounds for establishing a discourse, but rather an arid millennial ground to break, what I say has at least two sides and two aims: to break up, to destroy; and to foresee the unforeseeable, to project."

For British artist Emma Talbot the old is reborn from the young and the young, the new, is rooted in the old. Her work celebrates female language, female body, and speaks about new dimensions where human beings embrace power, gender, attitude to nature, from a different perspective suggesting a new approach to unpack contemporary issues like climate emergency. If we read the third assessment of the latest IPCC report on climate change – AR6 – published this year in April (the final synthesis is scheduled for release in late 2022 or early 2023) the future is eerie: financial flows for climate mitigation and adaptation increased by up to 60% between 2013/14 and 2019/20, but these financial flows that remained heavily focused on mitigation, are uneven, and have developed heterogeneously across regions and sectors. In 2018, public and publicly mobilized private climate finance flows from developed to developing countries were below the collective goal under the UNFCCC and Paris Agreement to mobilize USD 100 billion per year by 2020. Public and private finance flows for fossil fuels are still greater than those for climate adaptation and mitigation and Global GHG emissions in 2030 associated with the implementation of nationally determined contributions (NDCs) announced prior to COP26 would make it likely that warming will exceed 1.5°C during the 21st century. Likely limiting warming to below 2°C would then rely on a rapid acceleration of mitigation efforts after 2030. Policies implemented by the end of 2020 are projected to result in higher global GHG emissions than those implied by NDCs.

To sum it up boldly : the scientific community agrees now more than ever that in the current situation our efforts to reach net zero emission by 2050 is far from reach. As Nobel Prize laureate Al Gore put "In spite of the incredible progress we have made, the crisis is still getting worse faster than we are implementing the solutions. One reason is that fossil fuel companies and their backers have spent lavishly for decades to capture the policy-making process in key countries and to cynically lie to the public about the climate crisis, even though they know full well that their public persuasion campaigns were based on absolute falsehoods".

We must take action now at every level and with a different approach. Just as Emma Talbot “lyrical yet activist” message, as beautifully condensed by Iwona Blazwick, former director of Whitechapel Gallery. The complex work “The Age”, conceived as final chapter of her six-months residency in Italy, organised by Collezione Maramotti- the award given by The Max Mara Art Prize for Women each year to the winner - is woven from culture, heritage, history and knowhow. Created by Max Mara, and Whitechapel Gallery in 2005, with Collezione Maramotti joining in 2007, the Prize has given the precious gift of time and resources - through a fully-funded Grand Tour - to UK-based female artists who have not previously had a major solo show.

We speak to Emma Talbot the day after her premiere at Collezione Maramotti in Reggio Emilia, about her work, vivid drawings, silk paintings, animations, knits. And what means to re-balance our relationship with nature and female bodies.

Manuela Martorelli: There are several layers within your work. The element of language is crucial . In her seminal essay The Laugh of the Medusa (Le Rire de la Méduse), French writer and philosopher Hélène Cixous - whom is a source of inspiration for you - says a woman must write. And she says it with an impetuous urgent spirit. I feel a lot of that of

your work

Emma Talbot: You make an account of your own experience in your own way. For me that’s the influence of Cixous’ Coming to Writing (La Venue à l’écriture) . In this important essay she says: “do I have permission to write?” and then she talks about how you write for yourself, how you formulate your own way of creating a language, your own way of expressing YOUR experiences and YOUR thoughts. And that’s the sort of importance for me: to be able to find my own language in my work, visually. To be able to express the experiences I have as a woman, as someone of my age , someone who had MY life. To say I am a person in the world and that I am concerned about the same contemporary issues that we are all confronting. So there is a kind of movement back and forth between the personal and something much more universal, something we are all affected by.

MM: The gesture itself of writing on your canvas, on silk, is a kind of cathartic way to express such dramatic words. It’s an engaged message addressing the urgency of our endangered planet, our endangered species.

ET: In the animation I use the twelve Trials of Hercules, applying to each of these stories a contemporary issue, a contemporary problem. The protagonist, the “elderly woman” is describing what the problem is. Talking about how the problem can be addressed differently. In order to think differently on how to do things and to sustain

the continuance of our species in the future. So in that sense is hopeful even though it describes things vividly as real challenges, how they come about extremely problematic. The animation is honest about it. But at the same time is hopeful because it suggests that if we thought differently, if we use power differently, then we can set up different constructs, more fair.

MM: Words like “Foul” , “Dirty” populate this canvas, this painted animation. They refers to our Earth but at times it feels as if they speak about the elderly woman, how she is perceived by society, but also serving as a mirror to our conscience as we pollute the planet.

ET: The episode you are referring to is one of the Trials where Hercules has to clean the Augean Stables that haven’t been clean for 30 years. And he has to clean them overnight . So he subverts the direction of the river to run through the stables and wash all the shit away. My contemporary version puts the elderly woman in an environment run by fossil fuels polluting energies where she is describing how we live today: the staples are a metaphors how we live now. It is really problematic which we can see immediately as we look at the war in Ukraine , the dynamics of the usage of these types of fuels, gas are all co-involved with lots of problems we have today. She talks about using sustainable ways, sustainable energy, trying to achieve Net Zero. How it could be achieved if those in power would decide there was a value in doing that. She is saying that’s not an utopian idea , it is





an urgency, it is not a fictional vision few people might have, but rather it is a real thing in front of us that's urgent. It's a way to apply the Trials of Hercules to our contemporary situation. Every animation I have created around the Trials does that. Taking a different issue and interrogating it. The main character, this elderly woman, doesn't find one solution. She doesn't do anything short term. She does look straight into the problem: this is why it is like this, we can think like that. She offers way of thinking rather than being a kind of superior power that orders you what to do.

MM: During the premiere at Whitechapel Gallery presenting the work right after the residency you underlined how the research at the National Etruscan Museum of Villa Giulia focusing particularly on the Twelve Trials of Hercules shaped the idea to treat those stories through a completely different perspective. Taking these stories or the feeling in them as re-performed by a woman to interrogate the contemporary reinterpretation of these myths through empathy and patience – amongst the other feelings - rather than a typical male power-driven story.

ET: It comes from an essay by Ursula K. Le Guin called The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction. She says there are hero stories, which have this very subtle linear setting, a kind of phallic trajectory, where when something happens, like a big event, it is always described as a mono-line action. She affirms that rather the stories happening all around it are the stories of people sharing and gathering,

a kind of network of life done particularly by women and families, a social moment. However, those stories don't get told because are the hero stories that have been taking prominence in history. And so the Trials of Hercules is the epitome of the hero-story as it tells the story of a man development, from a young age into an older age and later transforming into a god. That's why it has been perceived as such a powerful story with lots of different governments and powerful structures that have held onto or used it. Instead an elderly woman isn't the usual hero, it is a very unlikely hero. But she shares wisdom, experience. I thought: if an elderly woman looked at these problems she would resolve them very differently than Hercules who saw all of them through aggression. He killed people, he stole things, he captured, he colonized. An elderly woman would use her experience and knowledge, principles that commend to mutualism,. She would not think about giving power to one person, one type of people, but rather she would think about power as a kind of positive energy to be distributed, fairly. That is really the message of my work. There will be power - somehow we are all part of that - and we can use it to the better for everyone.

MM: The look of this woman takes inspiration from Gustav Klimt's Three Ages of Woman (1905), where an old female figure looks almost desperately to her young self. Your elderly woman is particularly touching, especially as seen through the eyes of women, women starting to age, women looking at the character

as their mothers. It's a poignant image .

ET: Because I think if you as woman particularly - but anyone really - look at Klimt's painting you read it as this young woman and the baby – and that's a very beautiful image – portrayed together with an elderly woman who is ashamed of herself. We see it is a really objective way as if there is a kind of horrible spectacle on a naked elderly body. As if we were supposed to agree that a naked old body is something shameful, to be hidden, something we should not look at. I deeply wanted her to be not ashamed, but rather seeing her own body in a different light. First of all if you are an elderly person you survived! If you look elderly means you have experienced a lot. In my 3D work, part of the installation, I wanted to make a figure that is like a person whose skin is like an armoire. I was looking at Roman armoire and how it mimics the body of men, the sort of very muscular men. I wanted my elderly woman to have elderly skin as her protection. Because she has got wisdom, knowledge and experience. All those help you make decisions how to deal with what might be a surprising events. It helps you how to think. That's a very protective strength and it should be celebrated. So I wanted this a woman to be a figure who wasn't ashamed, who didn't see her body as problem and also someone who had the most agency, someone we would look at and feel "she knows what to do". I just saw in the Klimt that elderly as she should be suppressed and but also form me because the painting was brought by the National Gallery in Rome to celebrate 50 years of the unification of Italy. It was a really interesting



starting point with the project in Italy because it seemed to describe how a modern nation would suppress ancient wisdom, ancient knowledge, relationships to the earth and to the cycle of nature. I then thought it is really interesting because there is a rising nationalism across the world also. Also we are looking desperately at ancient knowledge to give us a sense how to live sustainably and how to survive. How to think about the future, so actually it is knowledge we need. At the moment is as if we can turn things about value, the things that have been suppressed previously.

MM: Looking at ancient time to find solutions for our present and close future. Is it something that has been always fascinating you or it grew strongly during the residency? Also by visiting these incredible sites in Italy.

ET: It sort of all sat together. I was in Britain when Brexit was happening and our government at the time was run by a prime minister who had been a classic scholar. And so quite often we would hear the rhetoric of the classics as a kind of justification for types of actions or decision that suggested to me that there was a hierarchical power structure. In the minds of the people that sort of rhetoric was to say: power has been always constructed like this and it will always be. Because it is based indeed on these kind of western principles of power. This really interested me: Will a small percentage of people always be in power? I didn't agree with this. It was an interesting starting point to investigate in this type of propaganda, of

language that was being used in order to describe nations and power itself, the action of governments, the meaning of governance. And I wanted to challenge it. I was thinking about how an elderly woman would do things to challenge something by reverting the acts of those in power. If they are aggressive doesn't mean you must reiterate that aggression. You can be persuasive or you could diffuse ideas: you tell a story and by telling you can attack those societal problems, beginning to change minds by giving people the chance to think. So I wanted my work to be able to attack the kinds of problems we face today and the system itself. I also find this old of power-rhetoric very fearful: where this would lead to? because this type of language is dangerous, very binary, very black-and-white and I wanted to demonstrate in some ways there are different persuasive ways based instead on togetherness and sharing power. I think the greatest power is Nature that we are part of. We are part of the energy in the universe, way bigger than us. We are just matter. When we die our matter returns to the Universe. In that way you really can rethink your all existence

MM: Nature, urbanism and ecopolitics, For your Venice Biennale's work you also looked at Paul Gauguin's painting *Where Do We Come From, What Are We, Where Are We Going?*, which he painted within a moment of deep crisis and existential reckoning, taking on the human desire for escape in our environmentally catastrophic present.

ET: Gauguin's painting is based on three meditations he learned as child, really existential questions. For me there was a parallel with these three questions and our relationship with nature which we imagine always as a place we could escape to. Gauguin wanted to escape to Tahiti, to leave behind industrialized Paris, a western industrialized space. But when he arrived in Tahiti he found out that the place was already corrupted. Because it was colonized, with all the problems related to colonization. I was thinking: we always imagine nature as a place to escape to but it is already corrupted because we already exploited it. In my painting where it says "Where are we going?" it describes humanity as AI or avatars trying to escape to another planet. These kind of actual projects where people have to consider survival. Humans are actually parasites, they just live from one host to another, they imagine their own survival as given. They can just corrupt and rack everything over and over. It looks like we will survive almost like by escaping ourselves. But in fact we have set to rack things again. It is a way to describe our situation now. If you think about what we could do now to recuperate our situation here on this planet you would be more active. If you instead think I would just go to another planet it is just a projection allowing you not to take action, allowing to leave your mess behind and starting to make mess just somewhere else. In a way it's a critique. The whole painting questions Where do we come from? Are we part of the universe? Where are we? Are we born into a void?

“I was thinking about how an elderly woman would do things to challenge something by reverting the acts of those in power. If they are aggressive doesn't mean you must reiterate that aggression.”

Where words come from? Where all the constructs we build? To give us a sense of what and who we are. These people, us, are climbing up in history.

MM: You have mentioned Klimt, you have mentioned Gauguin, but was there a particular artist who was fundamental at the early stage of your career?

ET: When I saw Charlotte Salomon for the first time I could recognize this is someone who isn't making work to show anyone. It was a project a way to managing huge experience and also I absolutely love Carol Rama and it the same. There is something similar about her work, something her Three-dimensional work, something magical about her “objectness”, everyday material that gets transformed into objects. But also something about people being in their life and experience translating that in something inventive. I find that exciting.

MM: You have explored several media. Watercolor on paper, painting on silk, knitting, and animation. When did your fascination to animation start?

ET: In the first lockdown I was in London but I couldn't go to my studio. I always wanted to make animation before but I always thought I don't have time to to learn . I had my drawing at home like everyone and I thought to teach myself these programs. And started to post them on Instagram. Then I was invited to project an animation on the Hayward gallery and later did a project at Piccadilly Circus to make four animations we shown every evening for months in that Covid period when galleries weren't open. To have art in different spaces, to have art available for people outside. For me felt like a way of extending my drawings. As if you could go into my drawings and walk around them, experiencing them in dept. I also made sounds so I could put that together with the animation. It felt really satisfactory to me as new medium.

MM: Your technique drawing on silk is a medium you have been experimenting since a while now. Where did it come from?

ET: Because I realized at a certain point , about 8 years ago, when I tried to paint on stretches of raw canvas that I didn't reach what I was looking for. I didn't like to be forced to follow a certain dimension, like someone else was deciding the starting point for me, for my painting . I had a flashpoint moment then. I thought : if I could paint on silk then I could cut it any shape, or I could drape it, put it on the floor. It would really versatile. Of course there is also a big history of painting on silk so I knew it is a material you can paint on. I also liked it because I made drawings on handmade paper, I was trying to find an equivalent to the drawings. On silk you make a mark and you cannot take it away, it is like paper, you cannot

erase what you draw. it is like watercolor - all the metallics in my drawings are watercolor. It is surprising what it comes out, and painting on silk for me had the same connotation. I had the need to make a painting immediately, inventively, no changes allowed. We were talking about Cixous . It is like “My” way of doing something. It is how “I” want to say what “I” want to say visually. It is “My” thing. It is the surface that “I” like. The silk comes already dyed in pink, or beige color when I get it, it is not white. I buy died silk, a kind of material with connotations that I already like . I think this is something I want to use and then it can be an installation that changes space, redirects you through the space. It can be something monumental that isn't heavy and weighted. Tell a big story but then you can pack it up really small, ecologically positive as it takes very small space . Also in the residency I researched recycled silk and started using it because I wanted not just to make a narrative, but actually apply the principles already.

MM: During your residency in Sicily you also learned about permaculture, a practice strongly present in Sicilian agriculture:

ET: I knew a bit about permaculture before. I read the writings of Starhawk, really important to me. She is a person who started to share the principle of permaculture widely and I really wished to visit a permaculture site and experience the way residents would live inside. I wanted to know what the elderly woman would do in the future as survivor because she is a future survivor, she goes back to the classic to reorder power structures. I wanted to know exactly what kind of things she would do. I stayed in a permaculture site where they built their own house from raw and clay. I even helped them renovate a small bit of the house. They also look after this terrain and helped looking at the plants, spending time with the family who lives there. We become good friends - they were here last night. They taught me the principles of permaculture I really wanted to study since long. By chance I discovered there are twelve principles of permaculture as well as there are twelve Trials of Hercules. There is balance in the project where all the paintings described the twelve principles of permaculture. These principles are quite open like :“observe and interact”, meaning just don't rush up doing everything. Make sure you have understood the situation before you decided what to do. Or “use small and slow solutions”. You don't have to do everything at once. Every act is something that could change things . It is a philosophy. It is very open and I could understand it by being with people living that philosophy.

MM: it is quite universal

ET: Exactly and I thought I could apply it to my life.

MM: Intellectual honesty permeate deeply your

work. You clearly feel how you, yourself is inside the work - as it is for every artist - but this work feels very autobiographic I would say as you narrate indeed first person.

ET: Sixteen years ago my husband died . We had two young sons, at the time six and seven. For a year after he died I couldn't make anything. Everything I made I thought wasn't about the thoughts I had in my head. My real thoughts were just grief and emotional, there were all about what's happened yet my work was all outside of me, it described something else. Then after about a year I thought maybe I won't make it . I felt: “I thought I was an artist but maybe I am not” and then I started making drawings just for myself . To show myself what I was thinking I poured all this sense of grief all these wishes. All these thoughts. I wrote and drew and I found this way of really being honest about of what I was thinking. Only then my work started to be about me, my experience, what I really felt and thought, what I am really interested in. Over time it just developed from drawings into bigger paintings or animation or three-dimensional work. But it comes from a real place and it is really mine. Without any fear about what everyone else thinks about it. It feels like it's a part of me that I know very well. I know when I made a drawing and I really believe in what I have done, I know what that feeling is and I try to follow that. It comes from what I really want to do and it looks the way it looks because the images of the figures are like a projection of me. That's me from the inside. The elderly woman in Klimt's painting has the same hair as me which is why I made this connection immediately. The elderly woman in my paintings I imagine that could be me in the future it is like a projection of me.

EMMA TALBOT

The Mares of Diomedes, 2022
watercolour and gouache on khadi paper
detail from The Trials
Courtesy the artist
Photo: Carlo Vannini

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The Cattle of Geryon, 2022
watercolour and gouache on khadi paper
detail from The Trials
Courtesy the artist
Photo: Carlo Vannini

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The Erythmanian Boar, 2022
watercolour and gouache on khadi paper
detail from The Trials
Courtesy the artist
Photo: Carlo Vannini

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The Lernaean Hydra, 2022
watercolour and gouache on khadi paper
detail from The Trials
Courtesy the artist
Photo: Carlo Vannini