

Shona McAndrew

Press book

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VULTURE

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An Artist Reckons With the 'Fat' Body



By Jerry Saltz, *New York's senior art critic*



Shona McAndrew, *In Too Deep*, 2022. Art: Copyright Shona McAndrew. Courtesy the Artist and CHART.
Photo by Neighboring States.

“As a fat woman,” Shona McAndrew explains in the catalogue for her new show, “I came to believe that I didn’t deserve intimacy, shouldn’t express happiness in the presence of others, and certainly shouldn’t be proudly showing my large naked body to anyone.” With her exhibition at Chart Gallery — featuring ten paintings, mostly nudes of herself and her lover — all that has changed. There is also one magnificent, oversize papier-mâché sculpture of McAndrew lolling in a bubble bath. Here is a ferocious artist slaying both her internal demons and cultural taboos.

McAndrew, who has described herself as “the only chubby child in France” (she grew up in Paris), was a breakout star at the 2019 Spring/Break art show. Her installation was a room-filling papier-mâché sculpture of her and her boyfriend sprawled on a bed in their messy Brooklyn bedroom. Afterward McAndrew, now 32, went a different direction, showing a series of well-done but removed images of women and friends. She’s a precisionist with a Post-Impressionistic touch for part-by-part painting, but the work was more devotional than “grab you by the lapels.” Something was missing.

Turns out, it was her. McAndrew is now the subject. She paints her naked body, either alone or being touched by others, taking pleasure in it as something that might be desired and seen without humiliation. Her work has become more open, honest, and vulnerable, without falling back on the rawness that characterized her work at Spring/Break. The paintings are rendered in a pink scale so that everything appears to come through a filter of mossy mist, lending them a formal stillness and a new sense of confidence. I can imagine this work sending profound messages to large audiences.

In Too Deep depicts McAndrew guiding the finger of her lover into her belly button as she fondles one of her breasts. Flesh abounds, falls, forms a landscape. She peers down the visage of her own body while withdrawing into her psyche. The penetration echoes Jesus guiding the finger of Thomas into his open wound.

Hold You Tight features a seated McAndrew as she embraces Stuart, her partner, who is standing. Her eyes are closed; she seems to be partaking of a world of sensual and spiritual sustenance — like she’s savoring the first taste of something she’s denied herself until now. The pose recalls Bernini’s *Rape of Proserpina*, with McAndrew as Hades, but rather than abducting the unwilling Proserpina into the underworld, she’s summoning something from within her. Stuart’s surrender is sweet.



Shona McAndrew, *Bedtime*, 2023. Art: Copyright Shona McAndrew. Courtesy the Artist and CHART. Photo by Neighboring States.

Movie Night shows McAndrew cradling Stuart's head in her lap. As he looks away, maybe at a screen, she's looking down at him, at peace and ease, lost in the moment. The cards are stacked against women artists exploring this kind of secret life. The search for domestic bliss, the overcoming of body issues and self-doubt, are common topics in other fields and in the popular press but feature rarely in the realms of high art. Such themes are dismissed as the stuff of romance novels and soft-core illustration. As bell hooks wrote, "Male fantasy is seen as something that can create reality, whereas female fantasy is regarded as pure escape... A woman who talks of love is still suspect."

McAndrew says she didn't look at herself in a mirror for ten years. "Growing up in a fat body, I always felt that the rules of femininity didn't apply to me," she told me. Now, she's rendering "body parts that made me uncomfortable" and has learned "to lovingly paint my double chin" and "to appreciate the formalism in the folds of my fat." Now she wants "to put my secrets into the painting" — secrets that she shares with so many others. "I don't want it to just be for me and about me," she told the *Art Career* podcast in late 2022. "I want it to be for anyone with a body."

Reader's Digest (2021)

State of the Art: Shona McAndrew

Anna Walker 31 March 2021



Philadelphia-based painter and sculptor Shona McAndrew talks about her practice, her inspirations and why there's never been a better time to be unique.

Reader's Digest: How would you describe your own artwork?

Shona McAndrew: I definitely think my audience is everyone, but I aim to talk to women specifically. I'm attempting to recreate or discuss the kind of art, typically portraiture, that has been made throughout time by men of women, for men.

The representation and role women have had historically, as we all know, was very limited, and in many ways it still is today. And that affects all women because we see these representations and think, *Oh, that must be what it is like to be a woman*. Turns out, we're just looking at how men *think* women are, and not how women think we are or how women choose to express themselves.

So, my paintings and my sculptures are a lot about taking that back and giving agency to the women I paint.



RD: Your portraits show the moments women have to themselves, that belong just to them—that's not something I've seen captured elsewhere...

Shona: I'm a fat woman, I've always been plus size. I grew up in Paris, where I was the fattest girl in school and I remember being comfortable and happy with myself until I saw a reflection of myself in a shop window. I'd feel sad, and not because seeing myself was sad, but because I was reminded of what other people saw when they looked at me. Thinking about what that image would mean to them made me sad.

I would think, *Alright, I'm fat. I'm not supposed to be happy; I'm not supposed to be confident*, and then my confidence would drop. That's why I'm interested in these private moments for women, where they don't have mirrors around them, where there are not other people looking at them and reminding them of who they're "supposed to be"—no one is there to take away the moment these women are creating for themselves.

RD: Your paintings feel like they have a particular resonance at the moment with women spending so much more time at home during the lockdown. I find that most days, I'm not wearing makeup, not wearing feminine clothes... I'm not presenting in the way that I usually do to the rest of the world. And it's been really nice to connect with that sense of self beyond the reach of others.

Shona: Absolutely, it's very freeing because when women get body hair, they're taught to remove it to *become* a woman, when a man get body hair, they're taught that they are men now because they *haven't* [removed it]. There's an idea that being your "true self" means you're really a man and shifting who you are means you're a woman. I think there's been a freedom in lockdown.

This year has been the longest my leg hair has ever been and I'm still a bit taken aback by it sometimes because I'm not accustomed to it. But then you get accustomed to it. And you remember, "it's literally growing out my body, it's genuinely *part* of my body." It feels thrilling to have these tiny victories of no makeup or body hair.



RD: There's magic too in seeing your body cultivating something. We're normally so busy trying to remove or prevent hair growth that we've become disconnected from our natural bodies.

Shona: Yeah, I never knew! I've never let my hair grow past that uncomfortable stubble stage. I have armpit hair now because I've been inside so much, and my boyfriend and I have discussed how we both don't even notice it anymore. It's been a year now, and just like anything else, you get accustomed to things.

That's why representation is so important, because things are shocking when you haven't had enough time to get used to them. But when you see enough of it, you become accustomed to it. That's why seeing plus-sized women, women of colour, women with handicaps, trans women and women with body hair is all so important. All that you have to do is expose it enough, and then we're going to have generations of people who say, "What do you mean women never used to have body hair? That's just what women are like!"

That goes back to why I make my art. I want women to walk away [from my exhibitions] thinking, *Oh my god, we're cool*. Because I think women are very cool. And nothing is more thrilling than a confident woman, because we all know how much it takes to be confident as a woman. It gives me chills.

RD: I'd love to talk a bit about your new show "Haven". How did you choose the title?

Shona: This is the first time that I've painted multiple women. A lot of the women, including the painting of me and my mother, didn't actually pose together, so I've photoshopped them together. It originated with me trying to create a moment with my mother: she lives in France and I haven't seen her in almost two years now because of COVID. The painting created a very soft moment together, like puzzle pieces.

And then "Haven" means a safe space. Titles are a bit challenging for me, because I don't always like the weight words play on images, and I think an image should be able to live on its own.

There's also something a bit witchy about the word "haven". I think for my next show I want to think about witches. Not the witchcraft part, but about the women who were burnt because they were loud and confident.



RD: Has the experience of visiting an exhibition ever influenced your artwork?

Shona: The shows of Jordan Casteel. She and I have parallel practices, I think. She's the much more evolved, considered version of what I'm doing.

Casteel has such an unbelievable relationship with her models. She takes pictures with the models in front of her paintings and you can see how excited they are to be standing before this enormous version of themselves in fancy galleries and museums. I've tried to emulate a lot of her energy. Plus, if you have the luck to talk to her, she's just the nicest human being ever created. I want my practice to have a similar warmth to hers.

RD: How do you connect with the models you paint? There's such a sense of intimacy in your portraits.

Shona: A couple of the paintings in "Haven" are people who've just reached out to me and said, "I would love to be painted one day". Then the rest are friends of mine, or people who follow me [on Instagram] and who stand out as being very confident. I like people who don't strive to be like everyone else.

When I was growing up in Paris, I was around very, very pretty girls. I went to a very fancy school, and a lot of my high school friends are literally international models, so I've existed for a long time around women who really wanted to look exactly how we were told to look. I never really understood why they cared, because "pretty" really only means three things: you have great DNA, a lot of time to spend, or a lot of money to spend on your appearance. But it doesn't say that much about *who* you are as a person. I enjoy painting people who don't seem like their goal in life is to be exactly what a woman is "supposed" to be.

"I have calluses from how hard I've been painting"

RD: Are there any body parts that you find particularly enjoyable to paint?

Shona: I prefer painting plus size women. I painted a few more skinny women for the last show, but typically I find that a bit more boring—there's less flesh, there's less curves, light hits bodies a bit more plainly. I love a nice belly.

RD: Do you feel that being a woman artist means that you've had a different experience in the industry to your male counterparts?

Shona: I think any other time I would have said yes in a negative way. I think right now, though, it's a harder time in some ways to be a man—though of course [she laughs], they're still being purchased by museums the most and they're not doing badly. But it's a hard time for them to speak about who they are, because for so long they've created this world where men are the norm, that now it's a question of, *What do you have to say about the man?*

It's also a good time to be a plus size woman. For a couple years, I had no shows, but I had about an article a month written about my practice. And a lot of it was like: *She's fat and confident. How does she do it?* or *She makes art about fat woman wanting to have sex*, which is not even true. People just wrote stuff like that about my work without asking me. So I think there's an aspect of, *Wow, you're a fat lady. That's so cool.*

I think right now it's a good time to be unique and proud of it.

RD: Anytime women's bodies are portrayed in a way that deviates from the media ideal, there seems to be a temptation to frame it as “fetish”, but your work is intimate and vulnerable while remaining completely devoid of voyeurism or sexualisation.

Shona: To use my Instagram as an example, if I have breasts in my painting, it will get almost twice as many likes. I think we all just love nudity. I grew up with nudist parents. We lived on one of the islands in Paris and the sand would be covered with topless women over the summer. Nudity is normal to me, but boy do my followers adore nudity.

“If I have breasts in my painting, it will get almost twice as many likes”

RD: It's a very new phenomenon for artists to witness such direct reactions to their work through social media platforms. Does consideration of the way a painting may perform on Instagram ever affect your work?

Shona: I definitely don't want social media to influence my work. The only thing is that it makes me worry about the women I paint. I don't want them to think that a painting of them [not getting as many likes] has anything to do with who they are.

When my models are sending me 10 pictures of themselves, and some of them have never met me in person, there's a lot of trust going on and I take that very seriously.



RD: What are you working on at the moment?

Shona: Next up is my third solo show of the year.

RD: We're only in March!

Shona: I know! I don't know if you can see but [she raises her hand to the camera] I have this little callus from how hard I've been painting.

I have a sculpture show in two months at this place called Art OMI in New York. They have an incredible interior space. A lot of female artist heroes of mine have shown there recently, so it's an unbelievable lineage to follow.

I'm making a full installation with three women—it's going to be like the three graces. I have a lamp in my bedroom of the three graces that I've had for many years now, and I love them very much. It's from the 1940s—I bought it on Etsy I was 25 and it moves everywhere with me. I'm making [a sculpture installation depicting] three women at home. I've been thinking about the last time I was really, truly involved with my girlfriends. These days we call each other and see each other, but [I'm focused on] when they were critical to my life, when they were the first people I texted when I woke up, back when I was single and in my early 20s.

I miss the days of planning everything around my girlfriends. That time was so important, but I didn't realise it then, I didn't understand that it was not always going to be that way. For this show I've asked myself: *If I was living with my best friends still, what would that look like?* It's going to be our living room, with a coffee table full of snacks and a bookshelf with 100 books on it.

RD: That sounds amazing. It comes back to what I said before, about the way your paintings depict women's private worlds—time spent living with my girlfriends is the only time other people have been in that bubble with me.

Shona: Me too. Absolutely. It's crazy how it becomes a family.

Have you seen that movie *Twins* from the nineties? Arnold Schwarzenegger and Danny DeVito play twins. [She laughs], I watched it a lot as a child for this one scene that shows their mother living in a commune of artists. I remember being so young and thinking, *Oh, that looks incredible*. There was a field just full of women painting and being friends. Little did I know that's not actually what adults do. But I've always wanted to recreate that...


Arts

Plus-size sculptures celebrate marginalized bodies and challenge taboos

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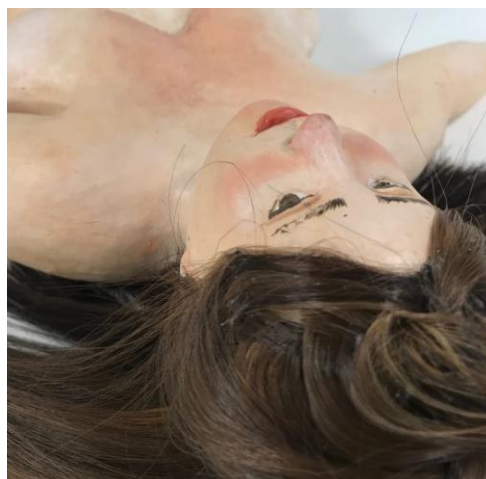


Written by
Marlen Komar, CNN

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With her life-sized paper papier-mâché sculptures, Philadelphia-based artist [Shona McAndrew](#) is presenting plus-size women in a way the mainstream rarely does: as sexual beings at ease in their bodies.

There's seated "Norah" (2016), her hand gripping the band of her underwear; "Elizabeth" (2018), soaking in a bathtub with her eyes closed; and "Stu and Me (Netflix and Chill)" (2018), an a couple watching TV in bed while engaging in another more intimate activity. Each conveys a comfort in one's body, flouting common portrayals of large bodies as self-conscious and inhibited.



McAndrew likens these depictions of plus-size bodies as "before pictures," miserable, unattractive versions of their future, skinnier selves.

"Plus-size bodies are never shown in the present, they're always about to shift, and I was very intrigued in taking that over and making bodies that only exist in the moment," she said in a phone interview.



"So yes, my women are plus-size, and yes, my women have hairy legs or hairy vaginas, but it's about her experience as a body, and about her in the moment that she's in."

McAndrew, who identifies as plus-size, chose to focus on larger women because she's most familiar with larger body types. But she also believes it is important to celebrate unrepresented bodies and challenge the taboos that surround them.

"A lot of plus-size women really respond to my sculptures. They talk about how they feel beautiful seeing a body like this represented in such a way that they don't experience or ever see," McAndrew said.



But it's not just curvy women who relate to McAndrew's work. The sculptures' intimate actions and poses, capturing private and sensual moments without hypersexualizing the naked body, seem to resonate across demographics.

At least that's how it's played out on social media. On Instagram, for example, McAndrew's "Norah," the woman lazily twirling her public hair has been shared by men and women of all sizes, accompanied by captions and comments like "me when I get home" or "#mood."



"A lot of people will forget my sculptures are plus-size for a moment. They just see a woman in action," McAndrew said.

While McAndrew cedes that, in a perfect world, external validation wouldn't be necessary for women to love their bodies ("Wouldn't it just be great if you just had you to tell yourself that you're beautiful?") she does hope that, after seeing her work, women will give themselves permission to feel beautiful and comfortable in their bodies as they are.



"When I see breasts as floppy or large as hers, it really makes mine feel beautiful," McAndrew said about the bathing "Elizabeth."

"And I really think that's what happens (when women see my sculptures): You see a representation of yourself and it allows you to let out the breath you have been holding."

Top image: Detail of "Stu and Me (Netflix and Chill)" (2018) by Shona McAndrew