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By Thor Shannon

Gina Beavers

OOO: *Hey Gina. Let's start with the basics: where are you from, where did you go to school, and how did you begin to make art?*

GB: I lived overseas most of my life because my dad was an American diplomat, though the government brought us back every four years so as not to forget our "Americanness." I was born in Athens, Greece, and I lived in Malaysia and Denmark. It was interesting because I always attended international schools, which I think helped me feel comfortable in an international environment. I think that's part of why I moved to New York—chasing a certain "Americanness," while still maintaining an international identity. I went to college at UVA. I was initially PreMed, but very quickly dropped out of that! My mom is an artist and an art teacher and she asked me, "Why don't you take an art class?"—so I did. I ended up getting a BA with a double major in Anthropology. After that I went to the Art Institute of Chicago for grad school.

When did you move to New York?

I moved in '97 and worked here for a year or so. I realized pretty early on, though, that I had more to figure out, so that's when I decided to apply to grad school. I went to Chicago for two years and then came back.

Were you always a painter?

I was a drawer for a long time. I was really affected by underground comics, so I started making comics of my own in the '90s—part of the whole riot girl thing. After making a lot of drawings, I decided I was ready to try painting during grad school. I began taking tubes of paint and using them the way I would use a pencil—drawing with the paint itself. I've taken painting classes, but a lot of it is self-taught. All that said, I feel as though I've always been a painter. I like art history a lot and I feel that painting ties you to this whole historical lineage that's still very dynamic. I like thinking that this is the same puzzle that somebody five hundred years ago had to grapple with as well. The context has shifted dramatically, but the basic impulse is the same. It's as if you're painting on something that's been around your grandmother's house for your whole life - you know, it's not really yours, but you come to make it yours.

How do you approach art history? Do you find it daunting or a challenge?

I'm a nerd about painting. I love it. I love to go look at it. I love to think about it. But it's hard to find a foothold in painting to react against at this point. There is so much history to contend with, so much has been done. I think I use it more as a way to ask, what does or should or can painting look like today? What does or should or can painting made by a woman in New York in 2014 look like? I reflect on culture a lot because of my anthropology degree, so a lot of my work involves looking at culture, yet through the filter of this really old technique.

What do you think about the art world's bullabaloo regarding the ongoing relevancy of painting—or lack thereof?

We're in the midst of a digital revolution and we're seeing many different modes of technology emerging, which I think is wonderful. I love a lot of work that deals with those technological conditions and advancements, but my approach to it all is, I think, a bit slower than some of my contemporaries, who it sometimes seems are working to keep apace with those advancements at all costs. I had an iPod with a wheel only like six years ago! Things change so quickly and I feel uncomfortable in that kind of upheaval. Painting is something that I could do and make that relates to our present moment—that relates to technology—but is also a language that will never really die.

I think the long, enduring history of painting proves that it is not something that will or can become obsolete in the same way an iPod can.

Totally. I think there is a certain tension in the art world right now regarding painting. It's hard to find too much contemporary painting in an institutional context, but go to any of the auction houses and you'll see all these young painters whose work is ascribed serious value. Whether or not that has any weight, of course, I don't know… But then MoMA is about to do a big painting show, too, which I think also points to its ongoing significance, and which I think is great.

Many museums of late have not wanted to touch painting because of the medium's associations with the art market, which are seen as impure because the works come to be known merely as commodities. And yet, I think there are so many good, important artists who paint, who shouldn't be disqualified from an institutional or critical context merely because of their chosen medium. It's a bit too simplistic of a dismissal.

Exactly. As a woman especially, I think there are still so many great female painters who need recognition who haven't yet received it. Now that viewing painting is so accessible because of the Internet and social media,

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it seems as though maybe the value is lowered in a weird way. Maybe they don't want to touch it anymore precisely because of that accessibility. I look at my work as a kind of mediation between pristine digital space and the rough, pet-to-death quality that real life paintings can possess.

Can you tell me more about your process of finding, and ultimately rendering, images?

I find my images through the Internet and on social media. The images I find on the Internet—that is, as opposed to just Facebook or Instagram—can be slightly more porny, since social networks are scrubbed so clean. So I have some nudes and stuff that come from the Web, and then I take a lot of content from Instagram. I make these food paintings that are—to put it simply—based off of people's photos of their food. You know, #foodporn contains like 36 million photos—I just looked yesterday—and every time I've made a painting, that count increases. I make paintings based on people's Instagram photos because lately Instagram is what I've been looking at most. This visual looking that I, as a painter or artist, do is now directed primarily into my phone, and I feel like the most honest thing that I can do is make paintings based on what I'm looking at. I used to look at the sides of buildings, I used to look at the sky, I used to look at cars, but now—for better or for worse—I look at Instagram.

It's so contagious, so visually seductive. There is such a wide variety of things to look at, from so many different voices, and each with their own agendas, being put forward. It's difficult to look away.

Totally. I follow a lot of artists and art people. I follow almost everybody that follows me. I just love to look at it and try to understand the crazy diversity of images that it contains.

So why #foodporn?

From a formal perspective, these images can be really abstract and really interesting. I like the viewpoint—often around a foot from the table. I like the idea of consumption. I can do all these things formally with paint that reflects and relates to food. It has both kitsch and grotesque elements to it—like the fake food restaurants put out, which is meant to look enticing but is totally artificial.

When somebody posts a photo of a meal on Instagram, it's often deliberately and artfully composed. It's meant to elicit a sense of envy—"I'm eating this meal and you're not." In your paintings though, there is this nearly grotesque quality to the products you're depicting. On our screens these foodstuffs are meant to look delicious—and the images are so pristine—yet when you encounter your paintings of these foodstuffs in real life, their appearances can border on revolting as a result of the thick, impastoed way in which you render them.

I started using the medium as a way to challenge myself. I could make things look photorealistic if I wanted to, but I like the messed up, wonky nature of paint. I want to maintain that. I have this one painting with these turkey legs that I've been trying to tame. I just put too much pumice on it and it looks really gross—I can't tame it. In terms of consumption, though, I'm not trying to make a judgment about people's food-eating habits. If anything, I'm more interested in the similarities between food photography and traditional still life paintings. People are framing these things to look pleasing—much like the deliberate designs of Dutch painting. What are people thinking when they're framing it? What is their process when they're setting it up? How they think it looks attractive interests me a lot too. I did this one kimchi hotdog painting informed by the Instagrams of some person who posted three shots from every angle of a kimchi hotdog they were eating. Obviously it's a little funny, but what I'm more interested in is the intent there. The idea that they're showing off using these fairly involved compositional techniques, all to capture a fairly banal object, is interesting to me.

Besides food, what are some of the other images you select?

Makeup tutorials—[they] hail from a much less populated hashtag. There are fewer options, but there are some really weird things on there. There are some images, made with collage apps, which have eyes next to lips, and various other surreal juxtapositions. They become these totally weird faces and compositions, which I love. I like the idea of putting makeup on [and] making yourself attractive—it's kind of like what you do as a painter.

I like thinking that painting now is the same puzzle that somebody five hundred years ago had to grapple with as well.

It's a version of painting, certainly.

The intentions are very similar. With both painting and the application of makeup, you're trying to make someone connect to your creation, to feel attracted to it. There is some really wild, scary stuff associated with these hashtags, and I like to use those images as the starting point for the paintings I then create. I like the repetition of the images. I like that some of these images have a kind of narrative to them. Some of them have cool colors, depth, nice contrast, and so on. To be attracted to a piece I think it has to be both narratively and formally interesting.

The narrative qualities in your collage-like paintings are especially clear, I think.

Yeah. They're almost like a flipbook.

Totally. Again, there is something grotesque about the reconstitution of these images—seeing an eye next to a mouth, abstracted and reassembled. There's also something about that process of beautifying that seems super artificial in the way you outline the different steps of makeup application.

The grotesque part is also sometimes just trying and failing. Honestly, sometimes I think to myself, "This is going to look really elegant," and then I make it and I'm like "Oh, God." Part of it is the material—I think the plasticity of the paints I use can lead to that. There is another influence I should mention though, which goes back to the underground comic book–making that I was looking at in the '90s: Julie Doucet, a comic book artist from Montreal who's a total genius. Her work is very autobiographical. She moved to New York and then made this one comic called *My New York Diary*, which featured all the guys she'd slept with, depicted in this really explicit way. There were others I was into too, like *Twisted Sisters*. There's a wildness to them, a grotesque not-giving-a-fuck thing, which I love.

There's an explicitness to your paintings too. You can see the connection.

Yeah, that really affected me deep down. I am actually really good friends with Jen Sorensen, who just became the first female winner of the Herblock prize, the biggest award for comic book illustrators. She introduced me to all these comic books. She wrote her thesis about the carnival element of underground women's comics—the idea that nobody's watching you because you're oppressed and hidden and forgotten so you can just be as crazy as you want to be, like at a carnival—this one day to go kind of crazy. I'm not saying that's what I'm always thinking about when I'm working on my paintings, but there is an underlying wildness that definitely pervades them.

I think the fact that you started in this comic book mode is fascinating. There is such a directness to the images that you are using in your paintings, which is perhaps connected to the graphic quality of comics. Comics are very clear on a visual level in order to communicate very quickly. It seems like your paintings perform in a similar way.

Yes, absolutely. I think the best narratives always communicate in a very direct, economical way. The directness of my painting also stems, of course, from the medium of Instagram. I like to reveal parts of myself through looking at and appropriating something from the group, which I think has something to do with my background in anthropology. That focus on anthropology as a student has contributed to, and evolved into, my interest in social networks.

Certainly, there's also a directness and explicitness to social media as it comes to what we share. Maybe I'm a bit cynical, but that is kind of what social media is all about—trying to get as many likes as possible, trying to share something that will immediately resonate with people. Because people scroll through their feeds so quickly, everyone is trying to create something that's immediately visually appealing, because otherwise their followers will scroll right by. There's a kind of delectation to something that can be consumed so quickly and so immediately, and that seems to relate not only to your paintings—clearly, because of what you're sourcing from—but also to comic books, where there is this immediate communication between producer and consumer.

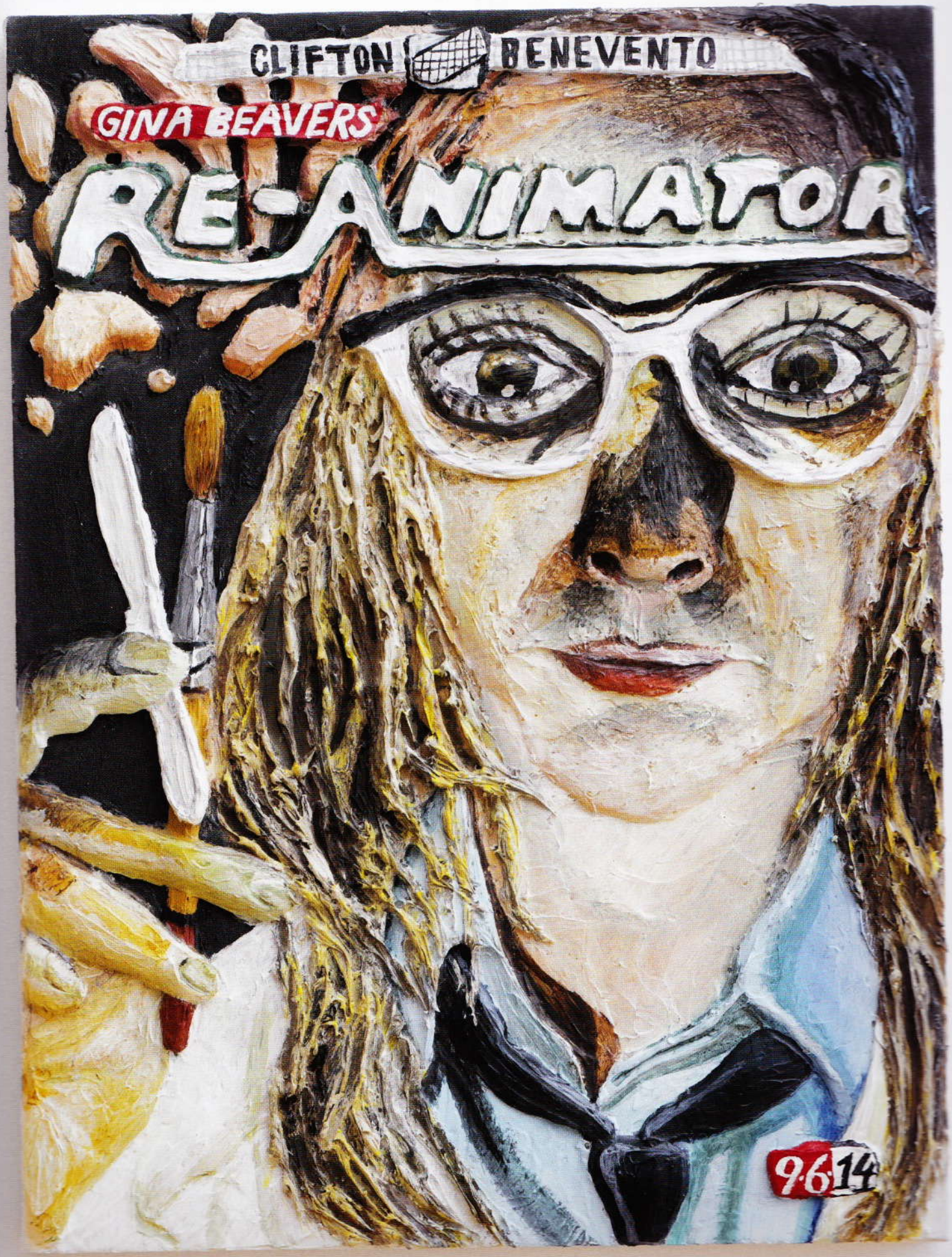
Totally. What I find interesting about that is thinking, "Do people try to anticipate what people will like? Yeah, they do." I feel like I'm bad at that. I mean, selfies and pictures of cats will always get a million likes, but it's fascinating how people anticipate what the group-at-large will embrace. It reveals a total self-consciousness on all our parts.

As an anthropologist, while combing through only one type of image linked via one hashtag, you must become familiar with which formal and stylistic cues work and which don't.

Yeah, definitely. Instagram is totally about blowing up your spot [and] showing how great you are. Maybe I'm being cynical now, but even when I'm trying to be really sincere, there is this element of, "Look how great I am."

How do you think your work is going to evolve with these technologies that are constantly shifting?

I don't know. I can already tell that I've been spending less time on my phone lately. I don't know what the next thing is going to be. I've definitely cut back on my Instagram. I'm losing the tether. I've always made work from things that I've either dreamed or seen. They come straight from my life, so whatever I'm going to be engaged in in the next six months, whatever I'll be looking at, will probably determine what my paintings look like or what their sources are. We'll have to wait and see. o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