AUTISTIC JOY

EMMA FRANKS AND VICTORIA GRAY IN CONVERSATION

Keywords

art, autism, sensory experiences, vulnerability, oversharing, Lilith, Asylum Women, artistic expression, neurodivergence, identity

Artist Bio

Emma Franks (b. 1972) is a visual artist and feminist, raised in Essex, now living and working in London. She is a multidisciplinary artist who creates paintings, costumes, performances and artist books, with themes of pregnancy, motherhood, the menopause, and illness. Her deeply personal practice combines lived experiences with strong imagery and personal symbols of power, as well as feminist icons, in rebelliously humorous works.

Emma studied Fine Art at Brighton University (1994), Art Psychotherapy at Hertfordshire University (1999) and Studio Painting at Turps Banana Art School (2023). Franks previously worked within state education and the National Health Service, in addition to being a practising artist.

Upcoming Exhibitions '*Gates of Horns:* Myths of *Resistance, Symbols of Defiance'*, curated by Hettie Judah, Carl Freedman Gallery, Margate February 23 until April 23rd. Recent exhibitions in London include Bow Arts Open Call, *curated by Lindsey Mendick*, *Safe House* Peckham *2024, Ripe Banana Leavers Show 2023*, Naissance *Re-Naissance* Unit Gallery London 2023, and Recreational Grounds VII (2023); *Love, Celebration and the Road Ahead*, TJ Boulting (2022); *Mood Times Ten*, Fitzrovia Gallery 2022; *Arundel Contemporary* 2018 *and The Stratford Gallery* 2018.

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Summary

In this conversation we discuss Emma's artistic journey, exploring the connections between her art, autism, and sensory experiences.

She reflects on how her painting practice serves as a form of self-regulation and sensory joy, while also addressing themes of vulnerability, oversharing, and the significance of tactile elements in her work.

The discussion delves into her Asylum Women series, the influence of Lilith as a symbol of rebellion, and her future artistic endeavours, highlighting the importance of mirroring and connection in her creative process.

Takeaways

- Art is deeply tied to sensory experiences and self-regulation
- Painting serves as a means of visual stimming for Emma
- Being alone in the studio empowers Emma and calms her nervous system
- Emma's art reflects her sensory joy and experiences
- The tactile nature of art is crucial for both creation and viewer engagement
- Vulnerability in art can lead to oversharing, which is both challenging and empowering
- The Asylum Women series reflects feelings of isolation and the struggle to fit in
- Lilith represents rebellion and the embrace of one's identity
- Art can serve as a form of mirroring, helping to connect with oneself

Conversation

Victoria Gray: Emma, we've been working together for quite a few months now, and we've been having lots of conversations, not just about your artwork but about your artwork in relation to your autism diagnosis and the chronic health issues that you live with.

And it's been a real privilege for me because I think we've had a lot of time to go really into the details of what it's like for you to be autistic, what it's like for you to make artwork.

When we started to work together, if we think back to the very beginning, we started to go through all the different sensory systems and thought about those in relation to autism and your experience of your senses.

You'd said, “being an artist is so tied in with my need for visual stimming and stimulation. My whole art experience is basically me stimming.” I can really relate to this. I make performances. for me, it is a kind of stimming experience.

I'm really curious to hear what that's like in terms of the painting process could you tell us a bit more about how painting for you is often a means of self-regulation and sensory regulation?

Emma Franks: Yeah, first of all, thank you for asking me to do this. We started working together not long after I got my diagnosis, so it really has been like one revelation after one revelation working with you and making all these connections. So, thanks a lot. Working with you is just always a pleasure. I'm going to answer your question, but it's going to be in quite a long roundabout way, so please bear with me!

I'm going to start off by talking about how much I love to be in my own head, and if I think about memories of when I look back at my childhood, for as long as I can remember really, I've just got so many memories of spending hours on my own and just being happy in my head. So, spending hours in the garden, just looking at the insects and plants and flowers.

EF: Or I'd be in my bedroom, moving things around, rearranging furniture, rearranging my shelves and looking at objects in my room. I'd have imaginary conversations with pretend friends, not real friends. I was terribly lonely, but I think I was practicing social ways of being with people.

And I grew up in Southend. So, in the summer, there'd be families, and we'd get together and hire loads of beach huts, but I've got so many memories of being on my own, just looking for tiny crabs when the tide goes out and shells. I am a bit of a dreamer, but I think what links all of those things is this need for me to be in my own head a lot. And I'm still like this as an adult. And I think it's because I just find it really calming.

I don't have to negotiate the outside world. I don't have to have conversations with people, which can often feel very difficult and jarring. So to now go back to the question of how this relates to painting and it being a self-regulatory behaviour, I just see my painting practice, which I've been doing for a very long time. I've been an artist since I was...

I sort of self-identified as an artist when I was 15. But I see it as an extension of all that playing and being in my own head. So, me being in the studio is no different to when I used to be in the garage in my garden. I must have been about seven. I used to collect leaves and mud and petals, and we'd have old tin cans, and I'd have it in a row and I'd kind of be like making potions.

And it was just this amazing sensory pleasure that I got, but I get that when I'm painting and I'm making work. It's like the colours and the light and the smells and the texture and just like pure delight. And I just feel like I'm essentially regulating my system. So, it's a similar feeling as well to when I walk into the woods, you just kind of get this instant calming.

And when I'm in my studio, I feel very empowered when I'm alone and I feel empowered when I'm alone in general. And my nervous system is at its most calm. And it's as soon as I'm out of my head that I start to feel disempowered. I feel like I have a very physical, uncomfortable feeling in my body. I become unsure of myself and just a general kind of low level of stress.

EF: And since my diagnosis, which was in May a year ago, we've been working together to help me see that my art making and what I've been doing really is sensory joy. And I see myself now as a sensory driven machine. And mostly when I'm in the world, I feel like that sensory driven machine is like turned on high and I must put all these strategies into place.

Like noise cancelling headphones, I will not leave the house without them, to kind of keep control of that regulatory system. So, I feel like when I open that front door, I'm like a meerkat or I'm like a little bunny rabbit that's come out of its burrow and I'm looking for predators. And the predators in my world are that fast motorbike, human unpredictable behaviour, building noises, anything that I can't control in my environment.

And I feel like there's a constant flow of like low grade adrenaline and cortisol. And if I'm trying to just explain to a neurotypical person, so a non-neurodivergent person, what that feels like viscerally in my body, I would think about the game 'Operation.' I don't know if you know that. When you're trying to get out the plastic organs, and for whatever reason, I can feel like this energy flow building up in me, this sort of tension, and it's like I must release it. And I'm now, because I've done so much work on being autistic and what that means, I now understand about visual stimming, I do see my painting practice as a version of visual stimming.

And I'll often, in my studio, I'll sit, and I just look at my work and get like kind of a bit of a kick out of it, you know, I can like feel myself get excitable. And I'm just looking at the colours and the textures, I use loads of different textures. And yeah, it's like I'm activating. I can feel that kind of pleasurable activation going on in my body.

And I do see it as an energy flow. I will also, because I do listen to music a lot when I'm making work. I can't listen to podcasts. It's too distracting in my head. I can't think. I almost need like a kind of non-thinking space in the studio to make decisions. But I can change the energy flow. So, if I'm like, if I want to sort of feel really energized and a bit then I'll put on something like The Slits. And then if I want to be calmer or introspective, I might put on Sinead O'Connor. So, I'm directing the energy flow as well. So yeah, to sort of sum up really, the experience of painting and me being in my studio and being in my own world where I'm in control of my environment and what stimulants are going to be in that environment is where I can experience a calm and regulated nervous system.

And you know, I'm 52. I've only just found out I'm autistic really in the scheme of things. And you know, I have manufactured a life where most of my time is on my own in my studio.

VG: Yeah. And thank God for that space. When we've been working together, it's like we've been able to look back at your life and how you've designed and organized your life. And it seems unintentional. But I think a lot of decisions that you've made have been made because you are autistic. Even if you didn't have the label, the diagnosis, you've always known because you've always you've always had that sense of perhaps being different. And you've also gone about your life in a way that perhaps doesn't look like how other people might want it to look. I know you've talked a little bit about not feeling like you fit in.

There are a few things that really struck me. I loved what you said about arrangement. So, I did the same, constantly moving things around in my bedroom, making little worlds, groups of objects, and I was really fascinated by the details of things. And I was thinking about that in relation to this notion of control. I think control is a funny word because people think that, and it's been said as well, that autistic people need to control the environment. And that has a kind of negative connotation.

But I think maybe it's more about arranging the environment so that it feels safer. So, there's something there about arrangement of objects in space, but also thinking about painting as a kind of way of rearranging your thoughts and your sensory system

EF: Back to when I was sort of filling the petals and things in the tins, you know, I felt like some sort of shaman. I mean, you know, even at that age. I sort of feel like that a bit when I'm painting. I feel so powerful. You know, I feel like I'm in my power and I'm a very unconfident person when you bring me outside of my studio. But in my studio, I've just got so much kind of like . . . I just get taken. I've just always felt like that. And I guess if you're an unconfident person, and if you're like, you know, a scared bunny when you're out in the world, you're going to want to be where you feel like empowered, right? I didn't, yeah.

VG: Yeah. And you also talked about the non-thinking space, which I also really connect to. I think because I work more with my body, I think there's something around the non-conscious or flow of movement or action, positions, things like that, where after a

certain point I can a little bit let go of the constant stream of thoughts, fears, internal monologue, that kind of thing, which is always pressing.

So, there's something about that space of making art which I think this has to do with the nervous system. It reduces the fear response because we're literally in the flow of something else.

EF: Yeah, it's just really calming. It's just sort of; I feel like there's this constant friction in my body. If I'm not in the studio, or if I'm not making art, or on my own, there's blocks. I feel like blockages, almost. And then when I'm in the studio, it's like, it's releasing those blockages. Yeah.

VG: Before we go on to the next question, there was just something that resonated with me. You mentioned about the potions and things that you made. And quite a few years ago now, I was making performances, and I was trialling different things that I could burn and things that I could set on fire, things that I could get smell out of by burning.

I had this little plate in the back of the house near the back door, which I called “the science plate.” And it had all these different experiments on it. And I remember my family coming and visiting and just looking at me like, what are you doing? And I said, “it's my science plate. I'm just experimenting.” You know, I'm in my thirties at the time and they look at me like . . . but it's play, isn't it?

EF: Yeah. The whole thing is play. And that's what I guess I was trying to say at the beginning. All I'm doing now is exactly what I was doing when I was little. You know, nothing's changed for me.

VG: So, let's stay with the sensory then, because I think we're getting into the flow, and we have kind of segued a little bit into the more tactile senses. And you've also said to me, “I want to make my work tangible and touchy. I want it to come alive. And it's not always enough that it's 2D.”

You’ve talked a little bit about how, with your paintings, there’s a need to sew into the paintings, and you said it's to do with the senses, to make the painting come off the surface and introduce different surfaces. For me, I always think about performance in that sense, because I'm not literally touching people, as in physically touching them, but there is something tactile in the space.

There’s definitely something in your work which I think has that liveness to it. And you said as well, which is really lovely, “when I see good art, I want to consume it.” And I know what you mean.

It makes sense. You make paintings, but also sculptures, banners, textiles. You also make performances, music, which I know is important to you, and costumes. Tell us something more about that then, about how your works are somewhat alive and how important that tactile element is for you, but also for people looking at the work, seeing the work.

EF: I feel this question relates again back to when I was a child and how I used to play. So, as I said, I had toys, but it was more like I treated them like objects. And I just used to get a huge amount of pleasure from looking at them.

And you said about the consuming. I wanted to consume them too. I absolutely loved Strawberry Shortcake Dolls. I don't know, I'm older than you, so I don't know if you know what they are? So strawberry shortcake, smells of strawberry, blueberry muffins, of blueberry. And I loved them, but it was the smell. And my God, I used to just sit there and just like . . . they were amazing.

And you know, I actually stole one!! I collected them all. I loved them so much. And I stole the grape one. And I can't believe I did it. And I scared myself so much that I, you know, I really freaked myself out. I don't know how old I was. I was in a toy shop in Southend High Street. But anyway, these like these objects were, I just got very attached to them and very alive.

And I still am attached to objects, and I've since learned that this is quite common for autistic people. I don't get as attached to them as I think a lot of autistic people do, but objects are important to me in my life. And if anyone moves things in the house, like an object that's important to me, I will get really angry. And I have to often control how pissed off I am. My husband actually broke my very lovely breakfast bowl. It's like the perfect size. And I'm very particular about the sizes of mugs and bowls and things. And I had to really control not shouting at him. But yeah, objects are very important to me.

EF: Now back to the studio. I can just become very calm. Again, it's this sort of sensory regulatory visceral thing. I feel a lot of things, very bodily. And, you know, when I'm looking at my studio and making things, I do get like a kind of blissful feeling and especially when I've completed things. And I'm often trying to reach that feeling when I'm looking at my work of like complete, like ... the only way I can try get people to relate to it is if you're looking at a beautiful landscape and you get that really like calm peacefulness feeling and just getting a buzz from the colours and just the light and you know, that's the kind of feeling that I'm reaching for.

Figure 1: Ancient Mother Goddess, oil, string, charcoal, fluff, fringing 120 x 100cms 2024

When I was at Turps Banana - Turps Banana is an alternative art school - I was there from 2021 to 2023 full time. It's a painting school and we used to have termly crits. So, you know, when we used to get together and look at a couple of pieces of work for each other and, you know, give sort of feedback. And somebody had put a piece of artwork on the wall, which kind of like was bordering on an object.

And this is something I've always been fascinated by, if I see art, I want to consume it. I've never understood that feeling. Anyway, I kind of got this feeling from this artwork that we had on the wall. And I started to talk about it, kind of looking around, seeing if anybody had the same feeling. This is pre-diagnosis. And everyone's looking at me like . . . I've always been so fascinated by objects. And I get this feeling like I want to eat them up. Everyone was looking me like I was completely bonkers, and I sort of quickly shut up because I realised that, I mean I have many of these moments, but I realised that okay no one can relate to this.

I think also I love to do things with my hands. I always have; I'm always fiddling. I don't know if it's stimming, I'm not sure, but when I was a little girl, and I still do this, I'll pick leaves from plants and I'm walking down the street and I fold them till they're nothing. And then there's this other plant, I don't know what it is. I think it's like a grass, but it's got these long seeds and I take this, pull the seeds off. Again, I've been doing that since I was a little girl.

I don't understand what this tactile thing is that I need. I just know that it's something I need to do. And I wish that I had a much more profound answer for you. But I just feel it's all connected to my sensory being. That's my only explanation.

VG: I think one of the things that I find really refreshing about talking to you Emma is, I mean, you say that you're not giving a profound answer, but the way that you're able to link this back to childhood and also the everyday, for me is very profound because often when we talk about art, we lean on theories or refer to other people's artworks. There's something almost shameful about bringing it back to the self or bringing it back to the way you described things like folding the leaves and the grass and the seeds. When I talk to artists, they're the things I want to know about, as well as the work. I think that this is the kind of insight that I'm looking for in these conversations and it's brave of you to say some of these things because I understand that sometimes you feel maybe this is going to sound weird if I say this or, you know, what will people think?

But this is really important because that's the impetus behind the work. I can relate to that a lot. I remember seeing a performance, probably about 10 years ago now, there's an artist in Northern Ireland called Dominic Thorpe, and he was doing a performance where he had his mouth open the whole time. So, he never closed his mouth. And it was a durational performance, and he was drawing, but using both arms and was against the wall. Something very simple, but actually really, really beautiful to watch, really

mesmerizing. And I remember having this feeling watching the performance where I said to my friend, “I just feel like I need to put my arms in the air. I'm so happy.” This feeling just filled me up I think I remember saying something like, “I am so glad that this exists. I'm so glad that I can see this person do this thing.” Which looks a bit weird but somehow connects to me on a really deep level.

So yeah, that feeling of being touched by something, I guess doesn't need to be literal, it doesn't need to be physical. It can be a kind of kinesthetic empathy where you feel really touched by something, but it's not that you've actually touched the painting or that someone has touched you, but there is a deep connection made,

EF: Yeah, and I'm really grateful that I am a person that can experience that as well.

VG: Absolutely. We've said this before, that there's challenges in terms of having such an alive, sensitive sensory system. But at the same time, we've said that we wouldn't swap that because we also have these blissful experiences.

EF: No, no, I wouldn't.

EF: So, you know, that's why I'm an artist. You know, I get to act, and I guess that's what I was trying to say about the music. I've learned to activate it, you know, when I'm in my studio or when I'm walking in the woods, you know, I can activate that blissful experience and I will purposely bring them into my life because, otherwise, I'm just left with all those jarring ones which are, you know, so draining to live with. And yeah, it's horrible walking around with this constant kind of high cortisol level. So yeah, it's all about just filling up with those blissful ones.

VG: On the level of health, you live with chronic illness and pain, and I do too. And I understand the relationship between cortisol and inflammation and pain. And so, there is something about regulating and pain management, which is to do with being in that space of the joy, being in the space of the positive sensory experiences.

EF: Absolutely. I've just got to say also swimming for me is really, really important. I went this morning because I knew I'd be bit stressed. So, I thought, yes, go Emma, to help just keep things calm.

VG: That makes a lot of sense, Emma, the swimming with you, because it is literally like an immersion, isn't it? I mean, you get inside of it.

EF: Yes. I just love it. Absolutely. It has to be like that for me, like I just want to have a full experience. And I think that's the thing about, you know, things coming off the painting as well, or the banners and the costumes. I want it to be like a full 360-degree experience. For me, like you mentioned about the viewer, I don't actually really think about the viewer. I'm just thinking about selfish pleasure!!

VG: So, we've talked a little bit about the sensory and you've said, and we've both said, that there's sometimes the sense that it can be very overwhelming, you know, the need to wear earplugs, the overwhelm outside. And you've, talked a little bit about this in relation to filtering the senses, but also emotions and this feeling of maybe oversharing sometimes. And I always think conversations like this, especially because they're recorded for the people to hear, it's a risk for me as well, because I am a chronic oversharer. Which is to say, I really like to get into the detail of things. I like to get into the kind of existential, I like to share personal details about my life because I think it makes for more rich conversation.

VG: So, you've said that you can't filter, that your filter is broken, and that the subject matter, the form and the impact of your work is perhaps a kind of oversharing. And you felt maybe a bit uncomfortable about that in the past. And still, yes, and still. And there's also a presence of anger in the work that fuels you for making.

And I've written this down because I want to say it verbatim. You said, "I can feel it in my body and my blood is bubbling away. There's tension building up inside of me and making the work releases something in me. It's like a paradox. I'm feeling angry and vulnerable at the same time."

EF: Did I really say that? I am profound!!

VG: Yes! That's exactly what you said!

Let's talk a little bit about oversharing and vulnerability and how that maybe makes you feel on the one hand, powerful and strong. I know that there's been times when I have done performances where I've been like, my God, this is massively oversharey. And then at the same time, I feel completely amazing because I am tapping into the edge of what I think is possible or polite or palatable. I like being on that edge.

That's where I like to be. I like to be in that space with art. I like to be in that space with people. It's part of me. So, tell me about what that's like for you.

EF: That's so interesting. So, let's see. The curious thing about being diagnosed at such a late stage in my career in life - I'm 52, I'll be 53 in July - is that so many of my autistic and ADHD traits have clearly been playing out in my work. And I'm now, with your help, able to join the dots. So, I've learned that being honest, literal, black and white thinking, being blunt, feeling things intensely and oversharing are typical characteristics of being neurodivergent. And these characteristics describe me very well, but they are also very clearly illustrated in my work.

For example, my works are incredibly honest. They tackle taboo subjects. I share very personal experiences about my life. They're blunt. But because of those things, I think some people find them very challenging because I don't mince my images in the same way that I don't mince my words. So, people will often describe my work as being brave, but I'm not trying to be brave. I'm just being me.

EF: And I don't really know any other way to be. It's not like I'm trying to purposely break taboos, but I just like what you just said about living on the edge, and that's just made me think about this bit about breaking taboos, because I think this might be me living on the edge as well, but I don't understand.

In my work, I've covered things like menstruation, a little bit of my chronic illness, and bodily fluids feature a lot. You know, there's menopause, there's vulnerability. And I don't understand why these subjects should be off limits. When most women, they will experience this in their everyday life. It just doesn't make any sense to me. And I think it's very exposing because from my life experience, I've understood, like from people's reactions, a bit like when I got no reaction in the crit and I was talking about the object, that I'm constantly breaking social taboos. And I'm constantly committing a social faux

pas because I'm getting these reactions. But to me it's not a big deal, but I can see other people's responses that it is a big deal.

I do like making people laugh and I do like stoking the fire, which I think is what you're saying about being on the edge. In my mind, all the things that I'm painting are about my own life. I don't paint anything that's made up. So I've painted, you know, a birthing body that's haemorrhaging. I haemorrhaged very, very badly with my second son and I was blue-lighted to hospital because it was a home birth. You know, I've had bodily fluids coming out of me. Any woman, even if you hadn't had a baby, you've had body fluid. But I do believe the vulnerability is not about me feeling like vulnerable in making the work. The vulnerability is about people's reactions to the work.

And I have thought about not making work like this. I've tried making work that isn't about this, that's sort of alluding to this. But first, I found I was very bored by that and very disinterested. And let's call them the solitary women, these women, when I did paint these, I felt like there was a pressure cooker building up inside of me. I had such a strong feeling in me all the time that, there was this work that needs to be made, which is the work that I've been making since. And so, I've done the alternative version of not kind of being honest and making work that is all about being angry and vulnerable at the same time. And I was utterly miserable. So, there's no choice to me. I must make this work.

EF: But since making this work, I do feel more empowered. I don't think it's just because I'm speaking my truth. I think it's also to do with the authenticity of the actual physical process of making it, the visceral and pleasurable experiences of making the work. That's why I also feel empowered.

I listened to a podcast last week, I think, on being autistic ADHD. And they were saying how important it is to lean into our vulnerability. And that's what unmasking is. And I suppose my work is me doing that. And by being honest about my experiences, which is what makes me feel vulnerable because of people's responses, I am also invariably empowering myself. It's like a bit of a double-edged sword, isn't it?

VG: It seems what you're saying is that the emotional regulation or the sense of oversharing is not relative to what you consider oversharing. It's what you've been conditioned to think is oversharing because of the responses of other people. And these

things, I think, happen way before we're adults. It happens from childhood. I remember one of the distinct memories where I noticed, “oh, this is different.” We were practicing for a Christmas play at school or something, and I got really excited about a song, I think. And I think I shouted, like yelped, completely non-linguistic, just a noise came out of my mouth, and I was told off in front of everybody. I was told to be quiet. It didn't make sense to make the noise, but I think it was a kind of stimming. It was some sort of expression, and it was horrifying. If I think about it now, I’d say that's the first time in my life that I think I felt shamed and embarrassed. I would have been very young.

EF: And there’s something about that look, isn't it, that people give you?

VG: And that carries through very, very subtly. It's kind of an insidious thing whereby you then start to mask. And I think this is the really complex thing about masking. We don't even know we're doing it when we're doing it.

EF: Absolutely, especially when you get like late diagnosed, you know, diagnosed at such an old age, it's God, it's a minefield really. You don't know where you are. And yeah, it's untangling it all.

VG: How do you stop doing something that you didn't know you were doing, or you don't know how you're doing it? It's something quite ingrained.

For years, I've had a dialogue with an artist, again, a performance artist in Northern Ireland called Alistair McLennan. Alistair's been a really good mentor for me in terms of the work that I've been making, as I would fret a lot about audiences - what they would think - especially because I was a woman using my body and there would be very different responses to that in different countries. Different audiences would think different things. And I was wanting to gradually start using my body more explicitly, as in, you know, not wearing clothing, because I see the body as a kind of sculptural thing. And I felt really frustrated that I couldn't use that capacity just because somebody would sexualize my body. And Alistair said to me, it was great, he said, “don't censor yourself because you're afraid of other people's embarrassment.”

VG: So, it might be that other people feel challenged, embarrassed, confronted themselves watching you. So, it's less about you, it's more about them, I guess. And I really think about that now. I think, okay, am I censoring myself because I am protecting other people? Am I avoiding the uncomfortable response that makes me feel I'm being difficult? When I'm at the point of asking that question, I know I'm in the right place, because I think that's where we should be as well.

EF: I just think it makes more interesting work. I mean, it's, you know, it's a bit like small talk, isn't it? You know, you don't want to make small talk paintings and work, do you?

VG: Which we're not good at!! No, no. I wonder what that would look like?! Actually, when we were talking about masking, you did bring up some of the paintings that you made, the 'Asylum Women' works, I think it's 2018 - 2019. I want to just flag those a little bit because I think it's really interesting to move across there.

VG: So, tell us about these asylum women then, and what was the thing that drew you to them in the first place? Because I have to say, they are really beautiful paintings. I'd love to have one.

EF: Sure. They're in my lounge. I do like living with them. Before I painted the asylum women, I used to paint imaginary women. I've referred to them as solitary women before. Maybe we could call them "masked women" as well. I just need to talk about them first before I put the asylum women into context.

For a few years I painted solitary imaginary women, and I was successfully selling them in the domestic market. I was painting them from my studio at home at a time in my life when I was raising a young family. I was living with an undiagnosed chronic health condition and undiagnosed autism and ADHD. I was very lonely. I was very isolated. I was struggling psychologically with being a mother. I was in a lot of pain but not knowing why.

And I was just generally feeling lost and never fitting in and always desperately trying to fit in. But now I can see that this period was me masking at my worst. So back to the paintings, the women started appearing when I had my first child in 2001. And they started off being painted in idyllic surroundings; lots of flowers, like meadows kind of

thing. And there would be a couple with their small child. And it didn't take long for the couple, for the man and the child, to disappear.

Figure 2: Let the Light Shine In, 2019

And then the solitary woman in the landscape just got bigger and bigger, till eventually she just took up nearly the whole canvas. And I'd still have some flowers or foliage around her. But I now recognize that they were self-portraits, but I wasn't painting from a mirror or a photograph, but they were me. I wouldn't have been able to know at the time that they were me. And people, because I was selling them and because it was the domestic market, I would have conversations with people, the public, a lot. And they'd often comment on them looking sad and melancholy.

And I used to get really defensive about that. At this time, I didn't understand why I was so defensive. It just felt like they had laser vision right through, that they could see inside me. It was really weird.

EF: And then it sort of dawned on me with time that, “shit, these are self-portraits!” But the women were always alone. Their eyes were often looking away. And it seemed that they had like a kind of veil around them. And they looked very lost in their own world. So, there was like definitely this, like as a viewer, you couldn't connect with them. They weren't connecting with you. They were very beautiful, like visually. And they were painstakingly painted by me.

Figure 3: Melancholy, 2019

EF: And the ADHD part of me found that physically agonising. It was so stressful. It's like I was holding my breath the whole time when I was painting. And because I do have ADHD, I'm very clumsy. So, it was the way that I was painting. Any mistake showed up. But because I'm so clumsy, I kept on making mistakes. It was torture. But the main frustration I had with them was that I couldn't talk honestly about them, even though I knew what they were thinking and feeling, because it would have been like me unmasking and talking about my most vulnerable self, which I now know that I was trying to hide. So, I was desperately trying to paint women, but hiding that they were me, but it being clear that they were women that couldn't fit in.

So, I was trying to find a way into that, and I was reading at the time a book by Phyllis Chesler, which is called 'Women and Madness.' And then another book by Elaine Showalter, which is 'The Female Malady.' And both of these books are about society's mistreatment of women, women that had been outcast, shut away because they refused to fit into society's expectations of how women ought to behave. I relate to Showalter's book. It discusses photographs by Dr Diamond, who was an amateur photographer and worked at the Sussex Asylum. And he had all these women as patients. And he had set up this studio, so, photography was very new at this time, and he had one of those massive, you know, the massive cameras.

There was like a kind of greenhouse, and he set up a studio there. He'd give the women props and he took photographs. And I found out that these photographs are allocated at Bedlam Hospital in deep South London. And I went and you could go into this little room next to the office of the people that have the archive. And they give you these white cotton gloves. And I sat and I was able to draw from these photographs. They're in like this big leather-bound book.

And then from those drawings back in my studio, I created five of the asylum women. So yeah, that's the sort of little intro to the asylum women. And yes, they're in my lounge.

VG: And you live with them. What's it like living with them?

EF: I love it. I really love it. It's funny actually because my husband loves living with them. My daughter, they really creep her out. What's also funny is that my middle son, he's a sound engineer, he's created this project called 'From the Front Room' and he records live music. So, musicians come to our house, and they record live music a bit

like, Tiny Desk. Often, they record it and you can see my paintings behind these musicians. It's pretty, it's cool, yeah.

VG: That's so fascinating. They're like witnesses somehow. They are big paintings. When you were contextualizing them and you talked about the paintings prior, painting the idyllic surroundings, there was something that you said, and I want to touch on it. I think it's sensitive, but...

You said that there was a couple and a child and then gradually the man and then the child disappeared. Something that I experience as an autistic person is this need to be alone and in my own head. It can be quite difficult sometimes to be around other people, and that actually includes my own family, people I actually love.

My special interests, my artwork, my imagination are places where I can retreat. And I wonder if there's some kind of solidarity for you with those women around you, some kind of witnessing, you know? We talk about wanting to be alone, but I don't really think that we're ever really alone, in the sense that there is nothing that we're in conversation with.

So, for example, I work from home. I don't really socialize a lot, I do selectively, but I never really feel alone because I have relationships with all the things around me; the objects, the paintings, the books, the plants, the way the light falls in the room. I have a conversation, a dialogue with all those things. And people say, “aren't you lonely?” and I think, no. There's an abundant amount of connection here that I have. My family, if you like, includes lots of things that are not human, that aren't people, that aren't conventional forms of love or expressing that.

I really like this idea that you're in the company of those women, they're on your wall, yes, they're paintings, but they also have a deep connection to you and maybe there's something there that means you're not really alone?

EF: Yeah. I feel like I'm constantly engaged with things, which I think is what you're saying. You know, there is a constant, not like verbal dialogue going on, because I do think of myself experiencing the world viscerally, you know, very much through my body activation and the nervous system.

I’m constantly looking at things and getting a kick, which is why I can't live in a cluttered house or any sort of visual mess. My studio is quite cluttered for some reason, but my home needs to be very ordered and there must be things on the walls and on the shelves that I get a kick out of looking at. And so yes, I get a lot of pleasure and pride when I look at these paintings.

Like I said, I'm a very unconfident person, but not when it comes to art. And so, there is something about me sitting in the lounge and I find them very grounding. They remind myself of who I am. Like I get a kick out of the fact that I made them. And I love looking. I still love looking at the way I painted them. I don't paint like this anymore. I used to paint. So, I would paint in translucent layers, and I'd build up the layers and they are very beautifully painted, very sensitively painted. And I still, what is it, six years? I don't know, my maths is terrible, but I still get a kick out of the way that they look.

VG: I think something that we maybe miss as well as autistic people is the kind of mirroring that would be helpful for us in terms of connection to self and self-development. So, we know in child development and child psychology, that there needs to be some kind of mirroring happening for the child to develop. And I think being seen, being heard, being witnessed helps us to do develop the connection to self that I think, sometimes, is broken and lost, or we can't connect to it.

EF: Yes, yes, I often forget who I am, what I've done. And when I'm in the studio - I mean, I've just thought this while you're talking - I am definitely mirroring back myself.

VG: We’ve talked about this in our sessions, it's finding that connection to self when so much of our life has been about mimicking the external world in order to survive. So yeah, having those paintings, and making the work, is a way of mirroring and these kinds of conversations, I think as well, hearing somebody else say something which is very close to your experience is kind of remarkable.

EF: Absolutely. Before I got diagnosed, I'd listened to all the Square Peg[1] podcast, which I think you've listened to. All of a sudden, I'm hearing all these stories. I mean, I've read every women's autobiography on being autistic. And for the first time I'm having myself mirrored back at me because in the world that's just not happened. I just get those

[1] https://squarepeg.community/podcast/

funny stares that we talked about before. It's like, mm-hmm. So yes, the art making is definitely a mirroring back.

VG: Let's move on to the last question, or exploration. It's almost funny, Emma, because you've said about the world not mirroring, but this next exhibition that you have, I would say, is like the ultimate form of mirroring back!!

You have a forthcoming exhibition, a group show called 'Gate of Horns' at Carl Freedman in Margate, and it's curated by Hetty Judah.[2] So, it's fantastic. It's a group show, and the focus of the show, I think, could not be more perfect for you and for your work. So, mythic figures, ritual objects and female defiance.

EF: And unruly bodies!

VG: Yes, unruly bodies. I want you to tell us a little bit about the work that is going to be featured in the exhibition, because this is clearly a brilliant moment for you in your career as an artist.

I think there's a brilliant sense of mirroring and reflection going on in the curation. So, just to go back to the 'Asylum Women', the work that you'll be showing in the 'Gate of Horns' exhibition is almost like an exploration of what was going on inside of those women's heads, as well as other subjects, and you'll tell us about Lilith, I hope.

So, let's just explore this exhibition a little bit.

EF: Yeah, you mentioned good old Lilith. The exhibition is called the 'Gate of Horns', and there are five artists who are alive and two that are no longer with us.[3] Those two are Alexis Hunter and Marybeth Edelson, which is what the exhibition is sort of alludes to, an exhibition she did.

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[2] https://www.hettiejudah.co.uk/

[3] Artists featured in Gate of Horns include, Ingrid Berthon-Moine, Isis Dove-Edwin, Emma Franks, Alexis Hunter, Tamsin Morse, Helen Sargeant and a tribute to Mary Bet Edelson.

But yeah, I've got the back gallery to myself, and it's called ‘The Temple of Lilith.’ So, I'm just going to talk a little bit about what led me to Lilith, is that okay?

EF: So, back when I was at Terps Banana[4] - so, I’d finished my ‘Asylum Women’ - I was getting very frustrated with the way I make work and I felt like I needed to sort of unmask, right? So, the work I'm making from then on is work that's the internal of what the ‘Asylum Women,’ and what the solitary women were thinking.

When I was at Terps Banana, I was doing a lot of experimenting and really enjoying myself. And I basically created this motto after the ‘Asylum Women’ because I described that horrible feeling I felt when I painted. The motto was that if I wasn't enjoying myself when I painted, I needed to change what I was doing to just do something that I was enjoying. I had to amuse myself, which is why I think sometimes the things I make are quite funny, because I'm just basically trying to make myself laugh! I think being an artist is bloody hard work, and I don't really get any money. And I think, well, at least I should be enjoying myself.

So anyway, that was my motto. But the other thing I was doing was exploring my identity as a Jewish woman. And I was looking for Jewish role models. I found those Jewish role models within the amazing canon of Jewish women feminist artists. And at the same time, someone suggested to me that I read a book called by an American author called Lisa E. Bloom, which was Jewish identities in American art.[5] And whilst reading this, I had a bit of an epiphany moment, which I'm going to say a little bit more about in a minute.

EF: But first I want to say that, at the same time, there was an exhibition, Feminine Power at the British Museum.[6] And in this exhibition, there was this small incantation bowl that was made around 500 AD, discovered in what would now be Iraq.[7] And inside this, at the centre of the bowl was this depiction of Lilith.

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[4] https://www.turpsbanana.com/
[5] https://www.lisaebloom.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Eleanor-Antin-book.pdf
[6] https://www.britishmuseum.org/exhibitions/feminine-power-divine-demonic
[7] Please note that at 47:34 in the audio, the reference to the incantation bowl, viewed at The British Museum, is stated as Iran, but the correct place of provenance is Iraq. This error has been corrected in the transcript for clarity.

For those that don't know, Lilith was believed to be Adam's first wife. She's very briefly mentioned in Isaiah, and she's notorious for refusing to lie under Adam during sexual intercourse.

And then she was proceeded to be banished from Eden by God. And God said, “well, you can come back.” And she said, “I don't want to.” And he said, “well, if you don't, I'm then going to kill a hundred babies.” And she chose for those hundred babies to be killed.

Figure 4: Incantation bowl with Lilith inscription in centre, photograph courtesy of Emma Franks

She grew wings and she ended up living in a cave. She chose to live in a cave, on her own, rather than living with Adam and be subservient.

So, you know, go Lilith, yeah!! I mean, I loved this little scratchy thing of Lilith I saw in this bowl. If you Google Lilith, you're gonna get these sort of like, you know, New Agey drawings of women with long flowing hair. I just don't relate to that kind of imagery.

I loved it so much I actually got it tattooed on my arm for my 50th birthday. Lilith became for me the perfect protagonist in my work. She was an outsider. She was a feminist. She knew her own mind. She was happy in her own head. I mean, to choose to live in a cave, you've got to be happy in your own head, right?

She was rebellious and to me she was cheeky. And in the 1970s, the feminist movement, who were very interesting, a lot of them were Jewish, they took on Lilith as a kind of icon. Lilith became this sort of feminist icon and then there was a magazine that was named after her.

And so back to reading that book, when I was reading it and I had that epiphany moment, the epiphany moment was this brainwave, that, because I'd been running away from making work about being Jewish, I wanted to make work about being Jewish. I didn't know how to, but the epiphany moment was I should be embracing my background.

I grew up going to synagogue a lot. Being in the Jewish community in Southend was a massive part of my upbringing. I've got two very religious older brothers. I wasn't brought up religious, I was brought up very traditional. But being Jewish was something I was running away from. And I thought, no, let's use this kind of upbringing that I had. And so, I had this idea to create the first feminist religion called ‘The 13th Tribe,’ because there were 12 tribes, and the 13th was going to be called ‘The 13th Tribe.’ And our founding mother was Lilith.

Figure 5: Lilith's Birth, ink, acrylic and oil on canvas 120x 100cms 2023

So, I created a performance - well, it was an initiation service really - where the congregants would come, and they were going to be ordained into ‘The 13th Tribe.’ I played the role of High Priestess. I had an assistant - sort of like a high priestess assistant, and I created a book which was called ‘The Teachings of Lilith.’

It's this big sort of canvas, well it's made from calico and is a hand-painted book which has got, for example, “How to Pleasure Yourself in Four Easy Steps.” And it includes, “Release Your Inner Roar,” “Go Naked Swimming,” “Have an Ecstatic Dance,” and that kind of thing. And the whole ceremony was full of subversive experiences based on my own experiences of being in a synagogue. A lot of those props will be at the ‘Gate of Horns’ exhibition in Carl Freedman.

Figure 6: Lilith Doll 2024 dolls fabric, fluff, wool, wig hair, ink, 87 x 52 cm

So, it's been a year since I received my diagnosis, almost a year, and there's been a lot to unpack and process. But I don't think it's a coincidence that making the Lilith work is in parallel to me unmasking, right? And when I made that '13th Tribe' performance, I still didn't know I was autistic. I hadn't even done that deep dive.

And all the work that I'd made in that period, for example, I wrote and performed a Menopause punk song, I just was making such visceral work about, as I said, the menopause, about pregnancy, about chronic illness, all these things. I still didn't know I was autistic. And now I wonder whether Lilith could have been neurodivergent. She chose to live on her own, in a cave. She was a free spirited, a strong believer in equality. But yeah, she was the perfect protagonist for me, and she still is. I still love her.

But I just want to just bring in anger, just to round this up really. I wasn't brought up to learn about Lilith. I only learned about Eve. And this makes me think about the recent rise in women being diagnosed late as Autistic and ADHD. So, there's been an absolute overlooking of us, right, in research. We've been left out of the story. Women have been left out of stories. So, it's no coincidence that in all aspects of my life, I'm only learning about myself late in my career. So, I've been left out of the story.

EF: It took them eight years for me to be diagnosed with my chronic illness, even though my dad suffered from the same illness, but they thought that it was only mostly men that suffered from it. I didn't learn about one woman artist when I was at art school, which was in 1991, let alone the canon of Jewish women artists that there are, and there are some amazing Jewish women artists. I have been left out of the Autism and ADHD research. So yes, I am angry, and I think there is a lot for women like me to be angry about, let alone all the other stuff for women to be angry about. But I'm using that energy and that anger to make work that places me right back into the story.

VG: That's really beautiful, Emma. And not to get too cinematic about it, but I guess there's something quite poetic about a year on from your diagnosis, having this exhibition, and attending the exhibition with all of that knowledge that you have of yourself now, and with a sense of conviction, I think, about wanting to have yourself in the story. And I guess a sense of hope about what your future might look like, how it might be different. And, to think about what next for your artwork.

Do you have a sense of what next? I know you've been making new work, and you sent me some really beautiful tiny paintings. I'm always obviously going on and on about performance and the music stuff!! So, yeah, let's just finish the conversation with that, a sense of what's coming next.

EF: I don't know, Victoria. After this I'm going to go in my studio and I'm going to stretch a couple of canvases. So, the little drawings were because I got knocked over by this dog. And if I get knocked over, because of my chronic health condition, I'm out of action. So, I've not had the physical strength to really make bigger work. It's been really quite hard on my body. So, with the little drawings I can just sit. But interestingly, they’re full of energy. They're tiny drawings, but they pack a punch.

VG: And there's multiple of them. How many have you done so far, and how big are they just for people who are listening? I just want to see a room full of them, like bursting at the seams!!

EF: They're business card size. They come in a pack of 100. So, I'm probably nearly halfway through. Maybe I've made 30. And the other thing I like about them is that they really don't take long to make. Leading up to this exhibition, I've really suffered from [reduced] executive functioning and I get a lot of brain fog. I'm incredibly excited, but it's really affected my concentration. I'm finding it hard to read and just like even watch a film.

But the future, I don't know. I haven't got a creative block in any way, but I think the best thing for me to do is just relax and let life just live. I think I've learned that through the years. And yet I find it very difficult. It's also been a difficult year, you know. I've had a personal bereavement. So, I'm just trying to be really, really patient with myself. I think I'm only really starting to properly come out of the grief and be able to process the diagnosis. A lot's been going on for me. And so I suppose the exhibition is kind of like a bit of a clean slate,

VG: Several months ago, now, you'd said, "I just would love to get all of my work in one room, have it all out and see it." And we were thinking about ways of doing that, even in your studio, And then somehow . . .!!!!

EF: Yes! Next week I'll be on the train to Margate. It's very exciting. As far as new work goes, the thing is about the way I work, I don't know whether I'm going to do a costume, a painting, an artist's book, from one moment to the next. I literally get a feeling, and the feeling right now is to do a painting. So that's next thing. Yeah, I always go with the feeling.

VG: Well, thank you so much, Emma. Thank you for sharing so much about your work, thinking so deeply about the questions and for sharing a lot about your personal life all the way back to childhood. It really is a gift.

How do you feel after having had the time to talk?

EF: I've got a really big smile on my face!

VG: Yeah, me too. I feel I'm kind of tingly and buzzy and everything.

EF: Yeah, yeah, I feel very skippy, like I want to skip.

VG: Okay. Well, we can just skip off then. Thank you, Emma.