

SPEAKERS

Allison Katz, Sam Thorne

Sam Thorne 00:04

Hi, everyone, thanks for being here. I'm Sam Thorne, Director of Nottingham Contemporary, and I'm so pleased to be in conversation with Allison Katz. Hi, Allison.

Allison Katz 00:15

Hi.

Sam Thorne 00:17

We're going to be talking about, or maybe around Allison's exhibition Artery, which recently opened in Nottingham contemporary and will be moving on to Camden Art Centre in early 2022. I'm going to briefly introduce Allison's work and the show, and then we'll move straight into a conversation that I'm hoping it's going to be rangy and meandering and appropriately arterial. So, for more than a decade, Allison Katz has been exploring painting's relationship to questions of identity, expression, selfhood and voice. Animated by a restless sense of humour and curiosity, her works articulate language of recurring forms. We see roosters, monkeys, cabbages, among many other things, forms that are by turns familiar and enigmatic. Allison's paintings, like her ceramics and posters, are wordy, as well as bodily. They're thick with puns, illusions, chains of association. What emerges from these tricky works is a critical pursuit of what Allison has called genuine ambiguity. We're really proud to be presenting Allison's first institutional show in the UK, at Nottingham Contemporary and its title is, as we're going to be discussing a resonant term. Allison's first site visit to Nottingham was in early March 2020, a week or so before the first lockdown. And all of the works in the exhibition were made during the last 12 months or so, against a backdrop of restrictions, of quarantine, of social distancing, more recently, vaccination. So, in this

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conversation, we're going to be exploring questions of painting at a distance of, of not touching, of flows, of blockages. In the show, Allison's paintings are installed within a series of walls and passageways, which are designed to echo or perhaps amplify aspects of the existing architecture. Allison approached the space as a kind of body, a porous body that extends beyond the walls, up as well as deep into the ground below. And in fact, the exhibition extends down into the city of caves, which is a network carved into the sandstone that sits below the galleries and below the whole of Nottingham. Visiting these caves in autumn last year, Allison was struck by how their forms of arches and portals coincided with some of those that have found in her own compositions from over the years. Another coincidence, Nottingham was the city where in the 1940s, Allison's grandparents met. So, working on this exhibition has, in a certain way, been a kind of homecoming, a kind of reconnection with family roots and family trees. For me, the questions that the exhibition asks are as much a response to the last year as an exploration of the perennial themes of painting, themes of communication, connection, intimacy, and origins. And I think it's this question of origins, Allison, I'd really like to start this conversation by talking about the beginnings of the exhibition that became Artery.

Allison Katz 03:55

Thank you. Um, well, as with any exhibition, there's always the kind of continuing flow of work that is occurring, and then the moment, the sort of decisive moment of an invitation, or knowing that there'll be a finite presentation in a space. So, it always seems to me that it's a balancing act of these two things. There's sort of the flowing stream of production, and then the very specific act of creating an exhibition, and visiting Nottingham Contemporary for the first time, looking at it as a site for an exhibition, I couldn't help but being struck that gallery one contained two out of four walls full of doorways, doors, entrances, into the hallway, into gallery two, into gallery zero, and then an exit door and an elevator.

Sam Thorne 04:56

I remember you saying to me that there's just so much noise in the gallery, and I sort of knew that, but I hadn't heard it so loudly.

Allison Katz 05:05

Exactly. I mean, I think for certain exhibitions that don't involve walls as such

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a central occupation, one wouldn't really notice. But you know, in my mind, painting has always a very intimate relationship with the wall. It comes from a wall. And even though now it's painted on discrete portable objects, it really is always thought of in relation to a wall. So, it was sort of remarkable to walk in and see that these walls already had a lot of action, or noise. But this idea of an entrance and an exit, or doorway, or a portal was already something that is contained within painting. So, it seemed absurd to reject it outright. And it seemed more of an interesting problem to me, how to compete with the comings and goings into a space, and to incorporate that in a way into themes that were already ongoing, or that I was already thinking about. And the elevator was a particular coincidence, because I had, I mean, rarely do I dream of a painting, despite surrealism, it's not an actual technique, I would do it more if it occurred. But I had had a very striking unsettling dream about an elevator, and had begun to research elevators and their primary role in the unconscious, and a sort of collective magnet for fears and desires. And it seemed to be, you know, a sort of non-subject subject, because also the shallow space of an elevator could easily be reproduced one to one on a canvas. So I was already thinking about this as a space or a site of, both, almost like the unseen, obvious space that we don't notice, but use frequently, and its' access to the unconscious. When I walked into gallery one, and I saw this giant elevator that was kind of in the way for me of a wall, that would be a kind of pure or clean exhibition wall. I knew right away, that I was going to have to paint that elevator, so, and that I would actually kind of manifest this previously thought, you know, into a work. So several things kept happening like that, in particular, with this invitation, and with that space, that, you know, I had already in mind, certain groupings or ideas of paintings that I wanted to use, and then a great deal of response and messaging that I felt came to me in this space. That was sort of effortless, and at the same time very clear that that would have to be the content because an exhibition is a conspiracy with a space.

Sam Thorne 08:02

And in conspiring with the space, taking the starting points of some of the architectures that existed there before, it felt to me that some of the structuring of the exhibition or the seeds of that structuring were there. So with the elevator, which, you know, we call an elevator, even though this one at the top of the building goes down, as you pointed out to me, that started opening out onto some of the questions of the subterranean, which would become a

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preoccupation. But I'm also struck by the fact that a week or two after you visited this gallery full of entrances and exits, it was closed off not only to you, but to everybody else, as well. Right. Yeah. And so this kind of sense of, I mean to push this kind of idea of dreaming a bit further, like your absence of the space shifted in a very different way to, you know, in more normal conditions, if you would, you would have been able to come back.

Allison Katz 08:58

Yeah, and and for sure that once it became clear, I couldn't come back, and that the exhibition would be deferred, delayed for a while was uncertain whether it would happen at all. It looms much larger in the imagination, you know, you'd be, you sort of enact, or you sort of restage a feeling of exile from some place that you only briefly got to begin to have a relationship with. And, of course, I knew that this invitation was already always, for me personally going to exceed the limits of the gallery because of this family history I have there, where, you know, there's two cities in the UK that I have family ties to and that's London and Nottingham. So, and I had visited Nottingham as a child several times through my great uncle's family who had stayed there, but my grandmother and grandfather met there, and it was a city I hadn't really spent much time in, but is obviously crucial to my origins.

Sam Thorne 10:01

How much did you know about your grandparents' time in Nottingham?

Allison Katz 10:05

I knew that they, you know, I knew that my grandfather came there for university after the war, and I knew that my grandmother's family had already found safety in England after the war, from Germany, and then their house was bombed in the Blitz in London, so they moved to Nottingham for their safety. So Nottingham, in my mind was always a place that was, you know, a kind of a safe haven, strangely, and it's a, you know, my grandmother and grandfather met there in 1947. They married there in 1949, they moved back to London for a bit, and then they moved to Canada. But it seemed to be a place that, you know, they were young adults there, and they really began their life in a way, they were envisioning a future, from a place that seemed to feel safer than other places they had endured and experienced. So from that perspective, obviously, there's a sort of romance and a kind of sense of gratitude for the

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city that seemed to have held them at a really momentous moment of their lives.

Sam Thorne 11:21

Thank you. But let's talk a little bit about the title of the exhibition, Artery. As I remember it, that idea started to emerge, perhaps in the summer of last year, when we were becoming much more familiar with the signage of COVID, right, or the infrastructures, or like how things were getting restricted or blocked, and so on. And I remember exchanging images of the different colourways, the different kinds of signage, the different structures that were put in place.

Allison Katz 11:51

Yeah, yeah, artery, well, it's pretty multi functional as a term first of all. I became more obsessed with the word after my husband had an operation, where they went to his brain through his femoral artery, and be exposed to the inside channels of the body, or let's say, the inner highway, and the way in which these arteries and veins run information and can transport things. Obviously, I had never thought about it intimately, or, you know, I had never even really seen an inside map, I hadn't understood that the brain and the thigh are, I mean, it's so obvious now, of course, but that you could sort of access one through the other. So that word artery was just hanging around my psyche, in my reality for a while, and then I, it struck me that the word art is in there. And that's nothing to do with its etymology. It's almost like an accident. Because the etymology of artery has to do more with a raised kind of flute type thing. But it you know, just that sort of joke that there's art in artery, I think, got me thinking about the way that you know, life is inside art and the other way around, and that you'll sort of find these random linkages. As much as there's these direct connections, there's also ones that are sort of meaningless and just chance. So that word was kind of hanging around. And then this idea, you know, when you look it up the way we're using the word arterial for wider communications, and roads and rivers and anything that branches out, in the world, as much as in our bodies, it seemed to me that it was the perfect metaphor, and also literal expression of what was going on. And when things started to be restricted, and you could only go one way, you know, this idea of like the passageway or the direction, especially after the first lockdown lifted, when we could go back to museums and such, you know, I remember going to the National Gallery, and I wasn't allowed to go on the path I wanted to go,

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they sort of said, you have to follow this pathway. And it got me thinking about the way in which we are directed, let's say in less obvious ways, because this was such obvious forced looking points. And I did start to think about the way artists have always wanted to either control or gently inspire you to look at things from certain distances or certain directions, and basically the choreography of any exhibition design, how that is linked to the passage and the movement and the flow of communication between pictures and spaces, and the pacing and the rhythm, and all that stuff was now becoming more controlled and governed by disease narrative, but it's always been there in the experience of looking at art, I think.

Sam Thorne 14:59

We, I think at the point when you were thinking this through, we started to talk about particular artists to who had tried to control those points of view before, right. I mean most famously, Marcel Duchamp, Etant Donnes, which can only be viewed through a barn door, peepholes, you become incredibly aware of not being able to see the whole of the thing, but being also held at one step removed, but being made aware of your own looking as well. I remember you mentioning also just everybody becoming habituated to zoom, right, and its very frontal address, this very kind of rigid kind of address.

Allison Katz 15:39

Yeah. And then there's sort of the fantasy wants to like Mark Rothko said you should stand 46 centimetres away from his work, maybe we have to fact check that but you know, like, it's also, it's not necessarily the best viewpoint, it's just one that for whatever reason, in that moment captures the the makers imagination, just as much as you know, for you, as a curator with exhibition design, you're obviously always considering the idea of remove and approach. So what is it, I was also curious to see what would happen if you paint with those things in mind, rather than think about them after the fact.

Sam Thorne 16:20

Because the paintings that you began to make were not only for this exhibition, but they were also in some cases for particular walls. Right. So the elevator piece you began to make you knew that it was going to be adjacent to the opening of the goods lift.

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Allison Katz 16:36

Yeah, exactly. I mean, I think when an exhibition is not retrospective, as this one is not, the, you know, the space itself is a material. And it's, it can be a sort of guide to something both random and, and providing content or providing meaning, you know, so, if I'm going to, I knew that that elevator painting should be one to one because it could be. And, and I did think that the best place it should go is right next to it, because that elevator will be closed, and I'll paint the inside, you know, that's a really one to one kind of assessment. And in the end, I was also open to the fact that it might not work and that the painting would go somewhere else once the work was made. So it's not a sort of script that you can't improvise off of. But it certainly begins to widen the question of, you know, specificity and site specificity, or things that maybe are not generally attributed to painting. They don't, you know, as such discrete objects and on such portable material, they seem to sort of almost ignore, or it seems uninteresting to link them so intimately or profoundly to a space. But I think that this actually, yeah, I just, to me, that's sort of part of the point of an invitation.

Sam Thorne 18:03

There are a couple of moves that you made with the space and with the installation of the exhibition, that, I would say, are pretty surprising for an exhibition of painting, right, so one is this, what we call the room within a room. And then another was this quite late decision to install a number of the posters you produced for the exhibition in city of caves below the building. But perhaps you could say a little about those two spaces, because I think there's a relationship between the two.

Allison Katz 18:36

The room within a room space was always an experiment in what it would mean to isolate a painting, and to give it sort of a shallow amount of space that, you know, you could argue was similar to what you have in an elevator, or a sort of shallow depth of space in which to operate and to, to not access directly, and to see a painting through a kind of set opening. And after all this ability to go up closely to things, I sort of felt that there may be an advantage to having that allowance withheld. And to see, you know, to sort of simulate room space, basically, on a kind of, yeah, on a smaller minute scale, almost like an experiment in what I'm doing anyway, which is putting a painting in

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a room. And what happens if you kind of recreate almost like a test zone for what it means to put a work on a wall with a limited space around it? Yeah, it always seemed to me that was something important about isolating a work and seeing it from a long corridor and having your sense of space available in a limited way.

Sam Thorne 19:56

The painting that's presented then in that room, within a room is called Katzenhöhle. So, a German title that would translate as cat cave. And what the painting presents us with is an aerial view of a subterranean network, right? It's actually of a specific network of caves in Nottingham, underneath Mansfield Road and Peel Street that were used or planned to be used as

Allison Katz 20:26

Planned to be used, yeah, they didn't actually use them. But they were mapping out the caves to be able to use them as shelters. I think they did use some. But I'm not sure they ended up using those particular ones.

Sam Thorne 20:40

And it's one of a number of different allusions in the exhibition to a space that lies below.

Allison Katz 20:47

Yeah, yeah. It's, and in a way, it's another, it's an impossible space, it's a space that's impossible to see ever unless you were in a plane about to drop a bomb, or, but then you wouldn't even see it. But it's a space, that's impossible to see actually, you can visualise it from above, and you can experience it from below, but it doesn't actually exist. So, I was interested in how it existed only as an image. And that the image that it does create kind of has this Rorschach style ability to be an animal, like a cloud, you know, you can start to see things in it. I saw a cat, someone saw a unicorn, which I thought was cute. Um, but it was also, yeah, again, more connections in the sense that my grandmother lived on Mansfield Road. So, for me to imagine that she was walking above this always seemed kind of wild. And the thing about Nottingham's cave network is that it's just a kind of very explicit mapping of what's below ground, which is something that we don't really think about and tend not to visualise. And it does seem to be in the metaphorical realm of the unconscious, you know, or

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the poetic ways in which we would talk about caves or cave space, which also was, you know, apartments during the pandemic were like caves, you know, we were all retreating into this kind of space that is private and domestic and personal. So it's very fascinating to me that underneath this entire city is over 800 caves. And it's a very active imagination of a city that it's so active below ground.

Sam Thorne 22:35

Tell me a bit about your first visit to city of caves, which I should say for people who are watching is can be entered just at the bottom of Nottingham Contemporary. It's been open to the public for I think, close to 30 years now and is a string of different well, reconstructions, I suppose a local history museum of sorts that takes place in this network.

Allison Katz 23:00

Yeah. And I happened upon it by chance also, I mean, it's right below the museum. And walking in, I'd actually never been in a cave before that. I have never gone spelunking? Is that what it is, yeah. I'm not a cave person naturally. So, I had no idea what to expect. I mean, it's good thing I'm not claustrophobic, not that it is very claustrophobic. But you know, I had really no relationship to the cave as a space. So I was amazed when I walked in, and I kept seeing these forms that I have painted upstairs, you know, especially in the section of the cave that used to be a tannery. And there's literally two portals in the material kind of carved out, which were two paintings I had finished or, you know, I had started by that point, they were well outlined. And also seeing this sort of mouth shape or this very large, yeah, tonsil-like open mouth shape, and then realising that, yeah, that's also how you refer to caves, the mouth of the cave, the belly of the cave, that they are so bodily and, and also that these are sandstone caves, which is a very rare material. And I have been using sand for several years now for the way that it's a kind of, disrupter to what, and you know how it disrupts oil paint, the smoothness and slickness of oil paint, and having been, and then I sort of inquired about the material, and sand is the strongest material, it's far stronger than rock apparently. So if a bomb were to fall over these caves, they would the sand would absorb the impact, contrary to what I thought it would do, which was, you know, crumble like a sand castle or something. So, the materiality itself was also very vivid and was reproduced upstairs. So there kept being these sort of yeah, these

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rhymes.

Sam Thorne 25:02

Yeah. Let's talk a little more about these rhymes or these chance encounters, because I mean, first of all, there's the chance or is it the chance of your grandparents having lived in the city, which I was certainly not aware of when inviting you to do the exhibition, there's your chance visit to city of caves, and then again, the chance of the spaces there and how they echoed some of your early works, but then I suppose also the chance of the givens of the exhibition space that you presented?

Allison Katz 25:31

Yeah, and I mean, I think sometimes, you know, I'm very interested in how chance is a material or coincidence, you know, a synchronicity. There's so many words for receiving messages or noticing something and realising that's the clue. Or if painting is a case that you need to solve or crack, that the, the answer is often not what you thought it would be, or your drive to actually paint something is never really what you thought it would be. And, of course, all these themes or these occurrences, personal and encountered, they don't necessarily make for good paintings, you know, there's one is always coming up against the limit of what a painting could be, or how painting could ever hope to internalise and then re-present these experiences. So what you said in the beginning about, you know, my genuine ambiguity, I think it's about how anything can come through painting. And I think part of the point or the impossibility of being direct with painting is also why it can appeal on so many levels and why to put language on it, one has to be careful, because it's not a definitive meaning, you know, so the reason why I'm compelled to make something or a chance encounter with something to me, it's one more material in the process. But sometimes, when a work is representational, or when a painting shows an image, it seems to have more of a fixed meaning. And I'm always kind of coming up against that, because just because the technique itself is not, you know, poured or manipulated through chance, material techniques. For me, I feel like the joy of, or not even joy so much as like the main drive in making a painting is that I might have a plan or an intention, and then I always come up against something that inflicts itself, insists that that's what needs to be there in order to bring wider, more disparate meanings to the fore, you know, to undo whatever I thought I was going to do, or to contradict

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or present another version of what is actually depicted. So the unseen, comes through by allowing the way the painting gets made, or let's say, tries to be, if that makes sense. There's, there's something about sort of finding material that I think is as important as the material itself.

Sam Thorne 28:09

Sure. Because I think the way that chance is typically formulated as a strategy is somehow as rejection of intention, or even the antithesis of intentionality, right? I mean, that's what we're familiar with in compositional approaches, like John Cage, or whatever. But they're often approaches that favour abstraction or tend towards abstraction. And I think what you're describing is the way in which chance and intention might become enmeshed somehow, or chance becomes the material basis, yeah, the fundamental approach to what you're doing.

Allison Katz 28:52

Yeah, or to be guided by the non visual sometimes, in order to create an image, I feel gives whatever is depicted or shown another dimension. So it keeps the figurative from being literal.

Sam Thorne 29:10

I'd like to turn a little to the the mouths that you've been painting for some time now, a number of which are in the exhibition Artery, and perhaps you could just begin by saying a little about where that form itself was originally taken from.

Allison Katz 29:30

It comes originally from a woodcut by Andre Derain, from a illustrated edition of Pantagruels by Rabelais from 1943. It's a small woodcut, and on a book page, and I enlarged it to my height, so 160 centimetres, and to me, it seemed the way to paint from the position of language, drive, hunger, the tongue, to imply the quotation around seeing, and to play with the theatrics of perspective and point of view, and our own expectation of looking and consuming an image. And of course, this idea that painting is so often wrongly relegated to questions of taste, you know, I like this, I don't like this. Yeah, and those mouth, those lips also form like a curtain or a window, you know, they frame, they stage. And they also make fun of perhaps the desire to look and to

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see and to consume.

Sam Thorne 30:44

I think prior to this exhibition, I'd often thought of them as being somehow about, you said hunger and about ingestion, right? Different images, objects. And then seeing them again, in this context, or seeing them over the course of the year as you'd been working on them, it was very difficult not to think about them in terms of in terms of the pandemic, or the kind of aerosolic aspects of mouths, right? And I wonder for you continuing to work on on these pieces over the last year, how are you thinking about them now? Has that shifted at all?

Allison Katz 31:23

Well, they always, you know, they seem to me, as being able to change also, depending with what's inside the mouth, or what is being shown or what is being consumed in that image. So, they didn't change. Yeah, I mean, they didn't change so much from the pandemic idea, or like, I didn't really, I don't know, I didn't shift in any other kind of, like new meaning to them based on that. I think, I don't know, I guess I sort of felt like I expanded somehow this idea of them as being able to quote or to be sort of ravenous, you know, like, with restrictions comes restraint, and they don't seem like a very restrained setup. So, I did, like their sort of refusal to close when everything was closed, I'm not even sure I noticed, I notice it anymore. You know, I just, I'm so incited. And that's also the joke, right? Like, can you, you can never run away from your own drives, you can't drive away from your own drive or your, you know, to, it's the autofiction of always understanding your shifting perspective is what is allowing you to see things. So, it also creates a kind of like, it's a doubting machine, you know, if you've always got a bit of your own face in view.

Sam Thorne 32:55

So I, what, what they frame, often these, these things often seem to be so aware of being framed. Right, there are figurines, there are mannequins, I mean, one is a self portrait of sorts, right? Coming from a photo shoot, its title is M.A.S.K. And yeah.

Allison Katz 33:20

And there's an exhibition.

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Sam Thorne 33:22

And there's an exhibition as well, perhaps you could talk about a couple of those works in particular that were presented.

Allison Katz 33:27

Yeah, I mean, especially with the exhibition one, you know, I think it's something that, it's nice to be reminded that the artifice extends into the exhibition act as well. And as much as the exhibition seems to have some authority, it's, it's equally an installation, it's equally a performance of the paintings that's temporary and completely based on current tastes and ideas of how things should be seen. So, it's, whilst I think we might see the exhibition as neutral, and I think we see it a lot less neutral than before. I always see an exhibition as another facet of painting itself, which is why I think so much about the end point of the exhibition whilst I'm making the work. And again, I don't overly determine the painting through the lens of the exhibition. But I do think it's part of the way in which a painting is seen, it's the context of the painting as well. And if an artist is involved in an exhibition, it would be wild to think that your participation or your interest would end at the four edges of the canvas. You know, I really see the exhibition as as you know, the final, not final, but a step in the general provenance of the painting itself.

Sam Thorne 34:56

Which I, which I've always I've read your posters in the past which are often both in the exhibition space, but extending around the gallery or institution as being a way of thinking about the context or the so-called peripheral aspects,

Allison Katz 35:13

Right, yeah. Yeah. And also, the posters, they are made throughout the whole process, you know, they're made at the beginning, kind of which seems to be the more obvious time when you would make them because they're announcements, but I also make them throughout the whole time that I'm painting as I kind of get more knowledge or material from the site and from the general like themes or motifs. And then I also make them after, once the exhibition is up, which I feel is like, kind of the best time or the most fun, because you almost get to go back to the beginning and re-anticipate something that's now done and begin the act of kind of undoing it immediately.

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Sam Thorne 35:59

The installation view that's in one of the mounts comes from an exhibition that was at the Fondazione Prada in Milan a number of years ago, a William Copley show. And what's really striking to me about this installation view is that I mean, it's the total opposite. It's about as far from the white cube as you can get right? You have these marble floors, you're extremely aware of the lighting at the top, and then rather than geometric lights, walls, you have these curbing almost intestinal velvet-coloured walls.

Allison Katz 36:37

Yeah pink velvet walls.

Sam Thorne 36:38

The title just seemed so perfect to me that it's it's not an installation view. It's an interior view.

Allison Katz 36:44

Yeah, exactly. Yes.

Sam Thorne 36:46

The guts, the guts of the building of the exhibition.

Allison Katz 36:49

Yeah, I mean, the, the insides. And of course, the white cube is so often contested as being the least, let's say the least, domestic way to see artwork or, you know, it's supposed to be neutral. I mean, it was something about that exhibition with these pink velvet curving walls that was almost so over the top, in terms of feeling like you can get inside an artist's production or that you, you know, that these are intimate works. And this materiality, like everything was sort of urging you on to see these paintings in the least sanitised way. And, yeah, it struck me that that was a kind of almost hyper ideal of an exhibition, you know, of that kind of, you know, always this, this battle between inner and outer life, or what's lost in translation between the two and that painting is neither a pure expression of one's insides, nor is it just a kind of neutral net of what's going on outside. It's really this improbable mix. And, and sometimes, you know, the, the structure of the viewing experience is trying to take that away or to purify all that mixing. And in this case, you know, all these materials

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and luxurious materials were sort of brought back in, in a way that that made you feel this kind of like overly sensual read, but it to me was almost like a fantasy of an exhibition. You know, it wasn't real.

Sam Thorne 38:41

You were talking in terms of sanitised, purified, and sort of like the languages of, of infection. There are within Artery, there are a number of themes of touching as much as not touching, around masks as well, right? I mean, both of which have been preoccupations of yours for some time. But could you talk a little bit more about that those those things in the exhibition?

Allison Katz 39:16

Yeah, well, I mean, I owe the the discovery of mask as my initials to my friend, the artist and editor Camilla Wills, because she pointed out to me that Miss Allison Sarah Katz as initials, is M.A.S.K., so when we did a conversation together for my book, we called it Confessions of a Mask, acknowledging Mishima's Confession of a Mask novel. So, I also kind of loved this idea. I mean, my father has the same initials. So, he's also Mask and he collected masks. He still collects masks, it's the only art form that he's really passionate about. And I grew up being surrounded by incredible masks, never realising again, like, oh, yeah, of course, obvious. And mask is also you know, persona, masquerade. This is like the sort of number one way we talk about inner life, and the demands of outer life, and compromise between the two, and the tragic and the comic, you know, the mask has almost been the, it's almost like the psychological image of how we deal with being human or being alive. So, it felt almost like too good to be true in terms of the, you know, an object or a thing. And then it was quite funny that, you know, as soon as lockdowns and pandemics begin, like the mask, takes on this whole other connotation and becomes this object that we are putting on, dealing with every single day. And it's sort of like keeping us from being together. I mean, I don't really see it as the same kind of mask obviously, as it doesn't cover your eyes.

Sam Thorne 41:09

Sure, but any connotation of persona or performance shifts, right?

Allison Katz 41:14

Yeah, it just got completely emptied out. And you can even just, it's based on

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like a Google search, you know, before the pandemic, when I would Google mask, you would get examples of masks. And now you do that, and you get examples of like, you know, surgical masks to buy for pages and pages and pages, it's completely displaced the historical artefact, the theatrical prop. Like, there's no other concept of mask right now until you're sort of several pages deep on a search. And that's just, you know, that's temporary, I think, but it's just another coincidence about how words and their meanings shift based on events, and what's sort of like the main preoccupation in our psyche and in the world. And at the same time, like, I guess, yeah, it's just, you know, yeah, it's just some of these terms are older than that moment, and they also happen to be initials.

Sam Thorne 42:15

So yeah, I mean, to, to continue thinking about not touching, there's a particular history with not touching, and painting, right. So, if we think about the motif of, I never know how to pronounce it, noli me tangere, which is the Latin version of the phrase that Jesus said to Mary Magdalene after the resurrection, when she went to touch him, and he moved away from her and said touch me not, or don't touch me. And so, you know, it's been painted by Titian, it's been painted by everyone.

Allison Katz 42:50

It's a big thing.

Sam Thorne 42:51

Painted by Holbein, it's a big thing. And we've talked before about how that is both the theme of painting, but also one of the conditions of painting, right? I think that's something that you were thinking through a lot with works that you were developing for this exhibition.

Allison Katz 43:07

Yeah. I mean, I felt like that, you know, was a lot more. It loomed very large in the imagination in the beginning, when it felt like the main thing that this pandemic would lead to was us not being able to touch anyone, which was very heavy as an idea. I mean, the fact that, you know, on Monday, last Monday, you were allowed to hug people, again, like a government, a government regulation, it just feels like that touching became this sort of, yeah,

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touching regulated, just got me thinking about it. And it also got me thinking about how painting's predicated on the idea of not touching it. So, it's nothing new for painting, you know, restriction and withholding is what makes it haptic, is what makes it all about simulation. And that that is sort of the main work of the material, you know, oil paint was invented to better render flesh. So, this idea that painting's always been obsessed by simulating, simulating texture and yeah, simulating postures and attitudes and positions, and that you as a viewer have to be a voyeur. Like you have to not engage with it on a certain level and that's what gives it its charge. So, I thought, well, painting is the perfect pandemic art and I did also you know, of course, I read a few essays that were also saying the same thing because if you even study a little bit about art history, you know that there's these episodes that are often repeated, and the noli me tangere has been really popular and I think it's because I always thought it's like must be like a bit of a joke. You know, like it's so meta, because you're obviously showing, how do you show that moment? You know, which moment do you choose to show when she can't touch him, but she's reaching to touch him. And in different descriptions of what's sort of required of the painter, they say, you know, you have to show that Jesus is looking tenderly, but firmly at Mary, and where do you put the hands? How do you sort of show the don't? And how do you show her reaching? And all those things I feel like are just, they're the metaphysics of painting and of desire anyway. And it's quite a challenge, you know, and that's why I think, everyone does it differently. Rembrandt also has sort of taken it up, I think it's one of these sort of non-visual visual motifs, because it's kind of impossible. And it also just heightens, you know, painting's impossibility of ever doing what it wants to do fully. So, in this case, I thought it's, it makes a lot of sense. And then of course, as soon as you know, we couldn't touch or you could touch a limited amount of people, I just wanted to paint touching, because actually, this is, this is part of what painting can do. It can simulate touch, and it can also explore touch in ways that are really interesting, even from synesthesia, you know, like a confusion of senses. An examination of restraint, and how that actually can almost get you closer to the thing itself. So yeah, so that idea of like blockage or restriction and looking and sensing and limiting, at the same time, as a form of exaggeration, intimacy, and belief in, in those acts as well, I feel like those contradictions and those impossibilities was exactly what painting could do without being overly directive. And you know, centralised, it was just more playing to its strengths.

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Sam Thorne 46:58

And the exhibition is, of course, full of active touching, right, and limbs, often quite cropped limbs, like it's phonetically an exhibition of touching.

Allison Katz 47:10

Yeah, and also, you know, even of these kind of other sorts of wordplays, like having these portal shapes, which could be eyes, or nostrils, or openings, windows, mirrors, the sort of shapes that are the shape of looking in some way. And then to have those either open, you know, blank, or filled, like the way that they can also represent voids, or anticipation, or absence, like certain threshold shapes can do that. And I was very interested in seeing how that would also collide with something concrete, you know, or a kind of after image. And, yeah, and the ways in which those would sort of accelerate your connection to both of those things that are kind of almost again, impossible to paint, you know, a void, you can't really paint unless you paint something that isn't a void. So, you're showing things in contrast, or sort of accidentally in that way.

Sam Thorne 48:12

I was struck over and over again, how you kept coming back to these kinds of impossible subjects, or impossible views. Early on, when we worked with your cousin, Caitlin, who's an architect on the design of exhibition, you've been working with Caitlin for a long time, and we were puzzling over how some of the renderings that she was making allowed for any possible views of the exhibition. Where you're almost standing inside of a wall. So, you can have this kind of stereoscopic exhibition experience of something that's on either side of a partition.

Allison Katz 48:49

Yeah, exactly. I mean, I love doing the renders with her in the CGI technology, or whatever it is, the architecture technology, because you see the exhibition from points that you'd never see it. Just like the way you know, the map of the caves, you'll never see it like that. So the ways in which impossible views translate into what is possible is always really, yeah, I love that part of the planning. And I think it goes back into the content, you know, because the impossible also can be shown, it's just maybe not what you think it is, or in a different way, you know, and even with the word play of, you know,

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or word play the year 2020, contains within itself two of these portals. And I actually started that painting with the two portals that shape in 2018, just hung around my studio for a long time because I couldn't actually figure out how to deal with these shapes. And I originally saw this in a documentary on Leonard Cohen in Greece. Behind him was a piece of furniture in Hydra in Greece, which was like an armoire that had those two portals on it, that showed seascapes. And I was just like, wow, this, it was something about him standing there, surrounded by those two eye holes. I don't know. Anyway, so I had it there for ages. And then it was only really in 2020 when I realised, oh, that's the kind of hieroglyph of 2020 you know, that 2020 is sort of like, it's a manifestation of that number. But it also yeah, so it seemed like a shorthand way to also just signpost or date, the exhibition and date the painting, and try to bring things together that you know, you don't, it's very subtle, but that is a way of marking time.

Sam Thorne 50:50

How yeah, yeah, exactly. And of course, so many of your exhibitions have thought about diaries and calendars. Now so explicitly, but it's so time bound.

Allison Katz 50:59

Yeah, exactly. And I mean, also, then, when I heard a lot of people in Nottingham refer to Nottingham as Notts, I had to laugh as well, because it's a great nickname, but it also could be spelt noughts you know, just zeros or beginnings.

Sam Thorne 51:17

And I think that that recurred through so many of your early reference images, like resource images that these noughts, which turned into Notts, and then you were showing me these remarkable diagrams of spaghetti junctions and freeway systems. Yeah, highways, which looked something like Celtic knots.

Allison Katz 51:42

Yeah, it looks like the Book of Kells, the these really elaborate, almost like illuminated letters. And they're just, you know, freeways and highways, things that again, you don't see, you can't see them when you're in the car. And their kind of beauty of design, or their shapes are from viewpoints that are not, you know, standard or not felt in any way, you know, so I guess it's all these

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shapes that exist, but we don't feel them. That that's why they're impossible, but they're also very real, or they're you know, they don't, they're not out of reach, they're just.

Sam Thorne 52:21

There's another painting in the exhibition of something that you can't see. And it's this kind of a fairy painting, right? Titled Channelling and it is a version of a work that you've made before. Say a little about where that came from.

Allison Katz 52:38

That, you know, that I was, when I moved to the UK I did get interested in its' relationship to fairies and psychology of fairy lore, the way that it used to kind of it was used as a description of mental states and a way to describe the invisible or the felt. And I was always kind of amazed, I like to see how it's possible to, or how it might still live. Anyway, so that fairy comes from an article I saw in the Daily Mail about a man who enlarged a still from his CCTV camera 1000 times and saw that fairy there. I mean, it's a version of that fairy, right, because I've been painting it many times. So, this is my current version of it. But effectively, I loved that the fairy still existed, but it had to be, you know, filtered through various technologies such as CCTV and the Daily Mail. And, but it's there, in some way. And this will to believe, you know, the comments section of that article where it was not full of disbelief in any way. So, the rule sometimes that the invisible or this idea, again, that it's impossible, because we can't just, we just can't see with our eyes, but it's there. And it's not, it might sound sort of, like, condescending or, as if I'm, you know, making fun of such a desire or a belief. I'm not, I actually think that the place of, of these kind of things, they, we're trying to find a way through technology, I guess, to still connect, you know, to or we're trying to use this technology that can survey us for us to see things that you know, maybe are not important to the data or to the government, but if you can turn a CCTV camera to find a fairy, you're actually maybe using the technology for something more exciting.

Sam Thorne 54:44

Yeah, I guess it's no coincidence that spiritualism and spiritualist infused artistic practices in in Europe were just bubbling up at the same time as cinema, as X-rays, telegraphs, telephones, right.

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Allison Katz 55:01

Yeah. I mean, that's it, it's kind of reclaiming some of these ways of seeing for things that, you know, can't be quantified or profited from.

Sam Thorne 55:13

Allison, thank you so much for the conversation today. What we should mention just before finishing up is that we're actually working on a publication at the moment, a book of Artery. We're doing that with our collaborators at Camden Art Centre and Studio Mathias Clottu. And it's going to be published in early 2022. So look out for that. Alison Katz. Thank you so much.

Allison Katz 55:41

Thank you. Thank you, Sam.

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