

# Studio Visit: Alexandra Grant, Antigone and the Body Politic



Alexandra Grant; Photo credit Gary Brewer

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*"The more I dream, the more I allow myself to dream/to be dreamt, the more dreams come to me. It is the same for the trees which stretch out their arms to us." ~ Hélène Cixous, Philippines*

*"A word is a bud attempting to become a twig. How can one not dream while writing? It is the pen which dreams. The blank page gives the right to dream." ~ Gaston Bachelard, Poetics of Reverie*

**Written by Gary Brewer**

With a perspicacious sense of wonder, Alexandra Grant transforms words into images within information rich fields; in her paintings, layers of abstraction and verse explore the imponderable plasticity of image and text.

Alexandra creates dense paintings of gesture and pattern with words written in reverse or in mirror-writing to challenge the invisible mechanisms of understanding. To her, the way we automatically make sense of what we see is an expression of the dominance of reason over other more subtle faculties of sensing and feeling.

“Twenty years ago, while I was in art school, I spent a lot of time thinking about what ideas would interest me in the long term, what would carry me into the future as a painter. My love of literature was something I knew wouldn’t change and it became the foundation upon which I built my work. Throughout my career I have used words and narrative fragments from various sources to inspire and to sustain my work – what I call my ‘sourdough methodology’ – is that a literary theme can beget the next generation of themes. I have painted words in reverse or in mirrored text. I write the words in reverse to disrupt the mechanisms of understanding, of how we ‘read’ a painting or ‘see’ a text. It is an effort to break down the naturalized methods of reading and seeing that are invisible to us and to upset the unrelenting fascism of our minds.” Alexandra uses literary texts as a starting point to explore the endless variations of ideas that arise in the fermentation of her imagination.

Early in her career, Alexandra worked with the author and originator of hypertext fiction, Michael Joyce, using texts that he composed for her to paint. Several years ago Alexandra became close friends with Hélène Cixous, and in 2013 they collaborated on a project titled *Interior Forest*, exploring the idea of telepathy. As Cixous explained it to Alexandra, “It is one step further than empathy.” For *Interior Forest*, a public project realized in both Paris and Los Angeles, Alexandra invited the public to come and draw with her, illustrating Cixous’ book *Philippines* with hundreds of participants.

In her studio, Alexandra was completing a body of work named *Century of the Self*, after Adam Curtis’ documentary film series. “I wanted to make paintings based solely on quotes, mimicking an adolescent world view where one is trying on various personas and selves. I used, ‘to thine own self be true’ – Shakespeare, and ‘le est un autre’ (I as other) – Rimbaud. I also used the phrase ‘I was born to love not to hate’ from Sophocles *Antigone* and in 2015 I decided to make the Greek myth the subject of my next body of work, *Antigone 3000*.”

Alexandra interpreted the story of a young girl who stands up against the power of the state as the subject of her new, increasingly abstract paintings. I asked if *Antigone 3000* was a metaphor and a statement about feminism that drew her to the play.

“I was moved by events in the world that corresponded to a central theme in *Antigone*’s story, from Ferguson to popular uprisings across the world, led by social media. *Antigone*’s brothers, Polynices and Eteocles, killed each other in the conflict over the rule of Thebes. Creon, their uncle and the new king, decided that Polynices, the brother who fought against Thebes, would be left unburied, as a form of public shaming. *Antigone* explored the idea of disrespecting the dead as a form of humiliation by the state, and of a person – or people – standing up against it in protest. *Antigone*, in deciding to bury her brother, becomes a symbol of resistance across eras. It is not

about her as an individual or as a proto-feminist heroine, but as a metaphor of a collective body of citizens standing up to power.”



*Alexandra Grant; Photo credit Gary Brewer*

As we spoke, the idea that fate is at play in the life of an artist, came into our conversation. There are moments when chance and coincidence take on the force of a preordained destiny, of how the interconnectedness of life can lead to synchronistic moments where the paths that one has followed leads to profound epiphanic moments.

Alexandra told me about an experience she had after the election of Trump. “I had a painting at LACMA as part of a group exhibition. The day after the 2016 presidential election, I had scheduled lunch to go see the show, as I had missed the opening. As a friend and I were looking at the installation, a group of students walked up and my friend introduced me saying, “She’s the artist”. I spoke extemporaneously about my work and the story of Antigone. When I told them that she, a young woman who stood up against the power of the state was their age, many people in the class broke out in tears. A majority of the students came from immigrant families, and the myth of Antigone resonated with them.”

The paintings in *Antigone 3000* repeat a single line from Sophocles, “I was born to love not to hate”. The words are not painted but are rubbings of a plaster sculpture, using a soft wax made for gravestone rubbings. The phrase is mirrored along a central line and appears tombstone-like in a form that is both discrete and abstract, and repeated throughout the composition. Looking at the paintings, our mind insists that we interpret the text. It is a subtle but engaging device in which we instantly see that there are

words, but we cannot easily read them and we try to make sense of the letters. This momentary pause in the apprehension of the paintings creates a space where the mind is fragmented: one aspect sees the pure abstract forms and the energy and emotion that they generate – the other is taking time to make sense of the letters. It is a trip wire that makes us stumble. It slows the mind and we take in the information in a different way. It is a blunt instrument that takes aim at the invisible systems of recognition and causes us to reorient our experience of the painting. The paintings are large – 84x72 inches and larger. The chevrons and parallel stripes of color give the compositions a sense of order and structure. The gestural pours and splashes convey the uncontrollable forces of nature in its spontaneity and violence. Alexandra builds layer upon layer to create emotionally and visually dense paintings. In some there is more breathing room between the elements. In others, the density creates a spatial compression that squeezes space, creating a powerful impact. The marriage of image and text blurs to exist as a physical embodiment of language; it is the language of the flesh. We feel the pure energy of the painting and its force affects the content of the narrative.

Oneric writing is a dream-like state where words emerge in a melatonin-mist of cognition and reverie. The purposeful intentionality of the conscious mind is infiltrated with unsolicited words and images, free-floating narratives spontaneously initiated by deep currents of the imagination. We are continually generating the image of our selves against the steady tide of time and forces beyond will and reason.

In *Forêt Intérieure/Interior Forest*, a book published for the collaborative project by Alexandra with H  l  ne Cixous, the former asked, “How does a painter work with a book? By putting it under her pillow and going to sleep and letting the words climb into her dreams.”

The poetic, fairytale-like quality of this quote permeates the universe of images and words that she creates. Alexandra spoke of allowing her mind to daydream and to let her imagination roam without a purpose or a specific goal in mind. Reverie is the seedbed of creation. The overriding force of reason needs to be subdued, to let a meditative state of mind explore new ideas and ways of being.

Alexandra’s paintings express a moral force that aims to have a positive effect on the world. She refuses to be brought down by the forces of pessimism and cynicism.

Her paintings are visually lush and filled with a passionate exuberance. They have a range of emotions from humor and pathos, and express a deep sensual intelligence. For her the creative act is an affirmation of life and our need to experience joy and sorrow, to face the suffering of the world unflinchingly and to find meaning in our lives: otherwise what are we fighting for.

***Alexandra Grant’s solo exhibition, “Born to Love” opens at Lowell Ryan Projects June 1 2019, 4851 W. Adams Blvd, Los Angeles***