

office

Catherine Mulligan Says There's a Thrill to Tastelessness

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Interview by Sahir Ahmed

In her first solo exhibition at [Tara Downs](#) in Tribeca, [Catherine Mulligan](#) transports us to the early 2000s when reality TV was so bad, it was good; so bad, it was hard to look away.

Oh, how I miss it. Yes, I know reality TV was, and still is, for the most part, scripted, but there was something about growing up in a time before social media that made watching someone act with absolute indifference to being recorded and projected onto screens across the country kind of special. Titled *Bad Girls Club*, Mulligan's exhibition, and broader body of work, strips away the superficial veneer of American life, compelling us to gaze into the eyes of a future that never quite materialized — a purgatory populated by hordes of demimondes, a lot less menacing than they seem.

Ahead of the opening, we sat down with Mulligan to talk about her process, contemporary ruins and the playful zombies that populate her canvases.



Hi Catherine. How's your day going?

It's ok. How's yours?

Good. Cool. Are you excited for your show?

Yeah, I'm nervous but excited. It's been a little over a year that I've worked on the pieces so it's just really intense to show them.

How come?

The studio is this safe space to get really weird and follow these stupid threads. The more time you have, the easier it is to forget someone's going to see them eventually.

Yeah that's weird – your work placed in a foreign space, in front of an unknown audience.

Yeah, it feels like the lights being turned on or an invasion of privacy in a way.

How did you get started with your zombie figuration?

Before this type of work, I was using a lot of appropriated images, found images from the internet or stock photos. And they were being distressed with sanding and paint remover. So I was really thinking about ruins, contemporary ruins, with death and loss as a subtext. And I think these women are creatures born of that world.

I think it's interesting that you draw inspiration from a lot of pop cultural references – a distant past not so distant.

They are very labored over. They take a really long time, I guess on that point, I think about disposability a lot. So it connects these two bodies of work. Painting is this ancient, archaic practice, and it's also meant to last centuries, especially the style of oil painting I'm doing which predates modernism. There's a way something from five years ago already feels incredibly dated, and the accelerated speed of trend cycles and technology that I'm trying to embed in the process.

How do you do it?

I make sketches, then a grid, which I follow with a lot of thin layers of paint. So I'll use a certain color for the under painting and then modulate the temperature over time. They have this sallow jaundiced color both because of these deathly associations but also because that's really the color of an underpainting. If you look at an old painting that's decaying or hasn't been restored, you can see them being this blue-green color that would be typically painted under the top flesh layer to give it a luminous quality.

How long does it take you to work on one piece?

It usually takes months. For this show, there's a few where I was very particular about the imagery. The painting with the two girls in the football field has three paintings underneath it. And I just wasn't happy with these versions. If you took an X-ray of the painting, you would see these histories.



Would these paintings always be related to the images coming above or are you just literally painting over something and making it brand new?

They were paintings that just didn't really work for me. The figures need a certain specificity where they feel very real but also otherworldly, and there's no formula to get there. So if something feels just not right, I will paint over it with an oil ground to get a white surface again. If I end up using paint remover, sometimes you can see these other colors from past paintings coming through — it gives them a certain patina.

The figures aren't as menacing as you'd think – being zombies.

Well, it's also a trope of horror films where sexuality is used to disarm the viewer. There will be some seductive woman or scene, you'll let your guard down and then the menace will reveal itself or the violent action will happen. So the women are both objects and threats in the work.

I notice the facial expressions, some are more flirty, others playful.

It's a bit playful. They are also bigger than life size, you encounter them in a gallery and it's this 1:1 thing relationship they have with the viewer. They are acknowledging you, flirting with you.

Why *Bad Girls Club*?

I picked that show in particular because it just felt like this purgatory. There's not really an elimination. There's no real goal. I guess it started with the intention of "reforming" the girls but it's really just a space for these chaotic women to fight, you know. That purgatory makes sense with the work too in this way. Like they're just stuck in this other third space.

Like a liminality; suspended between humanity and monstrosity, never quite here or there.

Yeah, totally. The football field is a screen saver image I distorted. I want there to be some mystique, some ambiguity about, "OK, are they actually situated there? Are they in hell or an unconscious space? Is it just pure fiction?"

I really like the hitchhiker. Tell me about that one.

Oh Thank you. Yeah, that one is actually my favorite. I think it captures the feeling I want the most successfully. Her expression is threatening, but there's something ecstatic about it too. She's on the side of a highway. She has this billboard that references a pro-life organization. I don't really have an answer for why I made that decision, it just felt like it captured the current moment.

I didn't even notice that, but I'm sure it'd stand out more on a larger canvas. This one feels like a commentary on the way we consume images and how that's evolved in our digital age – what we wear; how we pose; how we understand beauty; how we understand ugliness.

Yeah, exactly.

How would you describe your own work?

I feel like my work is polarizing. Someone said it was like a car crash. For me, it's more important to make an image that's memorable than an image that you *like* or know that you like. Sometimes I've hated something at first because I had no reference point for it or it made me uncomfortable. But that's really the work that ended up forming my sensibility or making me think or see things in a different way. I'm playing with these things in a very deliberate way, ugliness and bad taste. And I want it to provoke a visceral response in people. Like a punch in the gut.

The thing about *Bad Girls Club*, it was hard to look away. It's cringe but you just keep watching it, and I feel like that's a feeling translated through your work. It isn't aesthetically *normal*.

I think there's a thrill to tastelessness. I also think about how figurative painting has sort of been popular for a few years now. I see people using it in a way that seems very tasteful and restrained or affirmative. That's sort of something I want to push against.

What are some of the aspects of figurative paint painting that you're trying to avoid?

I think because figurative painting is a pretty easily commercialized art form, people don't take all the risks they could be taking to make something that's truly weird. And whenever I feel I'm censoring myself because of that, or the market, or wanting to be absorbed into the mainstream, that's when I have to stop what I'm doing.



What stands out is this tension between art and culture.

Yeah, I mean, in general, I think art should serve a different function than the dominant culture. But it's hard when you look at who still has power.

I'd describe your work as avant garde, being one of the only art forms that directly challenges the ordinary and the normal. There's a simultaneous absurdity and familiarity to it.

Yeah. No, actually I like that.

What drives you personally?

I guess curiosity about the world. yeah, I don't know. I feel very privileged to be able to make my work right now.

It's such an interesting time to be an artist. I love that your paintings don't feel targeted to a male gaze similar to how the show wasn't. Your audience could even be people that aren't into art.

Totally. Are you gonna be there Friday?

Yeah, I'll probably be there.

Oh, great! Well see you then and thank you.

Thank you too. Take care.

