

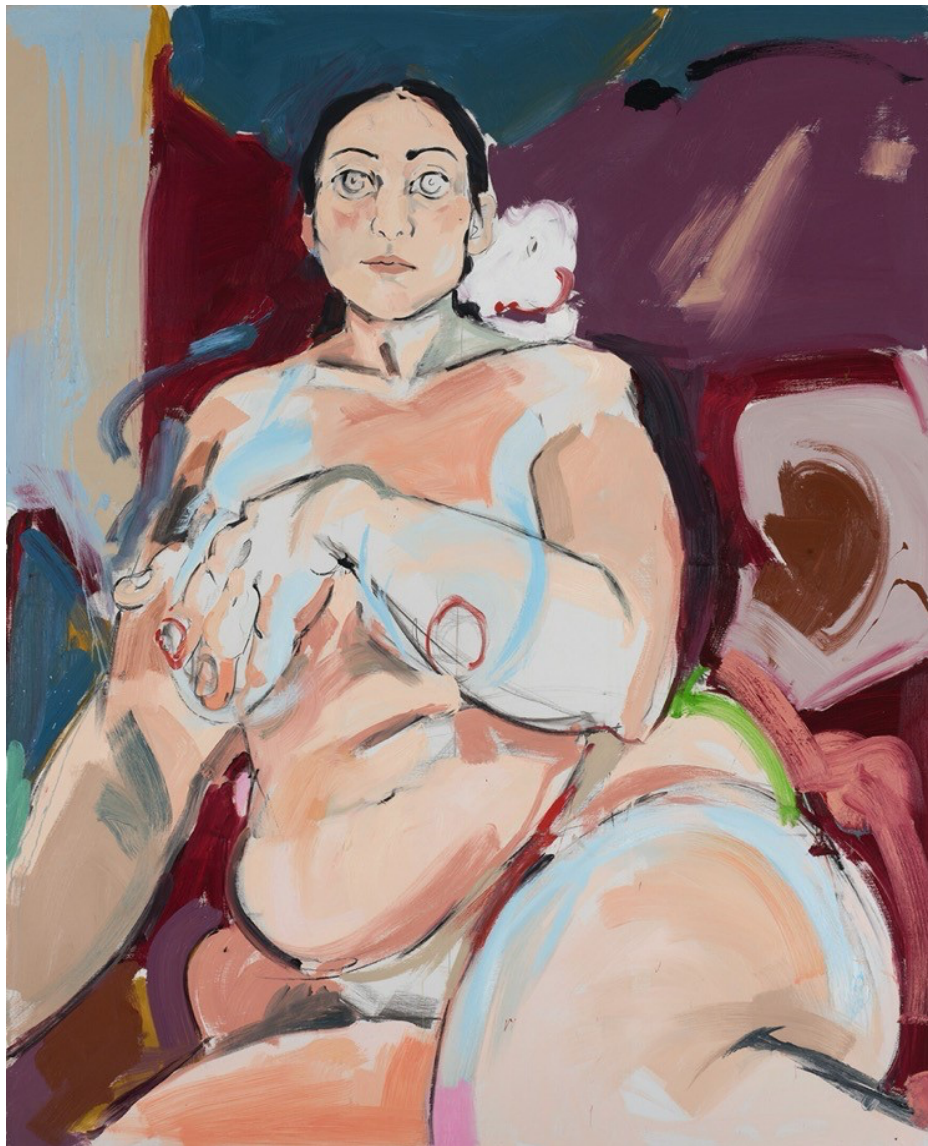
SKARSTEDT

VOGUE

Vogue
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THE STUNNING STRENGTH OF CRISTINA
BANBAN'S 'MUJERES'

Grace Edquist



Cristina BanBan, Mujer II, 2022. Courtesy of Skarstedt

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Is there a source of inspiration more endlessly fascinating, yet also fraught, than the human body? Art has turned to corporeal forms for as long as it has existed, depicting the pain and the beauty of our earthly cages. Yet seeing the crane of a neck, the arch of a back, the gaze of an eye can send us reeling anew, trying to understand the image before us as we try to understand ourselves.

In the artist Cristina BanBan's dazzling new show at Skarstedt gallery, on Manhattan's Upper East Side, the female form is in full, commanding force, tapping into the long tradition of the painted nude. The 15 oil paintings in "Cristina BanBan: Mujeres" (on view through December 17) evoke a seizing of power, a recapturing of attention. The women are bold. They are strong (those hands!). Their Rubenesque bodies, projected onto canvases that can stretch more than seven feet tall, are shapely, fleshy, voluptuous. Their presence is visceral, immediate yet intimate, and, yes, sensual. But they are also at a remove, not so much beckoning the viewer as daring them to dwell. Who are you to stare? Who are you *not* to?

"The subject of my work has always been the female form," BanBan, 35, told me in her airy Bushwick studio ahead of the opening. The paintings in "Mujeres," though, seem particularly focused: The exhibition's title means "women" in Spanish (she was born in Barcelona and is now based in Brooklyn), and all but one of the paintings have the title *Mujeres* or *Mujer*. This nomenclature is a nod toward Willem de Kooning, her artistic exemplar; his abstract-heavy Woman portraits are a clear inspiration. Both series layer body parts to surreal effect, using lines, proportion, and color as means of distortion. For BanBan, a hand from one figure will often jut out of the breast or hip of another within the frame, like in *Mujeres I*, a riveting piece in Skarstedt's first-floor space. But where de Kooning imbued his paintings of women with an almost aggressive intensity, BanBan projects something different, something softer but more potent. Perhaps it's because BanBan's portraits inherently offer something de Kooning's cannot: The painterly perspective of a woman.

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Cristina BanBan, *Mujeres I*, 2022. Courtesy of Skarstedt.



Cristina BanBan, *Mujeres II*, 2022. Courtesy of Skarstedt.

All the works in the exhibition were made this year, mostly in Bushwick, save for three that she made in Paris. Hanging above a fireplace on the gallery's third floor, *Cabeza I. Paris* is an outlier in its close crop on a face (hence the name, which translates to "head") and in its size; at under two feet tall, it is significantly smaller than the other works. Still, there is an emotional and technical cohesion among all 15 paintings. The brushwork is physical, gestural, with visible strokes of vibrant color. BanBan says she throws her body into the process, moving instinctually after she's spent time sketching out her ideas on paper. ("Drawing is with the mind. Painting is with the gut," she says.) Though mostly nude, BanBan's figures are sometimes graced by a modern accessory—a red flower behind the ear (as in *Mujeres X*, recalling a similar adornment in Manet's *Olympia*), a green barrette, or a striped pair of underwear.

The mood of each painting oscillates between an almost defiant pride and melancholy, often within the same picture. Standing before *Mujer II* (BanBan's favorite, she said during the studio visit), I felt a sense of deep familiarity, even serenity. The woman's eyes are cast just past the viewer. Her left arm is lifted, covering her chest: protective but not quite demure. I noticed a red circle atop the raised arm. "What's that?" I asked. It's her nipple, poking through flesh and bone, hidden no longer—provocative after all.

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Artist Cristina BanBan in her Brooklyn studio. Photo: Albert Font.

While BanBan would not call the figures self-portraits, many of them are more or less based on herself—“I use my own body because that is the image I have,” she says—so her use of color is often what distinguishes the works in this series. Dominant shades of sky blue (*Mujer I, Mujeres X*) or ruby red (*Mujeres I, Mujeres IV*) naturally make for different atmospheres. Swirling accents of kelly green or marigold delight in their contrast, as do little flecks of impasto on lips or knuckles. The use of color—or the lack of it—on the eyes can rattle, comfort, entice.

The loose, gestural style of the works in “Mujeres” is a sort of peeling back of BanBan’s earlier work, which saw figures still exaggerated in scale but more filled-in, and often placed in visible contexts like a subway car or a home’s interior. This work is more rough-hewn, with traces of charcoal outline and empty bits of canvas peeking through. Her matured style represents an intentional shift, BanBan says. “I am always evolving. I feel so trapped if it’s always the same thing.”

BanBan has been practicing art in some form since she was five years old, taking art classes every day as part of an after-school program where she eventually also taught. She studied fine art at the University of Barcelona before moving to London, where her art career took off. Over the past five

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years she has shown in group and solo shows throughout Europe and in New York, and earlier this year her debut with Perrotin gallery in Paris sold out. “Mujeres” marks her first exhibition with Skarstedt.



Cristina BanBan, Mujeres X, 2022.

Aside from her clear references to de Kooning, BanBan’s paintings in “Mujeres” evoke the strong figures of Paula Rego, sweeping colors of Cecily Brown and Helen Frankenthaler, and the contused portraits of Picasso and Francis Bacon (with whom she shares a birthday). But she maintains the larger influence on her work is not art history, but the human experience—*her* human experience—gleaned in conversations with friends, on a night out, while listening to music, by thinking about the world.

In this way, her paintings, she says, are like journals, chronicling her observations of herself and of others, a way to record life as it happens. If, like Sontag said, a journal “is a vehicle for [a] sense of selfhood,” then BanBan’s portraits are a way of turning that personal selfhood universal. For through depicting the body, we more clearly see the self, and if we can see it, we hopefully get that much closer to recognizing it, accepting it, and maybe even loving it.