



One Piece by Mequitta Ahuja, Xpect

Words by Sarah Burney

Mequitta Ahuja's 2019 painting *Xpect* depicts a woman in a red dress reclining on two chairs that have been draped with bright blue fabric. The large painting directly behind her, the smaller painting on the floor in the background, and the lack of furniture around the woman imply that we are in an art gallery. The model meets our gaze – she is clearly posing.

Xpect is a self-portrait. The model is Ahuja. Her classic pose is made decidedly contemporary by her pregnant belly, the sonogram she is holding, and her slight smile. It's a birth announcement! An Instagram trope inside a painting that is loaded with rebuttals to art history.

Kajal connected with Ahuja to learn about the making of this work.



Mequitta Ahuja, *Xpect*, 2018, Oil on canvas

Kajal: I was pleasantly surprised to see a birth announcement painting. We've been conditioned to celebrate pregnancy on Instagram but it's rare to see it celebrated, in a similarly contemporary, personal way, in fine art. The art world is still fairly dismissive to the visual tropes social media has spawned – despite the parallels these have to art history. Were you nervous at all about the high-low mix of combining an Instagram trope into a classic self-portrait?

Mequitta Ahuja: I have zero qualms about merging my intimately personal stories with my art. But I actually got the idea of announcing my 2018 pregnancy with a painting through two historical paintings: *Portrait présumé de Gabrielle d'Estrées et de sa sur la duchesse de Villars (Gabrielle d'Estrées and One of Her Sisters)* and Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait*. Little is known about *Gabrielle d'Estrées and One of Her Sisters*, an anonymously painted 16th century nude portrait of sisters, but it is presumed to be an announcement of the pregnancy of Gabrielle d'Estrees, mistress of King Henry IV of France. The pinching fingers gesture was a symbol of pregnancy. And though the meaning behind the Arnolfini Portrait has been debated, it has been interpreted by viewers as the foreshadowing of a fertile union.

What was it about impending motherhood that compelled you to make this work?

Xpect was part of a series of paintings I made relating to Picasso's 1907 painting *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. K. R. Version O)*. Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. K. R. Version O)* is a painting about the threatening, even deadly aspect of the sexual act (in Picasso's time, syphilis). Picasso presents woman – her body and her seductive sexuality – as the embodiment of that sexual threat.

In my painting *Le Damn*, I remake the Picasso painting in order to address the threatening aspect of sex from a female perspective, namely the threats reproduction poses for women, for which the specter of death, loss, and mourning play roles. My point of view is informed by my experience with pregnancy, life-threatening miscarriage requiring a blood transfusion and emergency D&C, infertility, and, ultimately conceiving my son in 2018 through many rounds of assisted reproductive technology (IVF). Had my road to motherhood been easier, I may have been concerned about emphasizing, in my professional life, my role as mother. My journey to motherhood, however, was so difficult that it took over my life, mentally, emotionally, and physically. There was no question that it would become a major element in my work. Art is where I go to process the world. It is my container for everything.



Le Damn, 2018, Oil on canvas

How long did you spend on this series? Was this body of work, including *Xpect*, made during your pregnancy?

The paintings in this series occupied me for over a year in the studio. I made *Le Damn* before I was pregnant. While pregnant, I updated the content of *Le Damn* by making *Xpect*. In *Xpect*, my subject – which is myself, the work is a self-portrait – is grinning and holding a sonogram. In *Xpect*, I reframe the despair I depict in *Le Damn* into a narrative of a dream fulfilled, thereby showing not only the threatening aspect of the sexual act, but also one dimension of its potential for joy. By recasting the figures in Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* with my own body, a woman of color as both subject and artist, I reclaim the territory Picasso borrowed from the Black body and from Black creative production. I see this as a decolonizing act. By shifting the perspective of the gaze of *Les Femmes d'Alger* from man looking at woman to woman analyzing and presenting her experience with her own body, my work is also a corrective to the sexually objectifying misogyny of *Les Femmes d'Alger*.



Le Damn Revisited, 2018, Oil on canvas

I immediately think of Picasso and *Les Femmes d'Alger* when looking at *Xpect* because your painting, *Le Damn*, features so prominently in it. Your decision to reproduce *Le Damn* in grayscale however, reminds me of another Picasso painting: *Guernica*. And your reclining pose is reminiscent of Ingres' *Odalisque*, in reverse, and the brilliant lapis cloth draped over the two chairs evokes Christian paintings, specifically the robes of Mary. Are these all intentional references to art history or am I reading too much into this?

In my work, I intentionally reference common motifs of the figurative painting tradition. This includes, among other elements, some of my poses, my figure's gaze, and my inclusion of draped fabric. In *Le Damn*, I include many of the formal and pictorial aspects present in Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. Version O)* including drapery and nude figures, however, there are critical differences. I convert the angular inward and outward thrusting structural movement in *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. Version O)* into a cyclical pattern. Another critical change I make is to the figure in *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. Version O)* who enters the scene at the upper right of the painting through a parted curtain. In *Le Damn*, I convert this figure into a wish-granting goddess. For the form of this figure, I was inspired by the Hindu goddess Kali, however, for her role in the narrative as divine intervener, I was inspired by the Puti figures, or flying angels of Christian art.

My references to Picasso in this body of work are extensive and include the grey scale of Picasso's *Guernica*. For the central motif in *Le Damn*, I reference Picasso's 1937 painting, *Weeping Woman*. In *Le Damn* I cover the torso of my central figure with a partial view of a weeping woman's face. With an emphasis on the mouth, I render the face contorted by crying as an extension and amplification of my central figure's own tears. In this way, viewers focus on the emotional experience of my subject instead of – as in the Picasso – the sexual presentation of her body. In the far background of my painting *Xpect*, I depict a small version of my painting titled *aMother*. In *aMother* – I made a large painting of it in 2019 – I continue the reference to Picasso's *Weeping Woman*.



aMother, 2009, Oil on canvas

Referencing your work in your own painting is a bold move – it assumes your place in the canon. A refreshingly defiant act considering the history of painting is woefully male and pale.

My mission is to change expectations of the self-portrait, especially the self-portrait of a woman or a person-of-color. I show a woman of color possessing her own story and the story of painting. Women and people of color are expected to mine their personal biographies as case studies in our social condition. I aim to hold and to embody in my work both politics of identity as well as the function of self-portraiture exemplified by Poussin's famous self-portrait – displaying authority within the field of painting including its history. I combine contemporary and historical expectations of the self-portrait, bringing together current ideas about the individual, including self-identity, identity politics, a value for introspection and the sharing of personal and autobiographical stories with old ideas about art as a tool for instruction and past ideas about the role of the artist as master of pictorial representation. I do this as myself, a woman of color, my image being a challenge to art history and to the expectations of who are the masters of pictorial representation.

Compare a Kahlo self-portrait to a Poussin, Velazquez or Gentileschi self-portrait. Kahlo emphasizes her biography. Poussin, Velazquez, and Gentileschi depict themselves as masters of pictorial representation, progenitors of the figurative tradition. I do both. By merging past and present ideas of self-portraiture, my work destabilizes the genre's old and current conventions.

Yes, historically artists, especially male artists, have depicted themselves as artists or simply everyday civilians – rarely ever as a model like you have done in *Xpect*. Again you are playing with “high-low” – casting yourself as muse not creator.

In *Xpect*, as in much of my work, I depict my intimate relationship to painting – my own paintings and the history of paintings – the verb and the noun, the act and the object – painting. I show my subject at work – reading, writing, handling canvases in the studio. In these ways, I replace the common self-portrait motif – the artist standing before the easel, with a broader portrait of the artist's activity. I depict my intimate and layered relationship to my own paintings. I am model, maker, owner and agent of my work.

Are you ever worried that there's too many inside jokes here? How do those who do not get the art history references respond to it? Is that a concern?

Since I make a lot of inside jokes and references in *Xpect*, an informed viewer will have a richer experience with the work. There is also a lot of everyday, human experience that I include in the work as well, and there are different ways, not just art history, that a viewer can bring an informed perspective. There's a photo of my son and me standing in front of *Xpect* that I think captures the human story that almost everyone can relate to.



Ahuja with her son, 2020. Photo courtesy of The Phillips Collection.

That is such a wonderful image! Speaking of the everyday human experience – is that an IKEA stool we see in the background?

Yes, that's a pink, children's IKEA stool in my painting and in my studio. Because I work large, I have stools of varying heights so that I can easily work high and low on the painting. The actual stool is heavily paint-splattered.

How has motherhood changed your practice?

When our son was two and a half weeks old, we learned that my mother had an aggressive form of uterine cancer. In 2019, we moved to be near her, purchasing the house just behind my parents. My mother died on May 3, 2020. I spent my days back and forth on the "Chai Trail," the small path between our houses. In the time I spent playing with and caring for my son, my parents only grandchild, I was also able to spend time in intimate, daily connection with my mother. Prior to these life changes, I had been trying to loosen up in the studio. My new circumstances tipped the balance. Working with time constraints – I paint while my son is napping – has forced me to approach figuration gesturally. Working while in the midst of a process of grieving has forced me to find its material embodiment, replacing my additive process with erasure. At first, it surprised me that during this tumultuous time, qualities I have long sought in my work are coming to fruition, yet it is a testament to the essential role of art in my life.

Xpect will be on view at The Phillips Collection through January 3, 2021.



One of the artworks that followed *Xpect*: Mequitta Ahuja, *Son of a Mother*, 2019, Oil on canvas