



**M**olly Garnier has been painting the female nude exclusively for several years now. Her work concentrates on the grace and structure of the female form, exploring the play of light and shadow on skin. In November last year she scooped up the award of Best Young Artist at the Lynn Painter-Stainer Prize, a new open competition that promotes the best in contemporary representational painting in Britain.

Molly's triumph at the Lynn Painter-Stainer Prize was a godsend, as it would be for any young artist struggling to make a name for herself. The £2,500 cash prize didn't go amiss, either. However, the most important thing she came away with was a reinvigorated confidence in her abilities as a figurative artist.

"I absolutely love figurative painting," she says. "But at college they push you to do other things and try to get you to not paint the human figure. A lot of people frown upon it; they see it as too old-fashioned."

Unusually, figurative painting was something Molly only arrived at while studying art and design at Edinburgh College of Art. "I never used to paint from life," she says. "I found the figure quite difficult, especially faces. I still do in some respects."

As a child growing up in Dorset, Molly preferred to scribble and sketch out her imaginary fantasies; the objective world didn't offer much appeal. Her fascination with the female nude only began when she discovered in her art college library some 19<sup>th</sup> century sepia photographs of nude women by Edouard (later Edward) Steichen. In particular, she was attracted to their size and the subtleties of light, qualities that she began to immediately import into her own work. Her pictures slowly developed towards postcard-sized female nudes half-glimpsed through darkness, a

motif that has now become her signature style.

Molly says the sepia photographs should be treated as a point of departure, not a deliberately embedded reference the viewer is expected to pick up on. She is keen to point out that the identity of the sitter is immaterial. "Identity causes people to look at pictures in a very specific way. I'm more interested in the layers and colours that come through, the shape of shadows and the contrast of light – it's almost like a narrative."

While photography is an integral part of her creative process, it is used in an intuitive way. Molly rarely makes preparatory sketches, and will often paint straight from memory. She is more concerned with the impression a picture or photograph gives than portraying precisely studied realism.

"I just look and assimilate, really. I work in a small room – on a desk, as opposed to an easel – and work mainly from my head."

As a consequence, Molly's pictures tend to follow their own internal logic. Light and colour are used abstractly, put together according to decorative effect. If the body started to intrude too aggressively, the decorative effect would be lost. This is why most of her figures are nameless, faceless surfeits of flesh – they must act as a stage for light and colour, not an obstacle.

"I never wanted my work to be about the model. I wanted it to be about formal structure and formal effects"

Creating a static image of nakedness has never interested Molly. Her bodies confront us not as an immediate sight, but as experience. "When I paint I try to capture what it feels like to be in a body. It's more about feeling than the body itself." Her work is almost always in series, a sequence of panels capturing one frozen moment after another, like frames in a

ciné film. The body is shown as part of temporal process, rather than an isolated state.

Molly describes a lot of her work as "dance". Her figures always seem to be turning, caught in mid-movement. We never imagine any of her figures to remain as they are for more than a second.

"I do a lot of yoga, and I love going to watch contemporary dance. I like the movement of the body."

Molly's pictures are characteristically articulated by a distinctive rhythm that flows in-between the frames. Each individual picture in a series refers to its adjacent neighbour. The composite effect is a dynamic chronology of movement.

However, we should beware of literal interpretations. Molly doesn't want her pictures to be tied down to a specific meaning or action. She revels in ambiguity and admits to playing games with the viewer. Molly never offers any clues as to where her figures are, who they are or even when they are placed. She shares an interest in uncertainty very closely with Alberto Giacometti (1901-1966) and Francis Bacon (1909-1992), two of her artistic influences.

"I never really know in my head where the room begins and ends. Sometimes I'm not sure whether I'm painting the body or a shadow of a body. I really like that."

Typically, Molly will take a wood panel, sand it down, prime it, sand it again, prime it again, and repeat this process until the wood looks prematurely aged, almost antique. She will then take a dry brush and apply the paint very thinly and scratch it into the grain of the wood – a process she compares to etching. All her pictures are made with dry brushes. "I clean them with linseed oil, but I make sure that they are dried clean before I start to mix and apply my paint." The painting is finished off



Page 7:  
**Being**,  
oil on board, 10x15cm  
Page 8:  
**Foot Following Foot**,  
oil on board, 10x15cm each

Right:  
**Turquoise Stud**  
oil on board, 15x20cm  
Below:  
**Lahare Paul**,  
oil on board, 91x91cm

with pale washes of oil that help to blend the individual tones together. The resulting effect is something that looks like it comes from a bygone age.

“Do you remember those pirate maps you used to make as a kid, when you’d draw an island and then dip it in tea to make it look old? That’s what I’m looking for.”

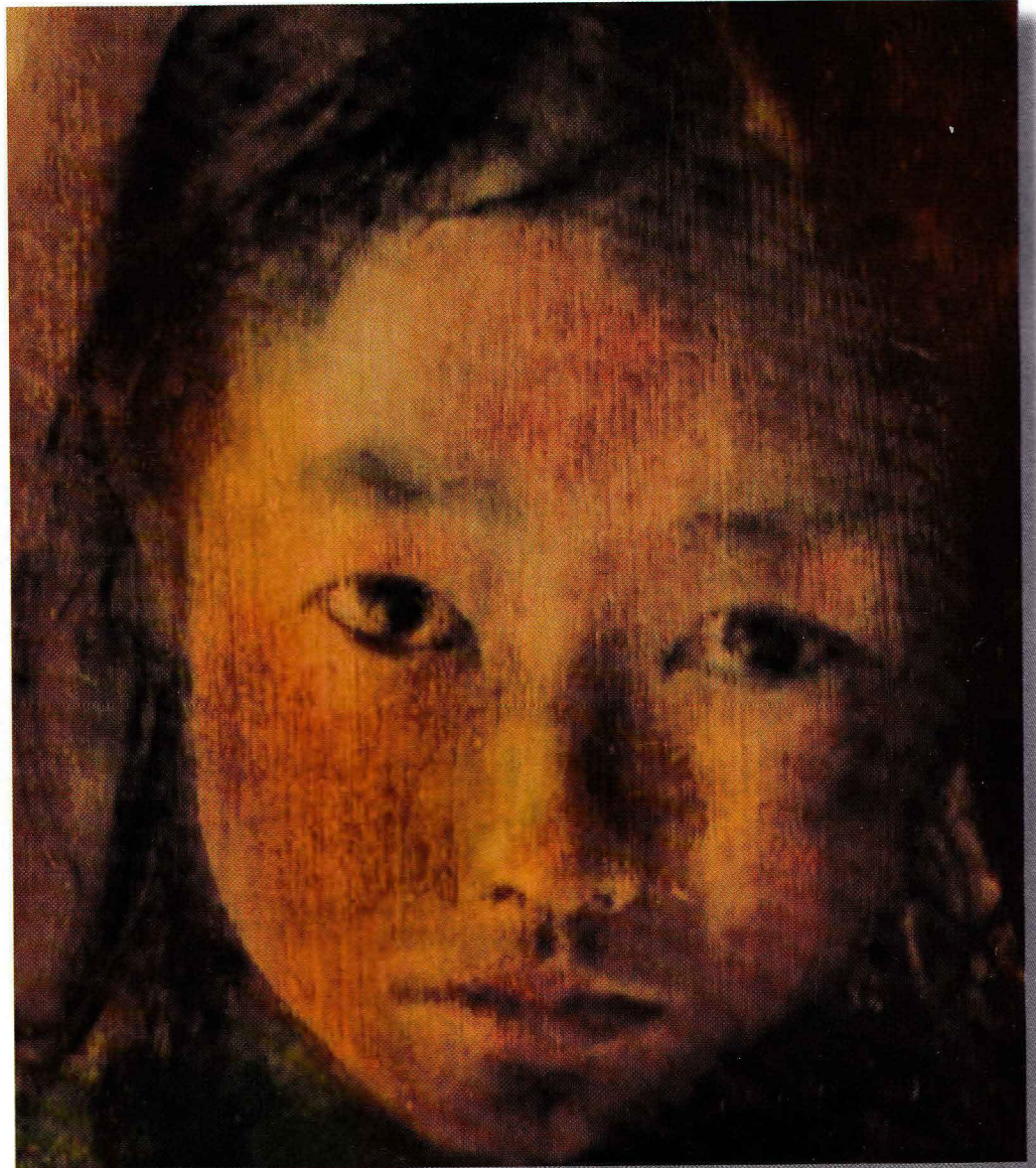
There is another, more pragmatic reason why a lot of Molly’s nudes are so indistinct. More recently, she has taken to modelling for her own pictures, largely because she cannot afford to pay for models. “I don’t want people to look at my pictures and think about me. I suppose that’s why a lot of the more recent ones are so vague and vulnerable. I’m slightly insecure about my body and I’m probably trying to protect my modesty.”

Molly’s work tends to provoke a wide range of reactions. Some take her nudes to be voyeuristic and sexy explorations of the female form; others are slightly more reproachful. Some of her nudes seem restless and cooped-up. Her work appeals to so many precisely because it is not devoted to arousal: sympathy and intrigue play major parts, as well.

How would she describe her work? “Awkward is probably the best word for what I do. I wouldn’t say erotic. Honest, maybe.

“One tutor suggested that I should visit a strip joint because my pictures reminded him of a similar kind of smoky seediness.”

More recently, Molly’s work has become much larger and more expressive. She is currently working on a couple of lifesized nude portraits, and has just finished a series of



**“One tutor suggested that I should visit a strip joint because my pictures reminded him of a similar kind of smoky seediness”**

semi-abstract landscapes made during her travels around Nepal and India.

Why the sudden departure in style? “I would like to be more expressive. I’ve always had this desire to use big brushes and full colour on a massive scale. Travelling around Nepal was such a new experience for me. The environment around there is so different, especially the quality of light and colour. Ideally, I’d like to be able to find some way to tie in my Oriental work with my female nudes. That’s my goal at the moment.”

Has she ever considered painting the male nude? “I find the male body very difficult to paint, and not as graceful.

“But, then again, I’m still a very young artist

at the beginning of my career. Each time I paint I discover a new thing about it, so I’m always experimenting. In 10 years’ time I’ll probably be doing something radically different to what I am now. It might be male nudes, not female ones. It might not even be figurative. I don’t know. That’s what is so exciting about painting.”

#### Artist biography

Molly Garnier was born in 1981 in Salisbury, Dorset. She was trained at the Edinburgh College of Art, and graduated with a first-class degree. Her work has been widely exhibited in galleries throughout Britain, including the Leith Gallery in Edinburgh and the Northcote Gallery in London. In November 2006, she won Best Young Painter at the Lynn Painter-Stainer Prize. She currently lives and works in Edinburgh. See [www.mollygarnier.co.uk](http://www.mollygarnier.co.uk).

