

KALTBLUT.

“For now, it feels important that if I am representing a figure, it is a woman’s form” – In conversation with Emily Ludwig Shaffer

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Art is something that is usually hard to pinpoint. And while everyone has a different perception of it, some messages are loud and clear, such as Emily Ludwig Shaffer’s. Her work explores the different stages of womanhood now and a couple of hundred years ago. Shaffer’s exhibition, *In Stead of Me*, her first solo exhibition at Berlin’s Peres Projects, opened early November and has impressed many since. KALTBLUT caught up with the American artist to discuss her work, the Italian writer Christine de Pizan and womanhood. Read the interview below.

KALTBLUT: For me, your last exhibition is quite complex. On the one hand, you’re dealing with cities, nature and urban landscapes, and on the other, you’re looking at Christine de Pizan’s work. How did you get into this very complex source of inspiration?

Emily: I started this body of work in January of this year. I had just come out of a self-imposed maternity leave. Knowing that this would be my first body of work – after having a child – I wanted to let the framework of the

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exhibition be pretty loose, give myself space and grace, to let whatever inspired me to come forth.

I was also reading this book, “The Book of the City of Ladies” by Christine de Pizan, which was recommended to me by another artist, Margaux Valengin. She thought the themes in the book related to my work.



Christine de Pizan published this book in 1405. She wanted to use the city as an allegory in her book to create a space for women and to celebrate them. It was a refutation of the stereotypes of her time about what women were or weren't good at doing. The works come from that book. Sometimes very literally. Sometimes, they're just reflecting on the experience of being a woman at this time in my life: living in a city, creating a home, a space for this child and this new life and adapting.

The architecture and the spaces I've used in my work previously were a lot of interior domestic spaces and garden scenes. Part of that was about investigating, looking at and creating my own spaces that are more traditionally associated with women.

I'm only thinking about this consciously right now, but I think my desire to push the women out into the city is because I was dealing with such a domestic space this past year in a way I hadn't before. I'm always somebody who wants to get out of the house and go out. And as soon as Shay was born, I wanted to go for a walk even though I was still bleeding. As much as I want to celebrate and elevate the spaces women are traditionally associated with, I also don't want to limit them to those spaces. It probably came from this desire of doing this traditional thing and then just wanting to get out and break out the woman from this interior and garden space and into the city.

There's this painting in my show: The pregnant woman traipsing through a cityscape. I wanted to paint her in this very confident but awkward gait.

KALTBLUT: Has motherhood changed your perspective on being a woman in the city?

Emily: Absolutely. I'm still figuring out how it has changed. Being pregnant and riding the subway and having people give up their seats or not was definitely a new relationship to living in a city.

When I was younger, like all young women, I had to get used to having people catcall me. You're constantly reminded of your sexuality. Now, it was this new experience of being a pregnant woman walking through the

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city and how people interacted with me. I was constantly reminded of the state I was in – as if I needed a reminder.

I think having your body be such a marker of who you are was a new experience for me in the city. And then after my child was born, pushing a pram around and seeing how horrible the side walks are, it made me aware in this way I'd never been about disability. Thinking about people for whom this isn't necessarily a temporary state for them. It must be so hard getting around the city for them. In this strange and indirect way, it made me aware of other people in a way I hadn't consciously been before.



KALTBLUT: Do these impressions relate to a specific city?

Emily: Most of them relate to being in New York City, where I live. I want to always harken back to my references, though. Christine de Pizan with the painting *Deep Foundations and High Walls* – I wanted that city to be somewhere in between a modernist cube, which I'm always doing, but with the crenellations on the top of a building, while hinting at an arched window, and bricks in the building, I wanted to bring in a little detail that brought it back to a historic space, as well. The city walls are like these punctuations in the painting that act like quotation marks encompassing the city, tying back to a more medieval idea of what a city is.

KALTBLUT: I saw this influence after looking up Christine de Pizan. When I first looked at your work, it reminded me of the video game aesthetic, specifically *Minecraft*. Do you find that sometimes the way people perceive your work is different to how you intended it?

Emily: Not specifically *Minecraft*, but video games are a reference I have gotten a couple of times. It's not one I necessarily think about consciously, but I accept that it probably has entered my brain. A game that I do think about sometimes is this old PC game called "*Glider*". There was this little paper aeroplane that would fly through interior spaces. You had to get to the next vent to lift the paper aeroplane. You're navigating through these very modern, minimal architectural spaces with this mundane object of a paper aeroplane. Even as a six-year-old, the visuals stuck with me. I was as interested in just exploring the rooms as I was in trying to win the game.

The joy of having other people see your work is that they bring references to your work that you might not necessarily have been thinking of consciously – or at all. I love hearing people's reinterpretations of my work, in both good and bad ways. There's also another example, which I find a little uncomfortable but have now heard

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a couple of times...

As you know, the women in most of my paintings don't have mouths. For me, that comes from this desire to have them be abstracted, more generic, and symbolic women's forms as opposed to specific faces. It also came from this feeling that verbal language is not, you know, my first chosen medium – it is painting. I want these women to speak like painted people. I want their body language to speak as much as their voices. But of course, other people have said this is about silencing. While I know where my intentions come from, I do paint them with the awareness that they could be seen as that, so I try to let their bodies be empowered in this way that makes it clear that I'm not trying to take away their voice.



KALTBLUT: Is it also on purpose that they look like they've been made of stone?

Emily: The stone or the marble statuary tradition is what I'm trying to point to. None of my spaces have real live people in them. I think about them as remnants of people, what we leave behind, and the spaces we create for ourselves. I'm not interested in depicting people in them specifically.

I think about them as these monuments or sculptures. They come from those classical sculptural traditional forms, like the Venus de Milo. For me, it's what images we wish to leave of people. That's what I think of monuments and sculptures, as wanting to embody and solidify and create a permanent state of being. For me, it's what states of being I want to see with these women figures. They are rounding out what it is to be a woman, not just in new states that define you by your sexuality or power status.

KALTBLUT: What I see in your paintings is the idea of a feminized city. I was wondering, what is exactly a feminized city? Would it be a utopian world?

Emily: That's a good question. I definitely don't think of these paintings as the archetype of a feminized city. More so just as a woman painting a city. It's going to be feminized, because that's who I am. It's more of an

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allegory than it is supposed to be seen as a literal space.

My spaces, the way I paint architecture, sometimes they feel very real, like you could enter them, but there's almost always some surrealist gesture that stops it from being a real space.

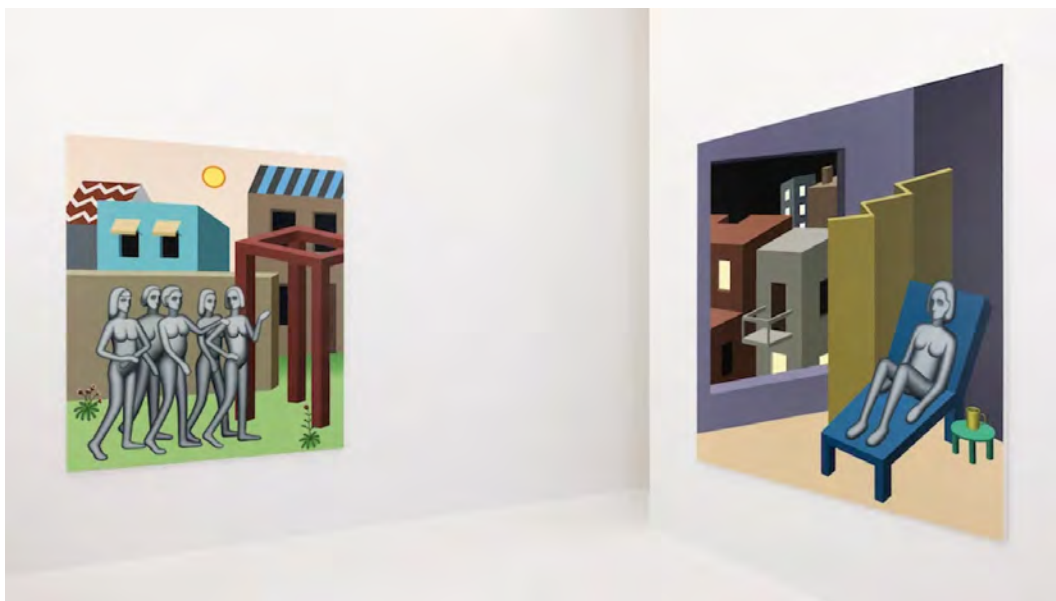
I definitely don't want to create a utopia, though. That is a very problematic thing to do because one person's utopia is not the next's. They're just supposed to be abstracted gestures creating a space in which one feels safe. And for me being a woman, I obviously reflect on that state, a lot.

KALTBLUT: Would you ever paint male figures? I couldn't make out any while looking at your works.

Emily: If there is a male figure in my painting, it's maybe appeared as a child. I don't have any adult males in my paintings. Not every single one of my paintings has a figure in it, though. That's also important for me that it's not always just about the female form. I used the figure in undergrad, but I found that the conversations were really hard because of the way the figures have been used in art history through objectification, and colonization.

I felt I was engaging in those conversations in a way I either didn't feel prepared to or wasn't trying to talk about. So, I got rid of the figure from my work for seven years and only introduced it again about four years ago. I wanted it to speak back more literally to the human form as well as implicate people in them and suggest these are spaces that have been left by humans.

I wanted to do that with female forms as there still is a lot of work to be done in creating images of women being empowered in paintings. It's not that I'm opposed to ever having a male form in one of these paintings, and maybe I will reach a point at which they will start appearing. But for now, it feels important that if I am representing a figure, it is a woman's form. And it is in a state that I'm not used to seeing in art history. As my figures are often portrayed in these liminal states of boredom, compassion and friendship, instead of as a virgin mother, or the wife of some noble person.



Emily's exhibition at Berlin's Peres Projects will be closing on 6th January 2023. More info on the Peres Project's website.