

Cincala Gilbert, Ingrid, *Peter Stichbury has Suspended Disbelief*, **CincalaArt**, November 2022

## CincalaArt

### Peter Stichbury has Suspended Disbelief



Peter Stichbury, "Vita Ventura, 1978", 2019

"I prefer to think that mysteries are currently opaque because of how little we know, rather than because they are unanswerable"

— Peter Stichbury

Peter Stichbury lives and works in Auckland, New Zealand, and is known for his portraits of both real and imagined people with smooth skin, symmetrical features, and wide-set eyes.

*1. Ingrid Cincala Gilbert: How did you get started in painting? What attracted you to the medium?*

Peter Stichbury: A slightly cliched origin story, I've been painting, drawing and making things since early childhood. I still fondly remember the smell of paint in kindergarten. When I was seven I constructed a human skeleton from old chicken bones I found in the dirt on school grounds.

*2. ICG: In terms of your process, I've seen some of your drawings, which are really incredible. How do you view drawing in the context of your overall practice? How do you go about the process of creating one of your paintings in general?*

PS: Drawing is the basic architecture, the substrate of my painting. It has an obvious directness and lack of impedance, a natural accuracy and subtlety that almost feels like an x-ray – it's a strange process. There's nowhere to hide, or hide errors. My drawing relies on only a few elements – tone, composition, a little variation in line, so it's soft, light, ephemeral, an aesthetic I enjoy as a counterpoint to painting. I feel like my drawings are the quiet introvert, and my paintings are the extrovert, the full spectacle - colour, viscosity, depth. There's a largesse in painting, a completeness in the way a successful painting can transport its audience. You set up a proposition, an externalised thought experiment for them to be drawn into, to wrestle with and perhaps untangle.

*3. ICG: That's interesting. With respect to painting, the "extroverts" as you put it, I've sensed a bit of a subtle transition in your work, with your earlier portraits, like "Swoon" or "Charity", for example, exhibiting higher dimensionality and luminosity, gloss, this giving way to a certain flatness and directness as in "Joseph Honeywell", and perhaps most recently returning once again in your most recent works to a bit more depth. Do you see this? Is it intentional or a by-product of some other goal?*

PS: The work has certainly waxed and waned in terms of dimensionality and volume. I have been influenced at times by Freud's portraits from the late 1940s, the simplifying, flattening effect of his use of light. Currently, there are some aspects of traditionalism that I am moving back towards - some sense of naturalism, even though my work is heavily exaggerated and stylized. This supports becoming less reductive and more generous in my general articulation of subject matter. Painting the figs in Actaeon, 2022, and the funghi of Viola P. Neal, 2022, was gratifying. I spend a lot of time intellectualizing the work, so it's been transformative to let go and revel in the poetry of rendering. Less thinking, more doing.

*4. ICG: In your exploration of the unique encounters that has been the genesis of some your works, my feeling is that you are seeking to highlight wonder and mystery as opposed to fear of the uncanny. Is that fair, and if so, why do you tend to take this path?*

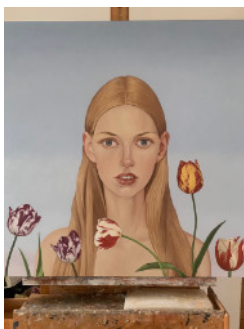
PS: Yes that's fair. We know the impulse to treat the unknown as a threat is a useful biological survival adaptation, but this fear can then devolve into social restraints and stigmas; modern intellectual taboos. The Academy struggles to discuss anomalous experiences with consciousness, and politically and medically they're difficult to broach because they're inexplicable using the information the current scientific method can produce, and because they're based around subjective qualitative data rather than quantitative data. But painting is the ideal context in which to address these themes. I try to resist a fear-driven or defensive stance toward mysteries that are hard to interpret within our current consensus reality. For me it's more valuable to suspend disbelief and approach them with intellectual curiosity and imagination. I prefer to think these mysteries are currently opaque because of how little we know, rather than because they are unanswerable *per se*. I admire the bravery of scientists like Garry Nolan and Jacques Vallée who steadfastly confront these anomalies in their work.

5. ICG: *I've read how your subjects have tended to be individuals in their 20s or 30s, who perhaps carry less baggage and tendency towards bias. I wondered if you have found corollary examples in the making of your art itself, as you yourself have matured? Do you find that your practice is substantially different than it was when you began painting?*

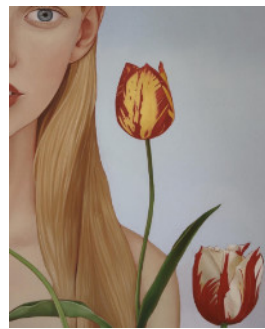
PS: I really like that reading, but it's not my intention. Rather than painting a particular age group, I attempt to paint people who are ageless, suspended outside time, outside our dimension perhaps. The specificity of their vital statistics is limited to the identity they are assigned, which represents an aspect of the subject I am examining at that moment.



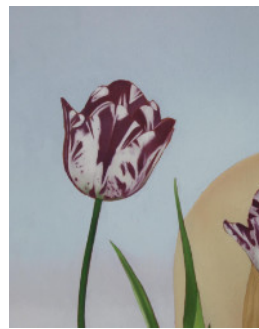
Peter Stichbury, "Cassandra", 2022



Peter Stichbury, "Artemis" (studio), 2022



Peter Stichbury, "Artemis" (detail), 2022



Peter Stichbury, "Artemis" (detail), 2022

6. ICG: *While on the surface your work has in the past focused on extraterrestrial encounters, one might say the larger focus is on the gap, or conversely the link, between the conscious and unconscious--and the fact that just because some things remain unknowable does not mean they are untrue. Are there connections you see in today's social and political discourse?*

PS: I guess that's true of all the subjects I research – the commonality of consciousness as a deeper theme. There is the relationship between societal belief and consciousness – the impact belief has on our interpretation of what consciousness is. On the one hand, Jung's theory of a collective unconscious that connects all humans. On the other, the theory that consciousness is a construct of the social perceptual machinery, an epi-phenomenon of the brain. Debate runs high around the nature of consciousness and therefore around anomalous experiences associated with death, and around the possibility of extraterrestrial / interdimensional contact. For now we're left with theory and the age-old debate between a materialistic and a spiritual interpretation of our existence. And of course my examination of consciousness feeds into this larger question about the nature, reason and direction of reality.

We can talk about how technology impinges upon consciousness, and transhumanistic ideas of life extension and how disturbing, and also incredible the results of that could be. I idealize people in paint, but actually manufacturing genetically disease-free humans who don't degrade quickly, who could live hundreds or thousands of years, how does that impact us ethically at a sociopolitical level? And at the level of consciousness?

7. ICG: *Portraiture has a long history of telling the broader story of the subject. In your case, the subjects are generally not famous in the mainstream sense of the word, but nonetheless I think mostly have backstories that are quite significant to your work. To what extent do you want the viewers of the work to really understand who these individuals are, and their stories, or does that miss the point?*

PS: When I started looking into the personal experiences of the subjects, I felt a need to tell their accounts in a biographical way to encourage the audience to grapple with the details. Now though, the accounts have settled in so many homogenous layers that their individual identities are less important than the propositions they offer as a group: aspects of consciousness, its anatomy theoretically, and its lack of confinement to the finite physical body. Also the role of the dimensions of time and space in the human experience. Contemplations around undiscovered intelligent species and the role of consciousness in that potential future relationship. Belief systems and the function of consensus reality in shaping human interpretation of these mysteries. Philosophical thought around consciousness in the form of Platonic and Socratic theory, which is a current research interest.

My Greek heritage also offers me a rich cultural inheritance in the form of the belief system of Greek mythology, which feels very poetic and provides an antidote to the mystery and open-endedness inherent in my consideration of consciousness. Greek mythology is a closed symbolic language detailing the Ancient Greeks' perceived sum of humanity's elements which offers the certainty of a finite system, even though, paradoxically, it's fictional.

8. ICG: *Who are some of the artists you admire in today's contemporary art scene?*

PS: So many. Neo Rauch, Tony Matelli, John Currin, Dana Schutz, Kati Heck, Kehinde Wiley, Elizabeth Peyton, Steven Shearer, Genesis Belanger. Ingres' work feels very contemporary in its subtle stylization and lushness, and I return again and again to Freud's *Girl with a Kitten*.

9. ICG: *What's next for you?*

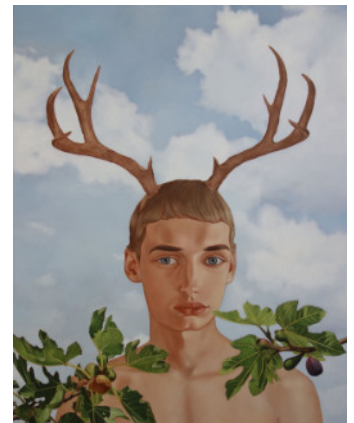
I have a solo show scheduled next year in Seoul with Gallery Baton, as well as a couple of other projects I'm excited about.

ICG: *Peter thank you so much for this insight into your work and process!*

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Peter Stichbury, "Actaeon" (detail, studio) 2022



Peter Stichbury, "Actaeon" 2022



### Peter Stichbury (b. 1969, New Zealand)

Peter Stichbury received a BFA and MA in Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland in 1997. He won the prestigious New Zealand art prize the Wallace Art Award in the same year. He has participated in exhibitions at the Dowse Art Museum (2022), The FLAG Art Foundation (2022), Nevada Museum of Art (2016) and Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (2013) in New Zealand. Additional exhibitions include: 'Human Condition' at The Hospital, Los Angeles (2016); and 'Artstronomy: Incursiones en el cosmos' at La Casa Encendida, Madrid (2015). His work is represented in the collections of Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Auckland Art Gallery, Christchurch Art Gallery, and Wallace Arts Trust in New Zealand.

Biographical information courtesy of Gallery Baton, Seoul