

NO MAN'S ART GALLERY

Everything is better when I'm with me

Marilyn Sonneveld

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For the occasion of Marilyn Sonneveld's second solo exhibition at No Man's Art Gallery, we sat down with the artist to discuss her practice, her new work, and the themes that run through it all. In a conversation about intimacy, desire and self-love, Sonneveld sheds light on 'Everything is better when I'm with me.'



Marilyn Sonneveld in her studio. © Lisette van Hoogenhuyze

What does your day-to-day practice look like?

I try to go to the studio five days a week. I've noticed I'm more productive when I try to stick to a schedule and start my day earlier, so I try to get to my studio in the morning. Usually I stay until around 8, because I do enjoy having the evening to myself. Keeping a bit of a fixed schedule gives me a structure to work with.

Do you have any rituals connected to your studio practice?

My commute to the studio is a ritual in itself. Because my studio is at het HEM I take the ferry, which clears my head. After the trip to the studio, I make myself a coffee and I sit down in my studio for a while to observe my work before I get started.

Can you describe your creative process?

I start by collecting. I have a trove of images: photos of myself, my friends, acquaintances; snapshots of a certain posture I see someone in, I've seen on social media, or I've sketched already. That's my starting point, and I go through these images to figure out which body I want to depict. I always start on the canvas straight away, with one body. Once I've placed the first one, I consider the composition and then go in and add others. So, at the beginning it's quite graphically focussed, and I'm not thinking about the colours but am focusing on placement and composition.

Then, after I've placed all the bodies, I can get lost in the work and I incorporate the emotion of it by blending the colours on the canvas. When I'm doing this, I try to forget about the composition and to focus completely on the colours – the bodies and their shapes function more like a framework.

What characterises your work?

Mainly the shapes; the organic and bodily forms are relatable and recognisable. But it's also the colours, the layers and the feelings they evoke – a kind of depiction of desire, or emotion, or eroticism, or sexuality. Although my work is also about touch, intimacy and embodiedness in a broader sense, I think these themes define how people experience my work.

In thinking about these themes, the topic of consent quickly comes to mind. Is this something you actively consider in relation to your work?

Yes. I am concerned with intimacy, which is something that occurs organically in my work through my process of composition. Of course, this also happens in everyday life; individual bodies that meet and interact, sparking a kind of desire. My work evokes that particular feeling, through a sense moving in slow motion and refraction through the layers and colors.

But of course, I do consider what is going on in the painting. Particularly, what is happening with hands, and touch: is it an embrace? Or more of a push? Is the touch happening in a manner or place that some might experience as positive, whereas others might not? I want to invite the viewer to have their own interpretation of what is going on, and I'm interested in the connotations a particular interaction might have for different individuals.

Desire, to me, is very much connected to emotion. It's fantasies and cravings for touch, or for a lack thereof. Not just in a literal, physical sense, but desire is ultimately about feelings we carry inside, and I think it's important to focus and be in touch with them. Once you tap into these feelings, you can better understand your own desires, and communicate what you do and do not want. Of course, desire is individual, and another person might not want the same things as you. I think that being attuned to yourself in this way allows you to grasp that individuality.

How has your practice evolved over time?

I started out working more illustratively, meaning my starting point was always a concept. I worked with screen printing, riso printing, making editions. But with these techniques everything is flat and I was missing a certain depth. I didn't enjoy working in that way so much, because I couldn't lose myself in it.

When I had my first solo exhibition at No Man's, in 2019, I had been interested in color for a while. I was experimenting with oil pastels at the time, but I still wanted more distance from concepts and to move from my illustrative thinking to a place where I would be more focused on my practice in its own right.

Then, I finally just started painting, with the big paintings on textile, *Flowing Flux*. The sheer scale of the works forced me to let go of a fixation on details. That just felt right: more fun, more expressive, more instinctual. So I decided to continue, and now rather than thinking about how I am going to visualise a certain concept, I just start painting and see what develops on the canvas as I go along.

How did that shift, in the scale and the medium of your work, occur?

It happened during the period of quarantine, largely within the confines of my studio and in my own head. But it was also shaped by conversations with friends and other artists.

Before, I was also very busy with *wipsite*, the website for sexual education, which came with a lot of pressure. Because of that, I wasn't really prioritising on my own practice, and on the development and growth of it. Talking about that helped me realise that I was stuck where I was and that I had to change something. I realised that I wanted so much more, and that I had the ability to achieve that. It's also thanks to the support people around me that I was able to make that change.

So this change had been waiting inside me for a while, and then once I took a step back, and decided to focus on myself, the shift to a different kind of practice happened quite quickly, within the span of a year and a half.

And now you're working with another new medium, with glass. How has that been?

It's been amazing. It was new for me, to put the actual process of making the object in someone else's hands, so I was a little nervous. But it was great to see how these craftsmen worked with my ideas. It's interesting to explore three-dimensional objects because my work is very much about embodied themes, normally worked out in two-dimensional spaces. I really appreciate that tension, but I wanted to extract bits from that and bring them into the physical space. So I see the glass objects as an extension of my paintings, as a part of the color palette, or an element of a body.

What does 'Everything is better when I'm with me' mean to you?

It's about desire. About emotion, about gut feeling and the fantasies that one carries with them in their body, but is not always in touch with. If you can achieve that connection through intimacy, in the broadest sense of the word - then everything just gets better.

But also in the literal sense, just being alone – when there's no white noise or other people that can bother you. It's also connected to the process I've been through in the past year and a half, where I spent a lot of time alone, focusing on myself, my creative practice and my development. The changes we've discussed are also thanks to me being at my studio in solitude, without distractions. So, it means different things to me, but it has everything to do with self-love. Feeling like you deserve attention and investing time in yourself and your development.

Do you have a clear idea about how people should feel when they look at your work?

No, not one particular feeling. The experience, and the feelings that are evoked, they're different for everyone. But I do think that my work always evokes something, because the bodies, and the ways that they may or may not be touching, speak to individual experiences and desires. One person might have positive connotations, whereas someone else might feel very differently about the same interaction.

Recently, I had someone at my studio that told me that my work made them feel anxious, because it reminded them of how close everyone used to be to each other before the pandemic, and how that will come back eventually. Another person might think the colours are beautiful, or someone else might love the notion of intimacy. That's very interesting to me, what's happening on the other side of the work, and the potential for dialogue. It might open up conversations and questions, like "do you like this particular kind of touch?" or bring back memories.

This is not something that I'm actively pursuing when I'm painting, but it is something I think about; opening up a space for storytelling and dialogue, where everything can be talked about without judgement.