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## Aspen artist Jennine Hough examines childhood

[STEWART OKSENHORN](#)  
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ASPEN — For most of her career as an artist — running through her undergraduate and graduate years at the University of North Carolina, a long stretch in Atlanta, some brief flirtations with New York, and her first few years as an Aspenite — Jennine Hough concerned herself with interiors, mainly with Southwestern native American themes, and pet portraits. Then, in 2003, she refocused her attention. She painted a saint and four years later, she had her “Female Saints” series, a collection of 30 paintings that became progressively bigger.

Hough, a tall, thin, blonde with a big Southern accent, says that the “Female Saints” was an “unintentional” series. In retrospect, however, she sees what led her in that direction: the earlier interest in Southwestern art, which often featured religious iconography; trips to Italy and Santa Fe; her love of Renaissance painting; her college studies of historical and religious art. The saints also provided an opportunity that dogs and cats and home interiors did not: to study things outside of the visual image.

“The research was amazing,” said Hough, one recent morning at her studio at the Red Brick Center for the Arts. “I went through books, the Internet. It’s incredible how much is known about a saint who lived in the year 200 A.D. — who her parents were, how she was martyred, where she was buried. Just fascinating reading.”

Looking at the work she has done in the five years since beginning “Female Saints,” however, it is hard to shake the idea that there was another desire underlying the stylistic shift. Hough’s recent work reflects an intense fascination with the human face. The paintings in “Female Saints,” she says, became not only bigger, but more focused on the visage: “Pretty much all face and no background.”

In her current series, “Issues and Incidents in Childhood,” which has spanned nearly two years, the backgrounds, while often significant thematically, also shrunk to nothing, so the faces, all of young girls, dominate the canvas. Her latest piece, a triptych (see photo above), features the faces of three girls, all blonde, in extreme close-up. The village and rolling green hills in the background, though rendered with Hough’s usual patient expertise, is entirely obscured by the characteristics of the faces, and the emotions and thoughts reflected in them. Hough says she borrowed the style from the Renaissance painters she adores.

But there is more, a lot more, to Hough’s interest in the face than a link to an era that ended some 300 years ago. Hough is captivated by the interplay between beauty and imperfection, a theme that seems prominent in her work. Her subjects in “Issues and Incidents” are rarely idealized. There are lopsided features, blank or disturbed stares, overbites.

“Kristin Scott Thomas,” says Hough, bringing up the English-born, French-based actress who is often depicted onscreen as the ideal of mature, cosmopolitan beauty. But Hough has also looked closer at the face, and seen its imperfections.



- Jordan Curet/Aspen Times Weekly



- Courtesy of the artist

“The eyes are different, so are the sides of the mouth, the sides of the nose,” she said. “You think of her as classically beautiful, the high cheek bones. But when you really look at people that’s what you see in them – the mouth tilts to one side, or one lip is lower, or one eye is more open than the other. That’s what my paintings are all about.”

Another favorite face, at least in its blemishes, is Abraham Lincoln’s: “One cheek is almost caved in; his mouth is just a mystery,” said Hough. “He had a quality of being tall, big, handsome, but also ghoulish and strange. I read a biography of Mary Todd once, and she even talked about his face. A lot of people don’t find him handsome, but I find him appealing. I could study his face forever.”

“Issues and Incidents” – including the piece “Early Learning,” which is featured in the Big ‘n Bold group show, opening this week at the Aspen Chapel Gallery – has Hough looking not only at young girls, but at herself. Not her face, but her personal history.

When her mother died, in North Carolina in 1999, Hough found among her belongings a box of slides. Since Hough was an only child, most of the images were of her. Or, at least, she was in the pictures, if not the focal point.

“My mother made these great dresses for me, just gorgeous. That was a hobby for her,” said Hough, who has four stepchildren, three by her husband, Joe Myers, a retired attorney with whom she lives in the West End. “So in most of the slides, my head is clipped off. She’s photographing the clothes. And I was disturbed [by that].”

Going through the slides, Hough remembered each dress, and the associations, either emotions or stories, that came with them. “So the paintings are about an issue or an incident in my life, around the period of wearing that dress,” she said.

“Modeling Red” begins to capture the entire episode with the slides. The painting, a reasonably faithful copy of the original slide, depicts an adolescent Hough, her head chopped off at the top, big sunglasses eclipsing most of her expression. As she says, it is a photo of the dress.

With “Playing Juliet,” Hough lets her imagination go. The piece, in Hough’s standard oil on linen, features a girl with her body slumped, her gaze empty. In the background is Romeo’s castle; in the foreground, colorful flowers.

“When I was a kid, we had a big front porch. Once a week the neighborhood kids would come over and put on a drama for the parents,” said Hough. “And I always had to be Juliet. I was the spoiled only child, had to have my way.” In “Playing Juliet,” she adds, “I’m in a swoon, my ‘Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?’ mode.”

“OVNS” brings Hough even deeper into her own psychology. The title stands for “overvalued non-satellizer”; it is a term she learned in a college educational psychology course, and refers to a personality type that is secure and independent to the point of distant. The painting has a young girl with a determined look; she is essentially unconscious of the other children behind her.

“You don’t need a core. You’re not a leader or a follower; you just do your thing,” said Hough. “So the little girl, 6 or 8, in the painting – there’s other girls in the background, and a school. But she’s alone. That would be an issue, I think, the girl going off to school and the alienation in that. That’s something a lot of kids face.”

Despite the emphasis on physical imperfections, and the suggestion of imperfections that run deeper; the personal history that includes playing second fiddle to some articles of clothing; and a title that suggests a less than ideal picture of youth, Hough says her own childhood was a happy one. “My parents were older,” she said. “When I came along, because they had had trouble having kids, I was special. They treated me really well.”

Similarly, Hough doesn’t see her paintings as necessarily reflecting the disillusionment of childhood. But, in her close scrutiny of faces, she certainly finds the challenges of being a girl. Of herself, Hough says, “I have clear highs

and lows. I can scream. And I can get very excited. It doesn't come easy."

One thing left out of her examination of childhood is the male perspective. In her "Saints" series, she did paint a few male saints; she now dismisses them as "experiments, more or less."

"I know something about women – their faces, their expressions, their thoughts. And as adolescents, what's going on," she said. "Men just aren't that interesting. Sorry."

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