

One of Many

JANE MORROW INTERVIEWS JENNIFER TROUTON AT QSS, BELFAST.

Jane Morrow: Jennifer, you've recently had a major touring solo exhibition, 'One of Many', comprising over 100 works – oil paintings, embroideries, textiles, and artefacts. The scale and timing feel inherently intertwined with the struggle for abortion rights.

Jennifer Trouton: For a long time, it felt like a quiet protest. I've been entrenched in making this hugely emotional work, thinking about how this is women's history which must be recorded. It's also personal because it's about me as well. And it felt like I was still doing what I'd always done – what so many women do – which is circling around it, never talking about it. These are common stories. We should share them.

JM: With a focus on painting, can I ask you about your process?

JT: I'm not a painter's painter. I've never approached a canvas, or any work, not knowing what I'm doing, or what it's going to have on the surface. It's entirely content driven, feminist work. But the stories of all these big issues can't be told in a single piece. I don't set out thinking "I'm going to make over one hundred pieces"; I explore the subject organically.

JM: You're not 'just' a painter either, in that you work across multiple media – what determines that?

JT: I never refer to myself as a painter. 80% of my work is painting, but it's also embroidery, or collages and assemblage – things that were ascribed to women and that were seen as women's work, women's subjects, and women's craft. I make work that appears, on the surface, to be very pretty, but there's a very dark subtext.

JM: I wanted to ask you to elaborate on the beautiful surfaces of your work that lure the viewer in, and then – within the exhibition format and interpretation panel – you confront them with the 'inconvenient truth' of the works' content.

JT: I've had so many people message me to say how much the work resonated with them. They say, "we'd never shared our stories before", or "I brought my daughter, and we had this conversation for the first time". That's what I always wanted for this work – to open a conversation. It's also making people

consider that even though something is beautiful or well-executed, it can still have political weight or value.

JM: Can you tell me a little about your colour palette?

JT: I consciously selected a very nostalgic palette for this work. It's got a lot of very muted, very retro – 1950s, 60s, and 70s – pinks, greens, dusky blues. A mustard, a brine. They all marry, running through the shelves, the paintings, the embroideries, and the colour blocking that I create on the walls behind the works as well.

JM: Your painting extends beyond the canvas, connecting the works via a subtle network when they are in exhibition form – can you say more about that?

JT: Women are resourceful. It can be a matter of survival. In the case of abortion networks here [in Northern Ireland], it's incredible how it was all connected. And the trace of that is represented through a quiet little grid. It's a very thin line, tonally just slightly darker than the wall it's painted on, so you don't see it at first. These networks helped women to find a way out of their situation, and the grid line takes the audience on that journey.

JM: In line with a lot of the messaging currently around abortion campaigns – 'abortion is normal', and 'we all love someone who has had an abortion' – your work literally refers to, and also feels like, home.

JT: The idea of home is probably one of the strongest things in my work. I've taken everyday objects and domestic space and repurposed them to be both familiar and unfamiliar. In the earliest days of this series, the work was very much about the objects – things like soaps and needles and herbs in tea. Recently, I've brought them together along with coded images of female patron saints – ones that represent marriage, childbirth, and childhood. Midwives, too.

JM: Politically and socially, this struggle continues – do you envisage a time where this series of work feels resolved?

JT: That's not the point of it. Artists aren't here to answer questions or to resolve things. We're just here to shine a light

on them or at least express our experience of things.

JM: I am always drawn to work that appears to be one thing but does another – whether that's materially, thematically, or linguistically... when something 'everyday' is deployed for other purposes.

JT: Women took everything available to them and they repurposed those things into weapons and to ward against attacks on their bodily autonomy. The church used to try to control where women could go – or even live – because of the plants and herbs that were available to them nearby, which could be used for women's health. You would be shocked at how many plants have a dual purpose and how many can be used both for fertility and for an abortion. I spent about a year writing an artist statement that didn't use the word 'abortion' because it's so loaded that even I had hesitancy in using it.

JM: You've mentioned a few times [in our longer conversation] that you have a lot of shoulder pain from painting. I thought that the VAN readership might relate to your experience. How do you work around that?

JT: Drugs [laughs]. My bad shoulder has come about because of painting daily for 30 years. I do worry – it's an all-consuming fear – that I'm going to not be able to continue. I have cortisone injections. Another artist in the studio is helping me to come up with a kind of elbow rest, which should help. But for months, I just did embroideries. I'm a thinker, but I'm also a maker and I don't outsource anything. If I can't paint, I don't know who I am.

Jennifer Trouton is an award-winning visual artist currently based in QSS Studios, Belfast. Her work has featured in group exhibitions both nationally and internationally.

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Jennifer Trouton, 'One of Many', installation view, Naughton Gallery, Belfast, September 2021; photograph by Simon Mills, courtesy of the artist and Naughton Gallery.



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