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INTO THE LIGHT JAMES TURRELL

WITH GALLERIST MAGGIE KAYNE

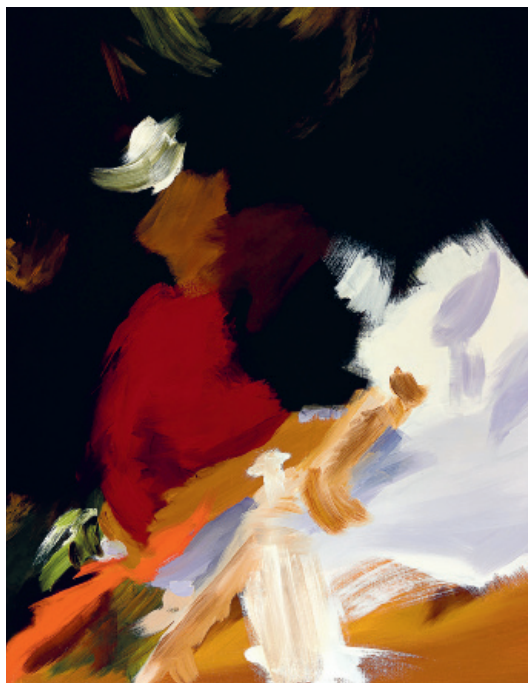
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RECLAMATION PROJECT

Painter **Elise Ansel** storms the boys' club, confronting Old Masters to create her wildly abstract paintings.

BY KAT HERRIMAN PORTRAIT BY WINKY LEWIS



Elise Ansel's *After Scarlet*; the artist in her Portland, Maine, studio.



IMAGE COURTESY CADOGAN CONTEMPORARY

Spelunking into the male-dominated

canon, artist Elise Ansel wields paint like an explorer might use a flashlight to illuminate the dark corners of a cave. Known for her abstract riffs on Old Masters, Ansel tackles art history's hegemonic, and often misogynistic, narrative through reinterpretation. The Maine-based painter's latest body of work, which is on view until April 17 at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art, addresses a piece she encountered while exploring the on-campus collection: *Annunciation* by late Flemish Renaissance painter Denys Calvaert. "When I visited the space, I walked into the Old Masters room and this painting jumped out at me. It was incredibly luminous," recounts Ansel about her show's inspiration. "In a way this painting embodies what the whole problem for me is. There are these magnificently beautiful paintings that are alien because their messages are either sexist or racist or so religiously pointed that the average person can't walk into them. My project is about reclaiming this work."

Through the repeated reworking of Calvaert's painting in different mediums, her Bowdoin show

demonstrates the way Ansel creates not only visual space, but also a more welcoming social environment within the context of the canvas. "What I've done is deconstruct the painting to find what could be relevant to a person in our time," explains Ansel. "Could it be about intuition? Is it possible to create an image that conveys something about spiritual experience?" Ansel's solo exhibition, "Distant Mirrors," is part of a larger course cluster created by associate Bowdoin professor and postcolonial literary scholar Hanétha Vété-Congolo, who is currently investigating the relationship between beauty and ethics. Ansel's work sheers content from craftsmanship in an attempt to salvage the undeniable appeal of these classical masterworks while still critiquing their moral ugliness. "It's about the idea of not throwing the baby out with the bathwater," says Ansel. "Like, T.S. Eliot is an incredible poet but also an anti-Semite. How do we not lose these cultural contributions? As women, how do we say they belong to us also?"

An adjunct lecturer at her alma mater, Brown University, the artist regularly tries to build new

conversations on top of existing narratives. By editing famous rapes, murders and abuse with commas of paint, Ansel levels the playing field, allowing alternative perspectives to flourish. Using a kind of Etch A Sketch solution to a historically ingrained problem, Ansel insists she is not attempting to whitewash the past with her work but rather deal with it head-on. "The whole point of art and creativity is communication. As an artist, some of my greatest learning has come from looking at the work of painters that I admire," explains Ansel. "My work is about creating this kind of open door for my students. It's about rejecting what's just fed to you and taking a moment to think about it, and rework it if need be."

Last December, the artist also appeared at Cadogan Contemporary in London with an exhibition titled "Fusion of Horizons." A selection from her archives, the show offered a window into the past that felt simultaneously reverential and critical. Moving from the literal to the abstract, Ansel sacrifices nothing on the altar of political correctness, but instead opens the door to a richer future.