

# VOGUE

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## Jenna Gribbon's Pursuit of Pleasure In Queer Portraiture

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### WATCHING YOU WATCHING ME

Jenna Gribbon (far right) in Prada, pictured with her muse and fiancée, Mackenzie Scott, in Michael Kors Collection, in front of Gribbon's *Here for you*. Hair, Tsuki; makeup, Kuma. Fashion Editor: Jordan Bickham. Photographed by Clément Pascal, *Vogue*, December 2022.

Jenna Gribbon's life as a figurative painter made a sharp turn in 2017, when she was 38. "It took me so long to understand myself and my sexuality," she tells me, "and that could be attributed in large part to the lack of images of women in relationships with each other. There's a bit more history of gay

men depicting and depicted in romantic situations, but I'd seen so few examples when I was growing up of queer identity among women. I wanted to make work that was impactful, but also more direct and more pleasurable," she says.

Jenna had been married to and divorced from a man, Matthew Gribbon, and she was then living with her partner, the novelist Julian Tepper, and their son, Silas. (Jenna and Julian were not married and had an open relationship.) It was at this moment that she met Mackenzie Scott, the indie-rock singer and composer known as Torres. Scott, who is 12 years younger, became her lover and main subject.

When I visit Gribbon in late August, she leads me to her Brooklyn studio through a magical secret garden with tall trees, low stone walls, and gravel paths. We head down a flight of steps into a smallish, double-height room with a skylight.

It may be New York's most charming studio: Paintings for "Mirages," her show at the Collezione Maramotti in Northern Italy (her first solo show in a European museum, which opened in October), hang on the whitewashed brick walls, and nine of the show's 10 paintings are of Mackenzie. The eye-catcher is *Here for you*, a 13-foot-long stunner of Scott lying supine on a slab, under five floodlights, against a greenscreen background, naked except for short-shorts and cowboy boots. Scott's long ash-blond hair cascades over the slab's edge. Her extra-pink nipples stand out as though she's put lipstick on them. Her head is turned, looking at me as I look at her, a somewhat troubled expression on her beautiful face. The patient in Thomas Eakins's *The Gross Clinic* or the half-dead giant in Dana Schutz's *Presentation* come to mind. But this one is something else: Scott's pose may echo female odalisques throughout art history, but we're a long way from the male gaze. "People have become so accustomed to looking at unclothed bodies in art," Gribbon explains. "Those are nudes, and they're considered tasteful. But I want people to understand that it's not a passive act to consume the image of another person's unclothed body, which is why I like to make them feel more naked. Like, 'Oh, maybe I'm not supposed to be looking at this.' It's a way to make the nude body less benign and more true to what it really is, which is extreme vulnerability on the part of the subject."

There are two more extra-large greenscreen paintings in the show—one of Scott literally (and somewhat hilariously) on fire; the other, a close-up of her face, one eye peeking out from under a blindfold. (Both paintings had to be removed to give Gribbon enough room to paint *Here for you*.) The other pictures in the show are smaller and much less fierce. Most of them are scenes from Gribbon and Scott's domestic life together—Scott, blindfolded and naked, reaching out to touch her reflection in a mirror; Scott, clothed, turning to look at Gribbon (and us) as she unloads the dishwasher. Gribbon thinks of the smallest ones as "documentary" paintings, but the sensuous, virtuoso paint handling and the sunlight falling on that ash-blond hair make

them delicious to look at, no matter what size they are. The pleasures that oil painting can give, and so rarely do these days, are here in full. "I wanted my work to be visibly pleasurable, to reflect the pleasure I feel in what I'm making," she tells me. "I had just started to go in that direction, and then I met Mackenzie."

A week before they met, in August 2017, Scott had a dream. "It was a sad one, about a woman leaving me," she recalls. "She was holding my face, saying that she loved me but had to leave. About a year later, Jenna did leave me—but she came back." They had met by chance at St. Dymphna's, an Irish bar in the East Village, two very tall young women with long hair, dark in Gribbon's case, inescapably blond in Scott's. Both of them had had romantic relationships with women before, and they talked and talked, about their backgrounds and their work and everything else. "I'm from Tennessee and I went to college in Georgia, and she's from Georgia and went to college in Tennessee," Gribbon says. Scott kept ordering more neat vodkas, and Gribbon poured half of them under the table. "There was definitely a lot of chemistry, and before the end of the night, we were physically entwined at the bar," Gribbon tells me. A few months later, she made a painting of Scott, the first of many. Scott became her muse—Gribbon paints her almost exclusively these days (paintings of her son, Silas, now 11, are the exception).

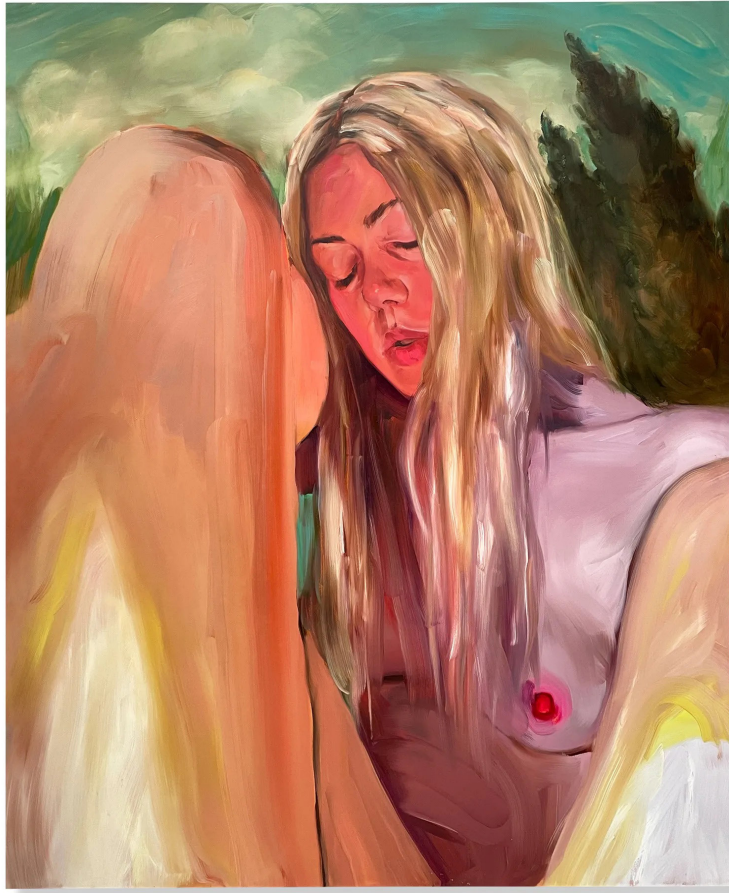
The muse-dom is a two-way street. "Her paintings somehow always feed into the songs I'm making," says Scott, on whose right arm Gribbon has legibly tattooed the words "Jenna and Silas." "There are so many songs about and for Jenna—'Silver Tongue,' 'Gracious Day,'" Scott says. The lyrics on a recent song, "Don't Go Puttin Wishes in My Head," are all about Gribbon:

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If we're calling off the funeral  
Then I'm calling for a hitching  
Just when I thought that it was over  
It was only just beginning

**B**orn in a suburb of Knoxville, Tennessee, Jenna Brown spent much of her childhood reading and drawing on her own. Her parents divorced when she was two. When she was five, she moved with her mother and her older brother to an area outside Savannah, Georgia, where her mother supported the family with a variety of jobs and was also a foster mother to several children. (Her mother, remarried, eventually adopted four of them.) "I don't know where that need to draw came from," Gribbon remembers. "I don't think anyone in the family was aware of contemporary art. But when I said I was going to be an artist, even though I didn't know what that meant, nobody argued with me." Her first-grade teacher complained to Jenna's mother that Jenna was always drawing in the margins of her papers. "My mother asked





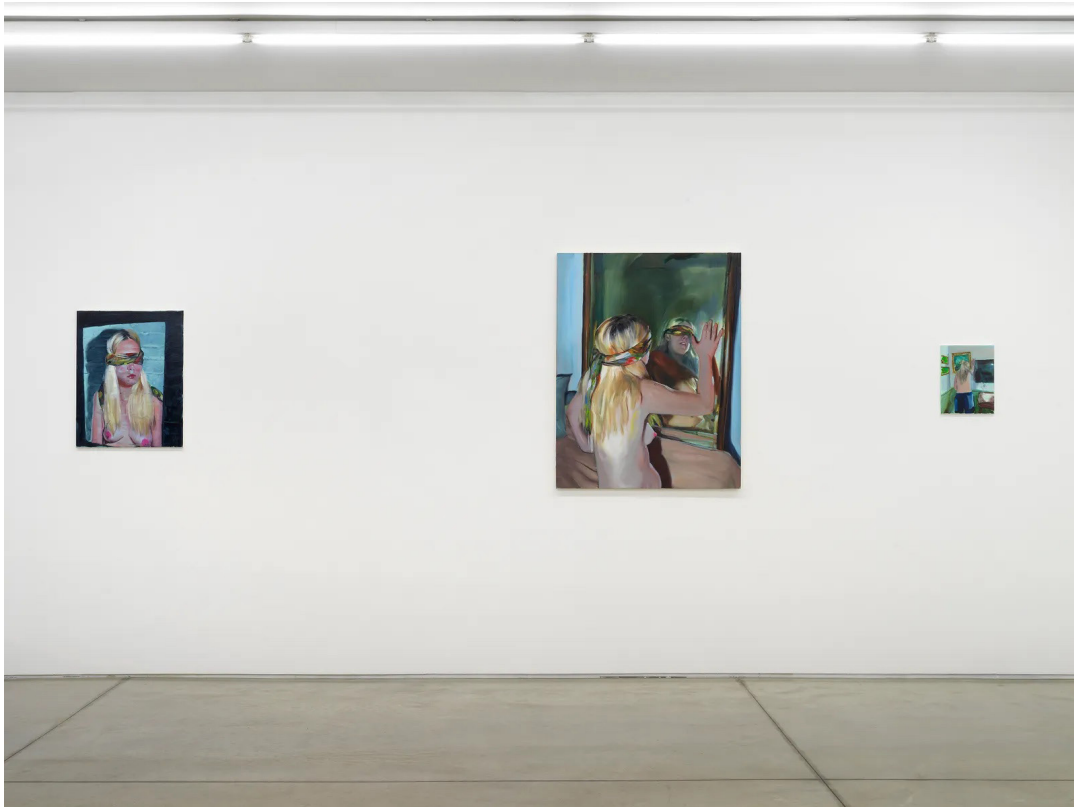
THE PLEASURE PRINCIPLE

"I wanted my work to be visibly pleasurable, to reflect the pleasure I feel in what I'm making," says Gribbon. *Acid rococo tenderscape*, 2021. Artwork: Oil on linen, 80 × 64 inches, Todd-White Art Photography/  
Courtesy of MASSIMODECARLO.

if I was getting my work done, and the teacher said, 'Yes.' 'Then you're not allowed to tell her that she can't draw,' mother said. 'My daughter is an artist.' " In college, all Jenna wanted to do was hang out in the art department and make paintings.

She spent four very happy years at the University of Georgia, in Athens, which had a very good art department. In addition to painting, she got interested in filmmaking—especially the works of Jean Cocteau, Jacques Rivette, Agnès Varda, and other French cinéastes. (Last year Gribbon had a show at Sim Smith gallery in London, in which stills and film clips from Varda's work were juxtaposed with Gribbon paintings that mixed both documentary and invented moments of intimate daily life.) Gribbon made a lot of experimental Super 8 films of her own at college, and she continues to be interested in this kind of work. (She made a music video, "Too Big for the Glory Hole," for Scott, in summer 2020.) In college, Jenna met Matthew Gribbon, another art student, and they were married in her senior year. The marriage didn't last long, but the two remain close friends.

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An installation view at Collezione Maramotti. Photo: Dario Lasagni

When Gribbon moved to New York in 2003, figuration was still taboo, and she couldn't get a gallery to look at her work. She did all the young artist things: lived in Williamsburg, above the Legion of Doom biker headquarters with four roommates (one was Matthew); worked as one of Jeff Koons's many assistants (she quit after a year so she could do her own work); got connected with Sofia Coppola through a friend of a friend and painted copies of the historic portraits in Coppola's film *Marie Antoinette*, which in 2006 led to her first solo show, at Sarah Bowen Gallery in Williamsburg. There were two more solo shows a couple of years later—one in Los Angeles, another in Chelsea. “But young artists doing figuration were not establishing themselves at that time,” Gribbon says. “I had many people tell me that I was fighting an uphill battle, that I needed to de-skill. But I'm very stubborn. I ignored everyone and just kept doing my paintings. It took about 15 years before I had any luck at all.”

Silas was born in December 2010. A year later, Gribbon and Julian Tepper, Silas's father, started the Oracle Club in Long Island City. It was a workspace for artists and writers and a hangout for members who would gather there to talk, attend poetry readings, and listen to music on a piano and a record player, while Silas slept upstairs with a baby monitor turned on. (Gribbon and Tepper and Silas lived on the floor above.) At this point, Gribbon was making life-size, full-body portraits of people she knew, talking and gesturing. She hung the paintings at the Oracle, and it looked as though they were talking to one another. "I loved it all, but I also found it really frustrating and distracting," she says. Having a child was not the problem. "People just thought of me differently. I'd go into galleries with Silas and people would say, 'Oh, are you still painting?' This kind of thing was said to me all the time, and it was so enraging. If a man brings his child to an opening, people think it's charming. If a woman does, they think you're done." When the rent on Oracle went way up in 2016, they closed the club, and Gribbon, feeling stuck, decided to go to graduate art school. She applied to Hunter and got in. While there, things started to happen for her. "I don't think it was about grad school," she says. "I think it was the resurgence of interest in figuration and the way people were using social media to find new art."

Gribbon was in a four-person group show at the New York gallery Fredericks & Freiser in Chelsea, and every one of her five paintings sold. The following year, soon after she graduated, she had her first solo show there, and again everything sold. "Ever since that '4 Artists' show, she's had a waiting list," Andrew Freiser tells me. "When I Looked at You the Light Changed," the solo show, featured nude or seminude women wrestling with other women—an ironic take on an art trope with a long, all-male history. She had invited friends to a wrestling party in her living room and taken photographs that served as raw material for the paintings. (Gribbon doesn't paint from life.) "Jenna is hands down an *alla prima* master," the curator and writer Alison Gingeras tells me. "I see her as a direct heir to the legacy of artists like Cassatt and Morisot, pushing the gendered spaces that they explored to a new level of intimacy, of the female gaze, and of desire that is captured with paint in a way that no camera could render."

In "Uscapes," Gribbon's last show at Fredericks & Freiser, six of the 20 paintings were very large, nearly seven feet tall by five and a half feet wide. All six show Gribbon and Scott larger than life, their naked, intertwined bodies in cropped close-ups, too big to fit in the rectangle. We see Scott through Gribbon's long, parted legs, just as Gribbon sees her. Breasts, thighs, pubic hair, fluorescent pink nipples—everything is right before our eyes. Gribbon had told me that she greatly admires Courbet's 1866 *The Origin of the World*, which still startles viewers with its unrelenting focus on a woman's genitalia. "I can't think of any other canonized painting that continues to be so shocking," she says. "I would love that painting more if it was painted by a woman, but the premise that we all come from a woman's body is a very human one. It's the opposite of objectifying a woman's anatomy—it considers the physical and spiritual realities of a woman's body." Gribbon made a painting in



Jenna Gribbon's *Here for you* (2022), which depicts Gribbon's muse and partner, Mackenzie Scott. Photo: Dario Lasagni

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response to Courbet’s *Origin*. Called *A Simple Demonstration*, it shows Scott on a sofa, naked from the waist down, legs spread open, and arms inviting us to enjoy the view. We don’t see the head on Courbet’s woman—she has no personal identity. Gribbon gives us Scott in full, in this and in all her large “Uscapes” paintings. Her labyrinths of female sexuality read as love songs, embracing vulnerability and queer sex as facts of life.

“Our art enters into almost everything we do,” Gribbon says. Gribbon and Scott love going for walks in the neighborhood and going out to art galleries, movies, and concerts—and for dinner or just drinks, but inevitably, they always end up talking about their work, while Gribbon snaps pictures for future reference. “We saw Roxy Music and Willie Nelson within a week of each other recently,” Scott tells me. Scott makes a perfect Manhattan for the evenings they stay home and read, listen to records, play chess or card games with Silas.

Jenna Gribbon’s star keeps rising. This year, she was one of four artists invit-



ed to show a work in the Frick museum's "Living Histories: Queer Views and Old Masters" project, which presented new works in conversation with old ones. Gribbon's *What Am I Doing Here? I Should Ask You the Same*—Scott, in regal red and purple velvet, draped to show her intensely pink right nipple—sat in for Hans Holbein's portrait of Thomas More and next to Holbein's portrait of Thomas Cromwell. (The two paintings of male subjects are usually hung side by side; Gribbon's work replaced the More while it was out on loan.) This past summer, she left her New York gallery, Fredericks & Freiser, which had put her on the map, and joined the powerhouse uptown gallery LGDR, a merger of Dominique Lévy, Brett Gorvy, Amalia Dayan, and Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn. The Massimo De Carlo gallery in Europe had recently taken her on, and, as of this month, she adds the David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles. "They all bring different strengths to the table," Gribbon explains. "I also like that no one person or gallery holds all the cards of my career in their hands."

Gribbon and Scott plan to get married this month, in a quiet ceremony at a friend's house in Montauk. They will move into the Brooklyn town house that Gribbon recently bought—she hopes that the renovations will be finished by the end of the year, the start of her 20th anniversary in New York. Getting married will make Scott available as a subject and muse permanently. And vice versa. "Painting her over and over again means that the viewer gets to know this recurring character and watch her change," Gribbon tells me. "She's no longer just a subject. She's a person you recognize, and this will become more interesting over the years."