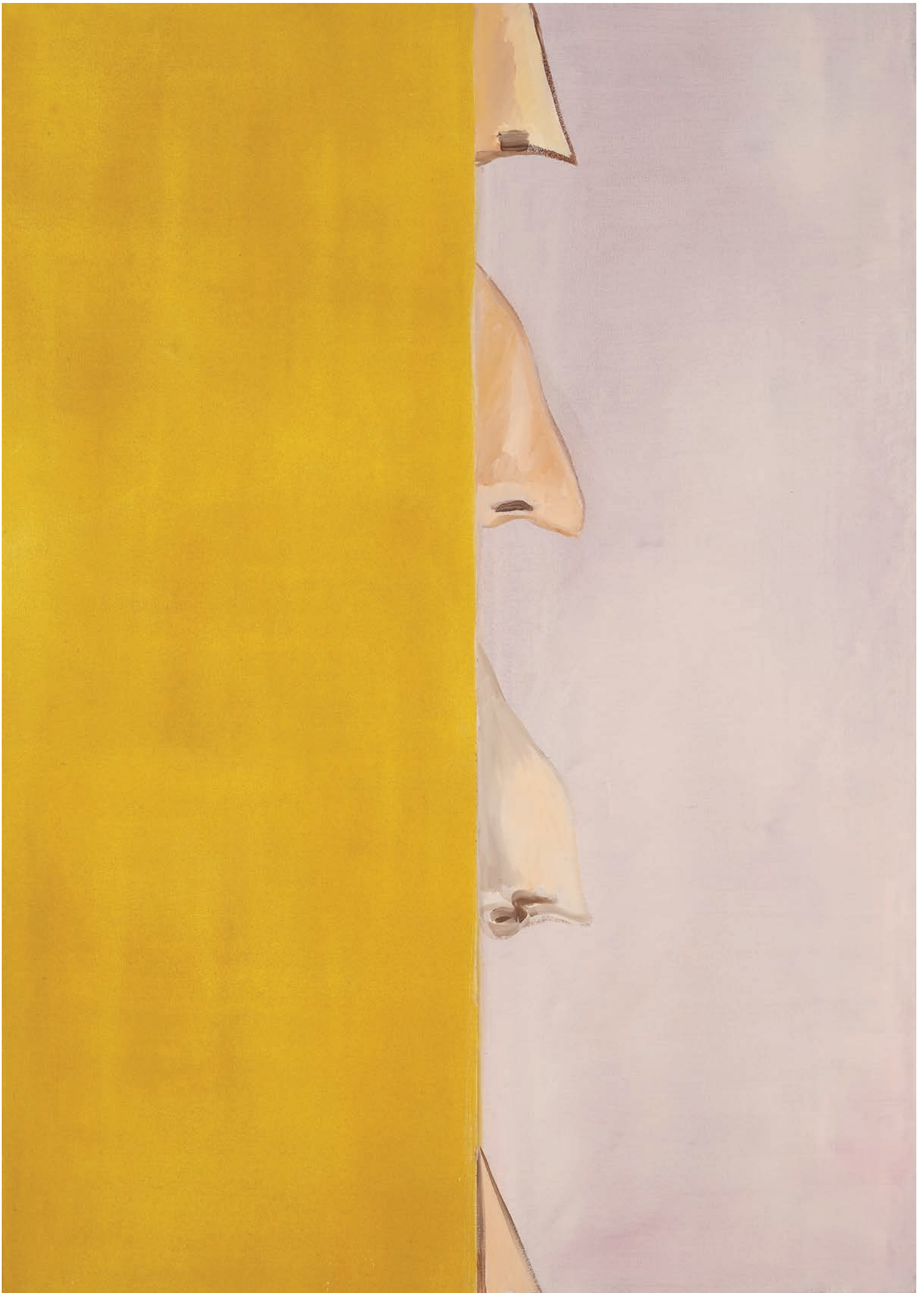


CHOICE

At what point does
a doodled line become
a nose? *Kirsty Bell*
on the paintings of
Allison Katz

&

CHANGE



When Allison Katz begins a painting, she starts by taking notes: borrowed quotations and her own observations, which meet and begin to form a dialogue of sorts. Fomented by this accumulated note-gathering, each painting becomes a forum for an exchange of ideas, where inside meets outside. At times, this conceptual charge seems in danger of overwhelming the painting's apparently simple imagery.

Katz was born in Montreal in 1980 and completed an MFA at New York's Columbia University in 2008, where she was taught by a clutch of influential painters – including Charline von Heyl, Jutta Koether, Blake Rayne and Amy Sillman – before moving, two years ago, to London, where she now lives. When I visited her studio in an industrial unit in south London in autumn 2015, our conversation turned to the notion of painting, which she described to me as an 'irritant'. She sees her work as a space in which to put something – to try and activate something, perhaps even to make a statement, but one that is constantly interrupted by all kinds of other things, which intrude whether you want them to or not. As we talked, a painting leaning beside the studio door kept catching my eye. It pictured the tiled interior of a shower, empty save for the amorphous shape of a sponge dangling from the shower head, and the leaves of a tropical plant (*Shower's Head (Frontal)*, 2013). Is it possible to paint a shower now without David Hockney springing to mind? Though the shower in Katz's painting is unoccupied, it feels as if a figure has just left, and that figure belongs to a Hockney painting.

On each of Katz's canvases, as well as between them, an extrapolated joust with intentionality is enacted – word play in painted form. Just as language can be made to flex into puns, rhymes and jokes, so Katz tests the flexibility of gesture. Can the painted image be dislocated from the artist's intention and enact a kind of spontaneity? Does each non-representational brushstroke inevitably morph into figuration? At what point does a doodled line decide to become a nose? The motif of a nose in profile has become something of a signature for Katz, appearing in several paintings, as well as providing decorative coverage for a paravent and a fake architectural portico. Derived from the artist's own profile, the nose is a metonymic self-portrait of sorts, thus hinting at the unavoidable, monolithic self that inhabits each painting, no matter how many external references or painterly tricks are brought in to try and trip it up or elude its domineering presence.

This double bind of subjectivity became central to a number of works in Katz's recent exhibition at Kunstverein Freiburg. The show's title, 'All Is On', appeared in one of the paintings, the three words arranged into the eyes and mouth of a Sphinx-like figure (*All Is On*, 2015). The 'O' of 'On' (the 'mouth') anticipates the viewer's inevitable exclamation of surprise on realizing that these three words cumulatively spell out the artist's first name. The title not only performs a dislocated signature, it can also be taken to describe the effect of painting itself, in which the medium enacts the animation of an idea: *all is on*.

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Noses
2014, oil on canvas,
116 × 83 cm

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Cabbage No. 11
2015, oil on canvas,
50 × 50 cm

The show included ten, large-scale canvases featuring a broad selection of motifs, which were arranged in an erratic manner that took into account the problematic architecture of the Kunstverein: before being reincarnated as a contemporary art venue, it was an art nouveau-era swimming pool. This group of works did not cohere into essayistic argument but appeared, rather, as a collection of notes, in which meaning was more likely to emerge in the interstices between paintings than to be contained in any individual image.

Katz has described an 'ambient' approach to the task of painting, a kind of osmotic accumulation of ideas. As such, interpretation must assume an equally ambient stance. In Freiburg, a pale blue painting of a seated dog (*Anyone with the Wish*, 2015) hung diagonally opposite a white canvas of an enormous balancing egg (*I*, 2015), besides which there was a painting of a fountain, water spewing from the mouth of a grotesque stone face against a tiled background (*Marienbad Fountain On*, 2015). This last was a scale copy of the disused fountain that Katz discovered in a building adjacent to the Kunstverein, here literally reanimated in painted form. Elsewhere, a tangle of naked figures sketched in inky-black lines appears as a spherical form drifting in a purple sky (*Belo Horizonte*, 2015) while, in another painting, that same tangle of figures forms the black and white background to a portrait of a monkey (*Generation*, 2014). In fact, this motif crops up in numerous other works by Katz; it is borrowed from life-drawing sketches made by her sister. Because she has no interest in the task of drawing, these figures enact the precise ambivalence that Katz is after: a fine balance between choice and chance. These leitmotifs become placeholders brought in to solve the problem of subject matter while inevitably creating new problems in their wake. The elements she adopts – noses, signatures, her sister's drawings, animals that sidestep the issue of identity which is raised in representations of the figure – deal with fakery, intention and the issue of problem-solving. Each work seems to ask: what do you want from me? In her studio, Katz quotes Brazilian novelist Clarice Lispector's description of the Sphinx: 'I did not decipher her. But neither did she decipher me.' ♦

Allison Katz is an artist based in London, UK. Her exhibition, 'All Is On', was at Kunstverein Freiburg, Germany, in late 2015. In March 2016, she had a show at Giò Marconi, Milan, Italy.

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*Just as language can be made to flex into puns and jokes,
so Katz tests the flexibility of gesture.*



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2
Anyone with the Wish
2015, acrylic on canvas,
180 × 90 cm

3
AKA (Beating Heart)
2016, oil on canvas,
2.1 × 2.4 m

4
IQ
2015, oil on canvas,
1.5 × 1.2 m

All images courtesy
the artist, The Approach, London,
and Giò Marconi, Milan



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