

NEW ESTABLISHMENT



CELINA
TEAGUE

CELINA TEAGUE's paintings take their cue from the non-stop stream of opinion, vitriol and hashtagging that have come to shape media events, each person trying and often failing to make themselves heard above the surrounding noise. 'Social media is a bit of a lie,' the British artist tells EMILY STEER, 'the whole thing is curated and selected by ourselves and we aren't even honest about the way that we present ourselves.'



How did you get started as an artist? I actually came to it late. I have some family in Mexico and my uncle told me that Oaxaca is where all the artists come from, and if I wanted to be an artist I should do it there. I went to Mexico not really speaking Spanish and found this amazing Japanese painter—whose style is more Mexican than the Mexicans—who let me start a course straight away. I was at the Universidad de Bellas Artes studying fine art, but it was quite casual. At the end of that year I applied to Saint Martins.

There does seem to be quite a Mexican aesthetic to your work. Do you feel a lot of that was picked up in Oaxaca?

It must have sunk in, though when I was in Mexico I used a lot of grey in my palette and they called me 'the London girl', with the rain. I used no terracotta colours, it was all grey and blue. When I came back, things like the Day of the Dead started to have a big influence on me. It's such a rich country with such a rich history.

Last year you showed I think therefore I # at Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, influenced by the Charlie

Hebdo shootings and the social media response. What made you want to explore this?

I've always looked at social issues, mainly environmental or feminist issues, they always seep into my work. *I think therefore I #* was the first show where I used hashtags, where I was really thinking about the impact of social media on me. I was one of those people who came to social media as late as possible, I think I was one of the last people I know to own a computer. But last year I got so involved. When [the attack on] *Charlie Hebdo* happened I was horrified by the story—well, it wasn't a story, it was a true life event that happened, and it's easy to forget that—and everyone had an opinion on it. I didn't know what *Charlie Hebdo* was, so I thought: let's start on a basic level of looking at what this subject is.

Do you feel nervous about subject matter like this, which is so loaded—especially taking such a brutal, gaudy look at it?

People kept asking why I would even touch a subject like this, but I think that problems arise when people are too scared to speak. I am

a big believer in freedom of speech, even if it comes with responsibilities. Europe is such a great place to live because we have fought for and won these freedoms. They've come through open-minded debate and open discussion and we need to keep them. Do I like *Charlie Hebdo*? Not particularly. But working with it I have the ability to edit. Anything about the Prophet Mohammad I swiftly omitted.

When the show opened you mentioned that social media should be opening up many different avenues of thought and discussion, when actually it does the opposite.

Social media is a bit of a lie, the whole thing is curated and selected by ourselves and we aren't even honest about the way that we present ourselves. We're all aware of that by now, although it is still easy to get stuck into that. Since my show I have used it a lot less. During my show I was looking at all these events and I was really interested in the ones that swept through social media, like the Boko Haram kidnappings and subsequent #bringbackourgirls campaign. The way I paint is so slow that by the time

I have worked through a painting the event is already forgotten. So then it becomes that I am taking the work on in a different way, it becomes contemplative.

There is a 'car crash' element to the work which feels like a moral stance. Do you want your paintings to spark action in viewers, or is it more about highlighting social behaviour?

I hope for that, but I honestly don't know how effective that is. My work has always been about issues that matter to me and on some level I'm sure I am hoping that it'll make people think about the issue and feel the same way, even if that is just a shared compassion for something. But you never really know how it will be interpreted and a lot of the time that people come to see a show they don't read the piece of paper, they see it at face value and they might see something totally different. In the Boko Haram painting I am no one, a lot of people probably don't even see the uterus shape, they might see a bull's head or just the pencils, and that's ok.

Celina Teague is represented by Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London.

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2016
Oil on canvas
50 x 50cm

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Tim Smyth

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