

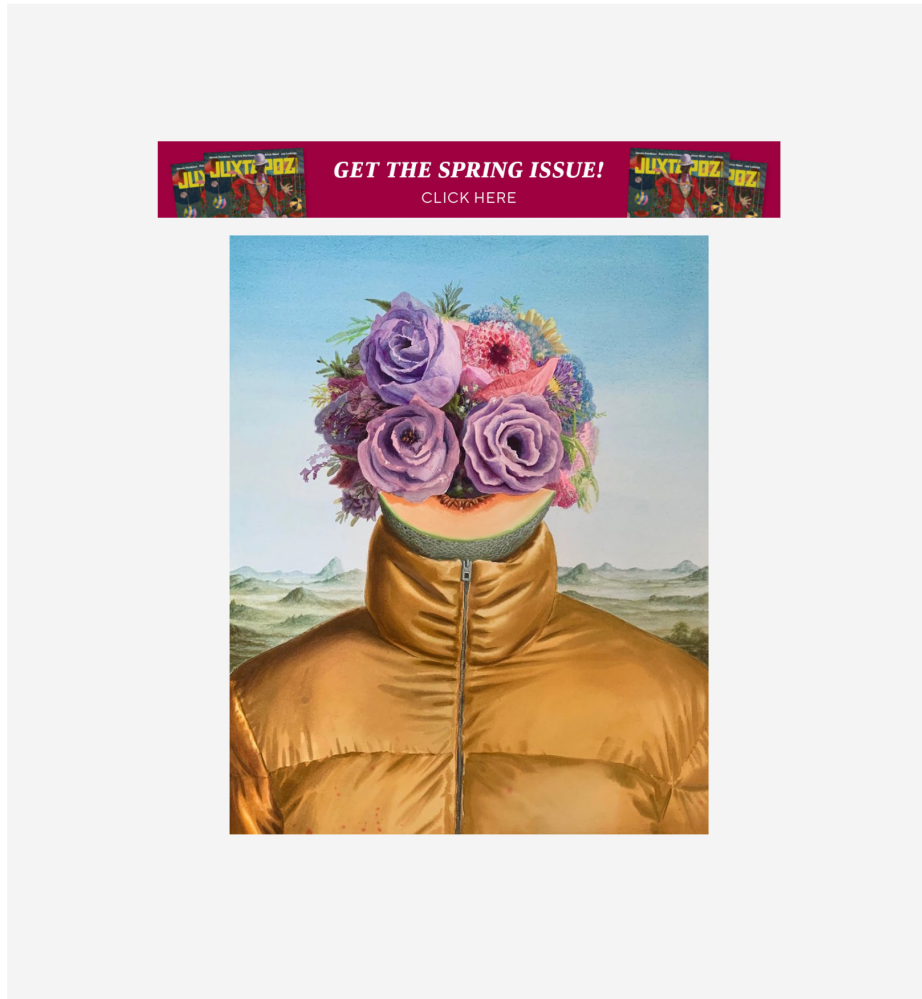
Bogojev, Sasha. "Self Discovery: A Conversation with Kirsten Deirup." *Juxtapoz*. Online. December 18, 2019.



## Self Discovery: A Conversation with Kirsten Deirup

December 18, 2019 | in Painting

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We continue to marvel at the work of [Kirsten Deirup](#), whose creations smoothly blend the familiar and factual with the incredible and uncanny.

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Whether composing still life portraits or building idyllic landscapes filled with the surreal and conceptual, her realistic rendering of such visuals pique interest when viewing the imagery. Skillfully depicting depth and light, her pictures regularly surprise with perspective and expectations as she switches from representational figuration to surrealism, rendered through traditional techniques and formats.

We're especially attracted to the portraits that successfully utilize the artist's themes and visual language to construct a body of classical bust portraits. Using familiar format as a universally recognized structure, she then builds her pieces by concocting a variety of items and objects to create a 'person'. From bulks of threads or seaweed, to a variety of fruits, vegetables, shellfish, and other food ingredients, to used cans and packaging material, Deirup's painterly technique adds texture that makes her portraits look almost real. To some extent, continuing Arcimboldo's groundbreaking concept, her cast of characters inhabit contemporary society, while referencing favorite artistic movements and styles. From fashion items to hairstyles or elements used to build them, these creatures are as much Renaissance icons as they are mythical creatures living in places captured by **Hudson River School** painters, and are equally unsettling, funny and just plain curious.

Intrigued about these fanciful creations and the thought process that creates them, we reached out to the NY-based artist with a B.F.A. from **Cooper Union School of Art** to talk about her influences and creative inspiration, as well as plans for these supernatural types.

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***Sasha Bogojev:* In what type of art or art movement are you most interested in and see yourself working in?**

*Kirsten Deirup:* The two artists I talk to most about art are my best friend **Delphine Hennelly** and my partner, **Brock Enright**. Their work looks nothing like mine, and yet we always seem to be thinking along parallel lines and interested in the same topics. I definitely feel part of a wide network and community of artists, but to my mind, it doesn't seem to be linked to a particular movement. And the artists whose work I'm most interested in are really varied.

**I see your work as figurative surrealism, with occasional forays into abstraction. Would you agree with any of it?**

I try not to think about what category I fit into. I understand it's a useful paradigm for understanding how artists fit into a larger context. I learned that from my time curating and writing about art. But I don't need it to make my own work, and I worry it could be a distraction.

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One of the great things about making art right now is that anything goes. Any technique or subject is acceptable if you can make it work, which is a kind of surreal place to be. I've heard a lot of people talking about Surrealism lately, and I think that might be why. The internet is surreal. Politics, right now, are surreal, so it's natural for that to currently be reflected in art.



**Is it more about the fun images, the painterly challenge, or is there specific meaning behind using foods or quirky objects?**

I'm always looking for a painting challenge; otherwise, I would get bored. But the technical aspects are a means to an end. Since moving to upstate New York, I have been looking and thinking a lot about the Hudson River School painters. As I drive around the Hudson Valley, I can see how these views inspired them to paint. I'm trying to reconcile that romantic, idealistic view of natural beauty with what we, as humans, are actually



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doing to the environment. I don't mean them to be environmentalist in a pedantic way, but it is something I'm always ruminating on.

### **Is there a narrative or a message your work conveys, or do you mainly focus on the visual aspect of it?**

In terms of a literal narrative, I do usually have a story going in my head as I'm working on them. It's kind of how I imagine an author developing a character in order to get a better sense of them. For example, the painting from [Universes 2 show](#), *Star*, I imagine being a woman who used to live in New York and work in a gallery, but now lives in LA and works in Hollywood. She's someone who is smart but a little disillusioned and a little superior.



### **Where do those assemblage portraits come from?**

A big inspiration has been Italian Renaissance portraiture. I'm interested in the rigidity and heavy symbolism. You look at a [Piero Della Francesca](#) portrait that is hundreds of years old, and you get a sense of a real person. I like the idea of creating a made-up person who has a real presence.

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**Are they, to any extent, connected to [Giuseppe Arcimboldo](#)'s portrait busts made of fruit, vegetables, flowers, fish, and books?**

I'm a fan of Arcimboldo. Those paintings make sense to me. But I think we are replacing human features with inanimate objects for different reasons. I'm thinking about how people incorporate products or brands into their identity, and how people become a kind of accumulation of their own stuff and preferences.

**I feel like yours are a contemporary, pop, if you wish, version of those concepts. How does that sound?**

When I think of "pop," I think fast-paced, flat, bright, impersonal, mechanical reproduction. I think I am responding to those sentiments without necessarily embracing them. Part of what I love about painting is how long it takes to make, how you can see time through the painter's hand. That's what separates it from something digitally produced. It's tactile and human. I'm drawn to the stillness of portraiture and landscape painting, and I use compositions that are intentionally classic and static, in an effort to slow down my ideas so I can see them.



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### **How do you compose those images?**

As far as composing them, it's a bit like a puzzle. I get an image in my head and I spend some time looking for an image, online or in catalogs, to fit the picture in my head. Sometimes I find what I'm looking for, but more often, it winds up being a kind of conglomerate. My last painting had a steak in it, where a guy's hat would be. I spent so long looking for an image of steak with the right shape and lighting that I really learned what a steak looks like. Then I put all the images away and painted it from my head.

### **What technique are you using for those and why?**

I'm using **Holbein** gouache and sometimes adding a little egg yolk for an extra binder. Ultimately I think of myself as an oil painter, but in the past few years, I've had a lot of time constraints (I partnered in opening a gallery and had a second child), so I learned how to use gouache in a way that I felt lived up to the feeling I get from oil painting.

### **Are they based on any particular people?**

Sometimes I do have people in mind, yes. One of the first ones I made was a self-portrait. A few have been friends or various people. But in the end, they're all more like combinations who make up archetypes rather than individual people.



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### **What other types of work are you currently working on besides the portraits?**

I've always got side projects going on. For the past few years, I've been painting on rocks, although I've never exhibited them. For the past several months, I've been working on a side project using Sumi ink and old folders. I've only shown a handful of people because I'm still not sure what it is, but it's actually what I'm most excited about!

### **Do you have plans or ideas to further explore this concept in some way?**

That's the goal. I've been doing a lot of group shows, which are fun, but that disperses them all over, and I don't get to see a whole group of them together. This year I'm focusing on getting a body of work together and we'll see what happens. I recently stepped back from the gallery I co-founded, and that has allowed me more time to focus on my work. For the first time in several years, I'm able to make painting a priority and it feels great!