

DAZED

George Rouy's 'guttural' paintings explore the complexities of the body

14th August 2023 – Text Thom Waite



To celebrate the launch of his debut monograph, the painter tells Dazed about his creative process and inspirations.

“In some ways it flew by,” says George Rouy of the last six years, documented in his debut monograph, *Selected Works 2017-2023*. In another sense, the evolution of the painter’s work in this time – from the soft-focus figuration of shows like *Squeeze Hard Enough It Might Just Pop!*, to the energetic and increasingly abstracted works in 2023’s *Body Suit* – marks a phase of accelerated growth. “It was a very transformative period,” he says, looking back on the amount of work he produced, and noting how it matured and gained a new sense of potency. Looking forward, he adds, he sees this as a reflection of where the next six years might take him.

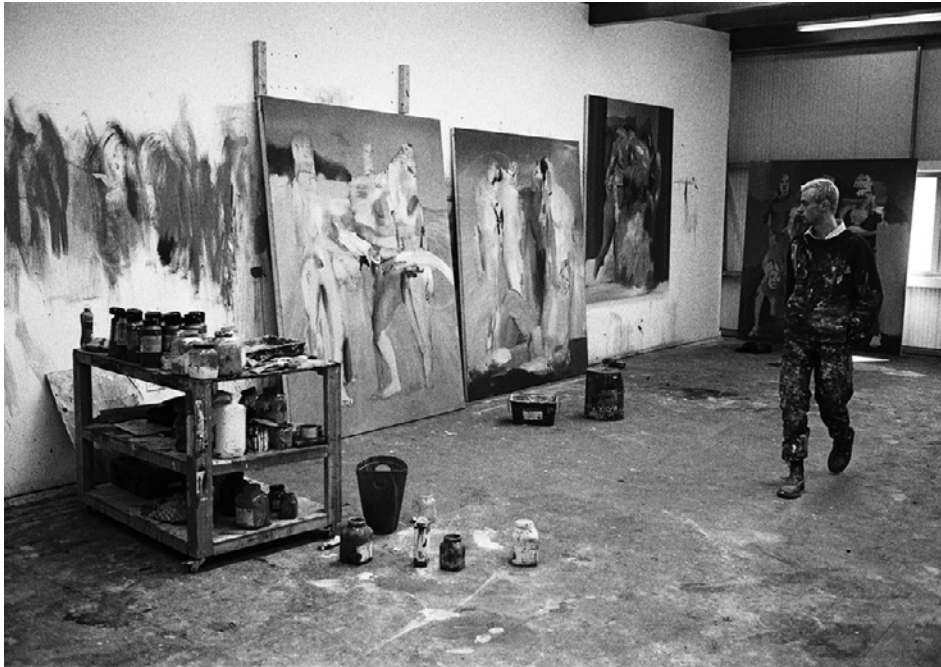
Rewind a couple of years before the scope of *Selected Works*, though, to 2015, and we find Rouy – freshly graduated from Camberwell College of Arts – in a very different state of mind. He always knew he loved figurative painting, he explains, but it wasn’t en vogue at the art school, and he gradually had it drummed out of him, leaving him “quite disillusioned and a bit lost”. After university, he adds: “I had to rediscover what I wanted to do. So I started from the basics.”

PERES PROJECTS

At first, this process of re-learning was experimental and erratic, producing several disparate bodies of work. Gradually, however, a focal point emerged. Rouy compares the process to sharpening a knife: “You’re becoming more focused, and you start to understand where the work sits.” This honing of both ideas and physical techniques is mapped throughout *Selected Works*, which is curated to highlight a movement away from the pure physicality of living in our bodies, toward the psychological elements we don’t see on the surface, and how they can be captured through movement or abstraction. (Dance is a key inspiration, with choreographer Sharon Eyal performing among Rouy’s paintings in a collaboration at Hannah Barry gallery last month.)

As a result, the artist’s figures seem to burst beyond the limits of their balloon-like forms over the course of the book, exploding into life; the brushstrokes become looser, and dislocated facial features are lost in swathes of garish paint, scraped across the canvas. As Rouy himself notes, the work starts relatively simple and restrained, but gains character and complexity as the layers build up over time.

Below, the painter delves deeper into the background of the stylistic shift traced in *Selected Works 2017-2023*, the role of “informed intuition” and technology in his creative practice, and what we can expect from his work over the course of the next six years.



Your work transforms over the course of the *Selected Works*, but where do you think the common threads lie?

George Rouy: I’ve always been in love with figuration, and how that can make one feel... whether it’s dance, or painting. It’s become very clear that that’s where the work sits best, at the moment. I’m always thinking about the viewer, and this kind of intuitive approach to how the viewer sits within the work.

My other love is abstraction. [That’s] the other thing that you get seduced by all the time, within art, and that’s purely psychological, because you’re just observing a kind of map within a painting. It’s about the marks, the physicality, these things linked to the anatomy. You have that aspect, and then you have the depiction of a figure. Something I’m always asking myself is where does my work sit within those two extremes?

What role does intuition play in your work?

George Rouy: I think intuition is something that’s learned, to a certain extent. Everything you see informs a

PERES PROJECTS

judgement of something else you see, or read, or something like that. There's an informed intuition, and then there's also a guttural, human, and emotional intuition that's separate to that. Or they work in tandem. Over time, making art, I've reinforced that more and more.

Are there any key reference points that informed this period?

George Rouy: I've just done this project with Sharon Eyal, the dance choreographer, and when I first saw her work, it must have been about five years ago... the work transformed after that point. I realised that the figure is so potent when it exists within a non-narrative environment, when it exists within the abstract. It's purely about the body, about expression. I draw the lines between the painting and this physicality of the body, live, in real time. It's how we all exist.



How is this turning point drawn out in the monograph?

George Rouy: The book starts quite simple. The figure was just used as a symbol. You'd have the bleeding thumb, or the idea of the blood, and I was looking at the symbolism of painting. Then, I left that. I felt like it was too restrictive. It's too symbolic. I wanted it to feel multi-layered, in all its forms.

Do you think your work over this period was influenced by external factors, like the pandemic?

George Rouy: [The pandemic] didn't affect my focus, or ideas, but it gave me time. I was very fortunate to have a studio that I cycled to. I was very fortunate. And I think the work progressed, in that moment, over those few years.

On a wider note, Hannah [Barry], my gallerist in London... we always say that we hope the work could exist in 100 years, or it could have existed 100 years ago. As much as the world changes, it is about humanity, and it's about those parts that are indescribable. There are certain poems, certain pieces, that have the same amount of weight and resonance [today] as they did when they were written. It's quite a reassuring thought.

The aesthetic of your work is often compared to technologies like photography, or video, with all its glitches and blurs. What's your relationship with technology in art?

PERES PROJECTS

George Rouy: I mean, the camera is my viewfinder. It condenses the image down. When I'm painting, I have a paintbrush in one hand and a [phone] camera in another. Then, I have Photoshop to plan paintings. I take photographs of the paintings, put them into Photoshop, and plan the next moments.

What I would stress, which is really important, is that the work isn't *about* technology. It's a bit bland, a bit stark when it's just about technology. Technology is the tool, it's not the subject. But technology is definitely a part of it. It enables the images [to become] more extreme.

AI is another thing that will allow a wider vision. I've seen some quite uncanny things that friends have done, where I've just been blown away. It's kind of scary. But humans aren't perfect, and we aren't the technology that we use. The thing that makes things valuable is that it feels like it comes from a human, that's what we can all relate to. You could get ChatGPT to write a poem, and it could be stunning, but if it doesn't have the human history... something's missing.

Do you think that's because it fails to capture those 'indescribable' or intuitive parts of human experience?

George Rouy: Yeah, for sure. The friction in how we all exist, whether you're feeling happy one moment, or anxious, or whatever, those bits define your judgement of things. It's emotional, it's purely reaction. Those things all add up, they equate to something that ultimately gives you a guttural response to something. Technology like AI doesn't have those parts. It's collecting a larger sense of cultural anxiety, but it's not a personal one.

If you could jump ahead five or six years, and look back on a similar period of work to the one collected in *Selected Works*, what would you be hoping to see?

George Rouy: I have images in my head of future paintings, I've always had images of what the work *could* be. But you have your physical ability, and you have what's going on in your head, and I think all the time I've been playing catch-up. Five years ago, I would be thinking about what I'd be doing when I'm 30. Now, I'm nearly 30, and I'm thinking: 'Is this what I envisioned when I was 25?'

I know that [the work] will become more abstract. I know that there will be figuration, but within this larger sense of how that can appear as a painting. That's how I see it. Large, full, dancing. Or rhythmic. It's intuition. I think you've gotta follow that as an artist, because that's what keeps the energy, and retains that beautiful bit that makes it so special, that it doesn't really have sense. Yeah, I don't know. Five years is a long time.