

# Kate Groobey Interview by Anna McNay

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Kate Groobey (b1979, Leeds) combines painting and performance to break down barriers between her audience, her protagonist and herself as a performer. For her latest series, Female Stallion, which comprises six large canvases with their associated soundtracks and performances, her muse is her wife, the writer and poet Jina Khayyer, and her purpose is to create a safe, feminine and queer space, which might ideally make people feel inspired, stronger and more empowered.

Groobey, who studied at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art, University of Oxford, and the Royal College of Art, London, was the first woman to win the prestigious Daiwa Foundation Art Prize in 2018. The ensuing residency in Japan provided plentiful inspiration for her work, as have her many encounters with different cultures and languages. It is perhaps unsurprising that the mouth – and lips and tongue – are common motifs and focal points in her paintings.

In her performances, the protagonist literally steps out of the canvas, as Groobey dresses as, embodies and becomes her character. Both the performance and the paintings are full of vigour, and her unencumbered gestural style is energetic and dynamic.

In this Zoom interview for Studio International, Groobey talks about her process, her inspirations and the importance of painting as a means of communication.

**Anna McNay: I want to start with the description of the works in your current exhibition, Female Stallion, on the gallery's website. It reads: "There are six large oil paintings in Groobey's new painting series Female Stallion with accompanying performances that see the paintings brought to life by Groobey herself, who dresses up as her character in painted costumes, performing improvised dances in front of painted backdrops to music of her own creation." This sentence is pretty breathtaking – both in its scope, but also literally because, to be exhaustive, it has to be so long. If you had to condense it a little, how would you describe yourself as an artist?**

Kate Groobey: I'm a painter. I began with the performance in 2015, around the time I moved to Paris, when I met my wife, the writer and poet Jina Khayyer. I didn't have a studio to begin with, because moving from London to Paris, it took me a while to find my feet. The idea of dressing up as my paintings came to me as I asked myself what I could do, what I could make, in that period. This was something I could do in the apartment. But the idea of a painting coming to life had established itself much earlier, probably even in childhood. There is a little girl, Erica, who becomes trapped in a painting in Roald Dahl's The Witches. And I had read the Harry Potter books with the moving portraits as well. So, I think those ideas were embedded. There is an excitement for me in activating my paintings. They are already very physical. I have always liked to make big paintings. This was the next step, really.

**AMc: Do you now create the performance at the same time as the painting, or does the painting still come first?**

KG: It's more comfortable for me to make the oil paintings first. But, before these, come the watercolours. That's really how I think through my ideas. And then the editing process begins, where I start to think about how I might create a series or a connected body of work from the ideas. I like to produce a lot of ideas in watercolour, and also as drawings. Then I start to conceptualise them and select those which I could turn into large paintings and performances. Normally, one series will comprise between six and ten paintings.

**AMc: I was going to ask you about the series and whether they exist in your mind before you make the works, or appear as these accumulate. Are you saying you conceive the series first?**

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KG: The drawings come first, but they are very much from my subconscious. I'm not really thinking at that point. I have a big box of drawings. Then I start with the watercolours, which are somewhere in between drawings and paintings. I will maybe spend six months just making watercolours. Then, at the end of that time, I look through them and start to edit. I think through what's happening in them and what the main ideas are. I ask myself how I can select between six and ten images to create something that can turn into a series or a show. The concept is then slowly developed over a couple of years. I might start with just one image, and then, after I have painted that, see how I feel. It can change. It's not necessarily the case that I select six, and it stays as that six. I might re-edit – reselect – based on how I feel after I have made the first one.

**AMc: It sounds as if you create a form of Gesamtkunstwerk [a total work of art] with your series – in fact, even with each painting and associate performance. Do the paintings stand alone, or are the performative elements imperative?**

KG: They are conceived together, and they are the most powerful when they are shown together, but, once they are out in the world, they can go their own way.

**AMc: I don't know if this is the same for all your series, but, for Female Stallion, some of the paintings were inspired in part by things you had heard being said. Do you note down words and snippets of conversation while you are in your drawing or watercolour stages?**

KG: Quite often, yes. Jina might say something, and I will go and grab a piece of paper. I might then sit and play around with how to manifest it into a visual. There is no one way of doing things, but that's how I have been working for quite a few years now. A lot of my paintings come from someone just saying something which sticks in my mind.

**AMc: Maybe connected to this, a lot of the imagery in the Female Stallion series is related to the mouth. Is this symbolic? I Like to Lick certainly has innuendo in it.**

KG: There is sexual innuendo, yes. But, also, I moved to France, not speaking the language, because Jina lived here. We did it at school, of course, but I wasn't a high achiever in French class. I'm trying to learn it now and really starting from scratch. But painting is a form of communication, too, and so these ideas all mixed together in my mind. It all centres on the mouth, because it has to learn to make new shapes in French. In order to speak the words, I have had to build new muscles. When I first tried to say certain things, my mouth just wouldn't function as necessary. So, even just on this very basic physical level, the mouth is interesting.

**AMc: What took you down to live in the rural south of France?**

KG: I was living between England and Paris. Then there was the Bataclan attack. Jina has a Middle Eastern background. She was born in Germany, but she's Iranian, and so it really hit her hard. The year 2015 was a year of turmoil in many ways, and we started questioning how and where we would like to live. We went on a two-year living-and-working-on-the-road mission, where we exchanged work for accommodation, to explore our possibilities. Jina always had a sweet spot for the south of France – one of her best friends has a family home here in Provence – so we looked, found and moved.

**AMc: Does where you are affect your work – beyond the linguistic input we have already spoken about?**

KG: Yes, definitely. The textures of Provence have entered into my work. The way I make the paint now is very thick, very textured, bubbling. You can really see it in photos. This comes from everything here being made from limestone, or covered in lime mortar, which, over time, develops thick texture patinas. Of course, the culture also enters into my work. Bouche à Bouche is my first French performance, with Jina's voice on the soundtrack. And

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the light of the Luberon is very special, very white. That's why all the great artists came here – Picasso, Matisse, Van Gogh.

**AMc: We have already mentioned the sexual innuendo in I Like to Lick. Then there is Get Into My Rainbow, which also makes use of a motif recognisably associated with lesbian and gay pride. How important is your sexuality – and autobiography – in your work?**

KG: Autobiography has become very important. After my father was diagnosed with cancer, I realised I had to address that topic in my work. It was the only way I could make anything meaningful. I hadn't made such explicitly autobiographical work before that. It was maybe there in the undertones, but so directly. Now, whatever the main feelings or events are in my life is what goes into the work. For each series, it's a question of what is important to me while I'm producing the work.

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