

Painting the cultural apocalypse: small but mighty insights with Beth Namenwirth

By Jennifer Vignone

We need art. It creates an inner vision where thoughts are processed, and wonders are engaged that lead to breakthroughs and discoveries within and without ourselves. It provokes that suspended state where we see the world throughout time. This is what ties us together. This is the power of Beth Namenwirth's work.

Ms. Namenwirth's work presents an array of observations and situations that may seem superficial but pull the viewer into layers of examination and insight. Early works such as "Kunstmatische schoonheid" ("Artificial Beauty", 2002), look at how women present themselves to each other and the world. Placed with the precision of a still life, her women are more like the wigs and flowers around them rather than living, breathing beings. She states:

A recurring theme in my work is the obsession with appearance: how do women want to look, how do they think they should look, and in what ways are they occupied with trying to manipulate their looks. I find this fascinating. Some women enjoy playing the game and others suffer from it.



Kunstmatische schoonheid, 25.6in-41.5in, 2002

Several years later, the theme continues, incorporating historic, contemporary, and seemingly out of context references. In "Z.t." (2013), statue-like figures from various eras of art history adorn a space occupied by torso paintings, reminiscent of Balthus and Magritte, speaking to how women are depicted not just throughout history but how they see themselves in pieces, never entirely whole. Spilled urns of mother's milk suggest how women strive to define who they are outside of their "typical" role in history and society. A broom leans against a torso, symbolic of "a woman's work is never done", while the cut open sweets in the foreground signify the luxury of sitting around eating bon-bons. Mixed signals abound as Ms. Namenwirth's symbols play with the viewer and invite consideration of seemingly random juxtapositions.



Z.t., 25.6in-41.5in, 2013

Since 2016, Ms. Namenwirth's approach has scaled down in size, with many of the canvases not surpassing 15 inches in height or width. She also works much more quickly, finishing a painting in about three hours. She explains how this came about:

It was a combination of things. In 2014 I had been very ill with a bowel inflammation and almost died. From that moment on, I no longer wanted to work with harmful substances for health reasons. Then I started experimenting with ways to use the oil paint as pure as

possible and came up with a mixture of oil paint, marble powder and a little stand oil. That gives a thick, pasty paint that you really have to apply in one go ... Another motivation for working quickly was that I had a small child and only had short stretches of time to paint. That is how I learned to paint quickly, which had a positive effect on the paintings.

As size and approach of these recent paintings has evolved, so has the subject matter. The paintings are deceitfully mirthful observations of everyday life and culture. They possess the quality of cartoons in their insightful look at a current event or cultural trends. As paintings, it is easy to be drawn in by their initial display of beautiful jewel-like color, painterly surfaces, and historic visual touchstones. However, further engagement reveals true depth. The viewer is drawn to examine and consider their own lives as a result.

In “Nudes with Smartphones” (2018), figures cluster in a Cezanne-like “The Bathers” landscape. But instead lounging idly, they stare with intensity into the glow of their interactive lives. The landscape swirls around them, melding land and watery tones while holding the women in a fixed space as they await the next email or text.



Nudes with smartphones, 13.77in-15.74in, 2018

Ms. Namenwirth adds another dimension to the picture plane with the idea of the viewer and where their attention — and ours — is focused. In some paintings, the figures turn away from us. In “Paint coming out of the painting” (2018), the paint responds, coming out at the viewer, as well as at us, while in “Walking with the backside of a painting” (2019), the viewer and the art are hidden, adding an air of mystery as to what the artist has chosen to hide.



Paint coming out of the painting, 15.74in-15.74in, 2018



Walking with the backside of a painting, 7.87in-9.44in, 2019

The push-pull of the interaction between painting and viewer has a more ominous impact in “De president bekijkt de Guernica” (“The president is looking at the Guernica”, 2017) where the question of who or what is being guarded—the painting or the President—as the viewer is kept away, either banned or in danger. The President, unconcerned, is the one element turned away and hidden.



De president bekijkt de Guernica, 11.8in-23.6in, 2017

Paintings where the subject matter directly engages the viewer can have an equally disturbing effect. In "Snowwhite painted some animals" (2017), a pretty little girl visualizes some troubling inner thoughts. Large doll-like eyes fix us in her outward gaze. Her "animals" face us with their deKooning-like presence. As deKooning was known for his portraits of distorted women, it is worth noting how Namene Wirth's female presents a prettified exterior while a firestorm rages inside.



Snowwhite painted some animals, 15.77in-15.77in, 2017

Asked if being a woman -- a woman painter -- forms a part of her definition as an artist and if she thinks of herself as a painter, or as a woman painter, Ms. Namenwirth responds:

In my earlier work I certainly was. It was autobiographical in a way and included my struggles as a young woman with my looks and expectations of what a woman should look like in this society. In recent years that is no longer the subject of my art. I do have a great preference for painting women over men and when I paint female figures, I focus on those aspects that many women are concerned with, such as what do they look like, how do they move their body, how old are they, what kind of they wear clothes, although I do not do that consciously and literally.

I myself find it difficult to know whether others see my work as that of a woman. Someone got angry once because he thought my work was made by a male chauvinist man! I personally think that my recent paintings have something cute because of the small size, the fluffy way of painting and the bright colors and can therefore be recognized as made by a woman.

When asked about her influences, her interest in combining the commentary of cartoons with her own painterly sensibility and interpretation of the figure is evident. Ms. Namenwirth states:

When I started at the art academy, postmodernism was an important movement. I think what influenced me in particular was figurative painting that was conceptual and over the top, like Jeff Koons and a Dutch artist Rob Scholte. Postmodernist artists took the freedom to use images from all periods of art history, which inspires me. I am also very impressed by figurative painters who stay close to reality and yet have their own interpretation of what they see, such as John Currin, Lisa Yuskavage and Dutch artists Michael Kirkham and Ina van Zyl.

Furthermore, I am also enthusiastic about narrative painting, in which extensive scenes are depicted about modern life and also painting that is based on cartoons, but interestingly painterly.

The cartoon-like approach makes her work approachable, as cartoons, animation, graffiti are so available in not requiring a trip to a special building to be seen. Once in front of her work the viewer feels that ease of being able to quickly relate to the images. The immediacy and quick turnaround reflect how we are as a culture now, where so many things are turned out, updated, tossed aside and reborn, resulting in a lack of permanence and evolution. Ms. Namenwirth's comments:

I did not consciously start to paint like that because I thought it would fit the spirit of the times, but I see that my work is in line with a trend. Of course, I am on the internet and am bombarded by messages and stimuli like everyone these days. It may be that this restlessness is reflected in my work. That everything goes faster and faster, may also give me the feeling that at some point it cannot go any further, which gives me a threatening and apocalyptic feeling, which I think can also be seen in several of my paintings.

I think that with my paintings I always want to comment on how people are and how they live, in the sense that by depicting things in a certain way I want to show that they are weird and not obvious. I try to do it in a loving and humorous way.

Beth Namenwirth uses a small platform and quick style in her observations of life that provoke thought. In today's culture, with everyday distractions and responsibilities, it is difficult to command attention. And when life-altering events such as the current COVID-19 pandemic occur, it is even more arduous to make sense of the world we thought we knew and figure out where it will go. When asked about how she views this particular time, Ms. Namenwirth explains:

It is of course difficult to look into the future, but the Covid-19 crisis seems to me to be temporary. I do think that the world will face several other crises due to overcrowding,

climate change, shifting power structures, etc. But I have confidence that art will move along and respond to all those changes because I believe the nature of art is to make everything to express what is there. In times of crisis, creativity can sometimes flourish. Even when museums close, art will be created and find its way to the public in new creative ways.

Even in this time of crisis, art does go on, and though we may not always realize it, it forms part of how the world sees itself at every stage of existence. Ms. Namenwirth has found a way to do this with an eye-winking grin and a paintbrush, creating a series of works that are amusing, diverse, and profound.

With a painting career of over 25 years, Beth Namenwirth's canvases are plentiful. Born in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1969, her family moved to the Netherlands in 1987. From 1987 to 1993, she studied art at Gerrit Rietveldacademie, in Amsterdam. She continued her studies back in the United States, studying at New York's Cooper Union in 1991. She was always artistic, stating:

Ever since I was 4 years old, I liked being creative and to draw and make things.

Beth Namenwirth's work may be seen on her website at: <https://www.bethnamenwirth.com>.