

# Studio Visit: Melissa Gordon

## Freedom of Movement

The studio is a special place for any artist but in Melissa Gordon's practice it is influential on several levels. Not only does she attach great importance to the place where she works today, in her work she revisits her past studios and those of other artists. Her current studio, on the ground floor of her Brussels residence, is in the process of being renovated. Nevertheless, that is where we find her, working on her solo exhibition at Kunsthall Oslo and her contribution to the tenth edition of the Contour Biennial of Moving Images<sup>1</sup>.

Gordon originally hails from Massachusetts in the US. After completing residencies at De Ateliers in Amsterdam and WIELS in Brussels, she moved to London, where she worked on her PhD at Kingston University between 2015 and 2020. She subsequently returned to Belgium to settle more permanently. 'When I had a studio near Brussels South train station, people were always dropping by: friends, other artists ... It surprises me that I still receive so many visitors since moving my studio to where I live. Talking about the work makes it real. Once the works have been shown, there's a discourse to go along with it, but that also begins in the studio.'

In the former garage of her home in Uccle, Brussels, where she and her family came to reside around three years ago, she is now creating what most artists would probably consider the ideal studio: a reasonably large space on the ground floor with lots of natural light. Earlier in the renovation process, Gordon found herself without a studio for the first time in a long while. However, she was able to seek refuge at the Frans Masereel Centrum. Her works usually combine painting, screen-printing

and other disciplines or materials, and so it was crucial that she establish ready access to graphic media. Her own screen-printing equipment remains boxed up in the corner behind a curtain.

For several years now, Gordon has been externalising the way she, as an artist, moves through her living and working space. The series *Material Evidence*, which she began in 2013, builds on her photo archive of images documenting the surfaces of her various studios over the years. The details captured by these images range from paint marks on the ground to dirty, open paint cans and splatters on the walls that betray the location where her canvas was hanging. She is drawing on this evidence of past actions for a new painting that, by the nature of the process, is not a direct representation but an autonomous, abstract image.

For other works, she places paper on the ground of her studio and employs the technique of frottage to make graphite rubbings. When these completely abstract gestures are hung on the wall of an exhibition space, the representation of a floor — with its evidence of walking and working — takes on a whole new dimension. This summer, in preparation for her upcoming solo exhibition at Kunsthall Oslo, Gordon went back to her former studio at De Ateliers in Amsterdam to make a rubbing of the floor there. In a certain sense, the painting becomes an exhibition space, leading the exhibition to in turn be seen as a painting.

Gordon often reflects on the working environments of other artists and, by extension, the context in which their practice takes place. Her exhibition 'Liquid Gestures' (2021) at Towner Eastbourne included two structures based on the ground plans of two studios: those of Janet Sobel and Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. Gordon will do this again in Oslo, representing the former studio of Agnes Martin — a monastic 3 ×



KRISTIEN DAEM, *Melissa Gordon*, 2023, from the portrait series III, currently on view in the exhibition 'TEN WOMEN / DIX FEMMES / TIN / ZEHN FRAUEN' at M HKA, INBOX, Antwerp until 24 September 2023, courtesy of the artist



Melissa Gordon's studio in Uccle in Brussels, photo Tom Van Hee

5 metres in size — as an open construction in the much larger exhibition space. 'As a viewer, you make a transition from one space to the other and from a physical to a mental space. I want to evoke the feeling that you're entering someone's private space,' she says.

Her interest in women artists in particular also led to the creation of her *Female Readymades* series — ongoing since 2018 — and the recreated studio spaces echo questions and subject matter from these paintings. Janet Sobel was a US artist of Ukrainian descent. Clement Greenberg saw her work at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of the Century gallery and later described how Jackson Pollock had also seen the works of this 'primitive artist' and was inspired by her for his 'drip paintings'. Yet it was not Sobel but Pollock who became the world-renowned star

of abstract expressionism. Gordon's work tells this story as a visual assemblage comprised of a blown-up detail from the only photographic record of a Sobel painting, fragments of works by Pollock and excerpts from a letter from Rothko to Sobel, inviting her to an exhibition on behalf of Peggy Guggenheim. 'These women's stories are unknown or erased. It requires a lot of research to get to the bottom of them,' says Gordon. For another canvas she conducted research into the disputed *Fountain*: long attributed to Marcel Duchamp, it has since been found that this work was created by Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven<sup>2</sup>. 'I am very conscious of previous generations of women artists, such as my teachers Rita McBride and Marlène Dumas, who created openings through their artistic practice that now afford me a certain freedom of movement,' says Gordon.

'I find it interesting that the authorship of my works hangs somewhat in the air,' she continues. 'The work is shared with the women I refer to. Maybe the work doesn't seem to be mine at all. For me, it's all about that research into how artists make their work, the movements and gestures they use.'

Her latest series of (for now) four paintings is inspired by the view from the windows of early-twentieth-century studios belonging to modern artists. We look out through the windows of these places where modernism took shape, but, rather than showing some view or a vast, open landscape, Gordon shows the medium of painting itself: abstract gestures of the sort that appear in her other works. The paintings also incorporate texts and maps. 'They are stories of people travelling from A to B, for whatever reason,' Gordon explains. 'The goal is not for the viewer to be able to identify the who or the where; it's about the journey itself, it's about people in movement.'

This is the first time that an artist who usually works with painting is participating in the Contour Biennial of Moving Images. The associative, assembled character of Gordon's canvases is consistent with a filmic attitude to composition. At Contour, her paintings are part of an installation: in a darkened room, a projected frame of light slowly sweeps past the works, allowing the viewer to see the illuminated part each time. 'The total "scan" takes about six minutes,' says Gordon. 'I wanted it to feel like a sort of lighthouse: you don't have control over what

you can see. It's like the paintings are a film, or as if you yourself are in a film, looking out. Your view is effectively impeded: you have to stand close to the canvas, as if you're near-sighted, and decipher the different parts of the work with what little light there is.'

In her new studio, she has replaced the back wall of the former garage with a monumental sliding glass door that looks out on the garden. 'It was really a dream of mine to one day have a studio with a view to the outside. I didn't have that for twelve years. It makes a big difference to me, but it remains to be seen whether it will have a visible impact on my work. Someone who was recently visiting the studio noticed that my latest work is less contrasty — perhaps that does have something to do with the increased amount of daylight and my reduced reliance on cold, artificial light.'

Translated by Jonathan Beaton

1 See also, in this edition of GLEAN, Pieter Vermeulen's interview with Auguste Orts, the curators of this year's edition of Contour.

2 See also Siri Hustvedt, 'A woman in the men's room: when will the art world recognise the real artist behind Duchamp's Fountain?', *The Guardian*, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/mar/29/marcel-duchamp-fountain-women-art-history/>.

Melissa Gordon's studio in Utrecht in Brussels, photo Tom Van Hout

