

JANAINA TSCHAPE

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**JOE FIG: Can you please give me some background information?**

**Where did you grow up and what kind of high school did you go to?**

**How was its arts program?**

JANAINA TSCHAPE: I was born in Munich, Germany but I grew up in Brazil. When I was 11, we went back to Germany and lived there for five years. Then we went back to Brazil for a year, and finally back to Germany when I was 17. I wanted to apply for the Art Academy in Hamburg, but I had to wait until I was 18 so I moved to Berlin for the year. It was right after the wall came down. It was a pretty exciting time and was important for me to live that year before starting art school. In that year I realized how I wanted to prepare my portfolio because art schools in Germany are a very different. Especially the one in Hamburg, which was more sort of a conceptual academy. There were not many painting professors. It was more about photography and video. It was super hard to be accepted as a student. But I got accepted and moved back to Hamburg and started the art academy in 1992. I finished in 1996 and I moved to New York to go to graduate school at SVA [School of Visual Arts]. I went for a year and then I stopped. It was really very different for me. In Germany the Academy

was very free and open and there were no classes. We just had a studio, a mentor, tutor and workshops but there were no classes, no grades, and no tests. It was all about the work that you were producing. SVA was different system, which I really didn't get into. So I went back to Hamburg to finish up my Masters degree and finally moved back to New York for good. I've been here since.

**JF: How come you traveled back and forth between Germany and Brazil? Did you have a preference as to where you lived?**

JT: My dad was German and my mother is Brazilian, so he moved because of his work. They are very different cultures for sure. I noticed it especially when I moved back to Brazil at the age of 15 and realized I wanted to study art in Germany and not in Brazil. At the time Brazil was still a military dictatorship. It was a different system. It was more rigid, more **traditional**. Their art schools were really old fashioned. In Germany Martin Kippenberger and Sigmar Polke were professors. [Joseph] Beuys really changed the system of art education in Germany and I was really drawn to that. Why would I study in Brazil? I had a German passport and the whole structure there helps you as a student to become independent, quickly.

Hamburg was a very conceptual school, which was hard for me in the beginning because I was painting. Besides Polke there were not many painters as professors. It was difficult and very formal and conceptual in terms of art criticism. I actually did stop painting for a couple of years. It made me question everything. It was a healthy process to step away from painting because I would not know how to finish a painting anyway. I would get so emotional and dramatic about it that I ruin the painting. So to step back like this was a good thing. I gave it more thought and looked at it from a distance. Why am I painting? I questioned all those things.

I went from painting to doing sculptures because I was literally chopping off my paintings and experimenting a lot. I started making sculptures and from there I started doing performances with the sculptures. That's when photography started coming into the work too. More as a tool to record the performance, than as a medium that I was interested in.

I never thought of becoming a photographer in terms of my art practice, it was for recording what I was doing. When I moved to New York I had two suitcases one with clothes and one with these latex sculpture-objects that were inflatable. That's when I began doing video as well because after using photography to capture the performances I thought I need movement and I need to record sound and just have more history in time.

The funny part was, that looking at the photographs and at the video afterwards, I realized that that my performances were really not for the public. They were very intimate and personal and in fact the photography was becoming the art and not so much the performance any longer. My generation looked at the photography of performance art from the 1960s and 1970s through books really just as a record of the performance. I was aware that what I was doing was a performance, but I was looking at the photograph that captured it as the art piece too. That made me look at the work in a new way. I thought here's the photography, if I show my work what would I show? It was an evolution. In the beginning I was doing only slideshows of my work and then I started looking at the image in a different way and printing them. Then with the video I started editing it. In the end the work became a whole new piece instead of just a recording of the performance.

**JF: When you were describing the sculptures and the performances you did from art school, I had a flash back on how much fun art school is, isn't it? You're just trying all this new fun stuff.**

JT: It is. You stay overnight in the studio at school and there's all this talk and all this debate. It's really nice. I never want to lose that ability to

try out everything. Because if you corner yourself into a medium, sometimes you can't get out so easily. I was always afraid of that. As I continued with video and photography I found it became very much a production. I went from using a little camera with a timer and doing it all alone, to all of a sudden I was using a much bigger camera and then I needed assistants and then I'm printing, I'm editing, everything became a production which removed me from that intimate relationship with art making and I started questioning it again.

I started drawing again to have that personal relationship with my art making. While I'm doing the performance you're hands-on and it's very exciting. But once the recording of the performance is done then you have 100,000 digital images you have to go through. It's a slower process that is still interesting but is a lot drier in a whole different way.

So I was missing art making as an intimate thing and I started drawing again to get back to this. And to think. The drawings became bigger and bigger because I was just having fun doing it and not thinking about it in a way. That led me back to painting. I had a fear of going back into painting. But now I just keep everything open. I continue to work with photography, video and painting. I think if you leave yourself that liberty, then you don't need to corner yourself with one medium. You don't need to feel now I'm a painter or now I'm a photographer. There's no need for that.

**JF: Well you're now a triple threat.**

**JT: Exactly. (Laughs)**

**JF: In my own practice I've always felt that going back and forth between sculpture, painting and photography that each one helps and informs the other. It's easy to get burnt out on one thing. It's a way of keeping it fresh.**

**JT: It's really nice; and they're suited to go back and forth. I was just in Brazil and I went on a trip to the Amazon on an expedition where I was shooting video and taking pictures and it was super nice to be out there and not in the studio. But then I miss the studio and I go back. One thing feeds into the other and it makes you realize things.**

**JF: When was the last sculpture you did? Was there a big break? Did you stop doing one thing and then concentrate on the drawings and paintings? Was that over five years or did you go back and forth?**

JT: When I was in art school, I did a lot of things with wax and cubes and latex. It was very Eva Hesse inspired. After a while they became more things to wear, things that were in my domestic environment but they were all sort of wearable too. That's where they became more like costumes. The sculptures morphed themselves into costumes and inflatables. They became props. I never looked at them as objects.

Now I'm doing paper cuts. I just like the nature of them and how they are popping out of the wall. I don't know where it's going but it will sort itself out.

**JF: Well it seems the piece that you're describing is going to be on the wall but is a combination of painting, sculpturing and drawing.**

JT: Exactly and that's where my interest is right now. With my paintings there's a lot about pattern, about repetition. I don't know if you saw that movie, Flatland? **It was inspired by Edwin Abbotts novel.** It's kind of a cartoon where the two dimensional world becomes three dimensional, so you have squares and triangles and they start floating around in a way, I feel these paper cuts are starting to pop out of the paintings and off the walls. I'm trying to go inside the piece to work with the idea of landscape. We'll see ...

**JF: All right, so let me just step back for a moment. Do you remember the earliest piece of art from childhood that got any recognition?**

JT: Yes, this would be in Germany when I was about 13. Mother Theresa was in town. It was a huge event and the church held a competition for a painting of Maria, the mother of Jesus. I did a painting that was very surreal with a big Jesus cross and a very small Maria and I won the first prize from Mother Theresa!

**JF: Mother Theresa gave it to you?**

JT: Yes.

**JF: Oh my gosh that's so exciting!**

JT: She shook my hand, she gave me the prize, and my mom was so proud. I got some money for the painting as well and it was placed in church. It was an ordeal. Very exciting.

**JF: Well what an auspicious start. That's amazing.**



JT: Yeah, I was very proud.

**JF: Do you have a picture of you and Mother Theresa?**

JT: I do. (Laughs)

**JF: You should have that in the studio.**

JT: I know. I keep thinking about it. I should. That was the first time I got really proud.

**JF: Can you tell me more about why you decided to come to New York?**

JT: Talking about the different mentalities between Brazil and Germany, New York felt like natural ground. Culturally, Germany is a giant. The culture, the history, it's too heavy as a mentality. Brazil on the other hand is almost the opposite in a funny way. I was always in between both. New York felt like a relief. I didn't have to decide if I was German or Brazilian. I could just be. It felt very good because there were other people like me. That was the main reason I stayed here.

**JF: When you did you consider yourself a professional artist and were able to dedicate yourself full-time to that pursuit?**

JT: When I finished art school, my money was running out and I was always thinking, what am I going to do to survive? I wanted to keep doing my art, but I gave myself a time limit, a mental block. I thought if I'm 32 or 33 and I'm not making a living off my art, I'm going to stop and not become a frustrated and weird person. I was very rigid. I thought I had to do everything to make it. So I did little jobs and things to make money. I was totally focused on making my life workout. I had my first gallery show when I was 27.

**JF: How did you get your first gallery show?**

JT: There was this project space called Clinica Aesthetica in the meatpacking district. It was run by Elizabeth Fiore and Yvonne Senouf. They were partners and they offered to do a show. That was my first gallery show. It wasn't a commercial gallery it was more like a project space. It was for me, stepping into the arena of showing my art, which was super, important and felt scary too. I had a show where I inflated one wall. I had the inflatable wall and I had photographs. I worked with them for a couple of years but then they dissolved and did something else.

**JF: How did that show come about? How did they find you?**

JT: A common artist friend introduced me to Yvonne and she liked my work and introduced me to her partner. After that, I started showing with Galerie Catherine Bastide in Brussels. I met her also through a friend. I was her first show in Brussels when she opened in 1999. Then things started moving from there. I started showing in Brazil at Galeria Fortes-Vilaca and slowly I started to be able to pay my rent. I was relieved. For me at the time I just wanted to get my rent paid and survive until the next month and just believe that it was going to work out.

**JF: Currently you're showing with Tierney Gardarin how did that relationship come about?**

JT: I used to show with Sikkema Jenkins in New York and Denis [Gardarin] used to work there. He would take care of me at the gallery and we had a super nice relationship and have stayed friends since. We had a good time working together and I wanted that relationship to continue. Then I met Cristin [Tierney] and she's adorable so.

**JF: So then how long have you been in this studio?**

JT: It's almost been five years.

**JF: Is the studio separate from where you live and is that what you prefer and does that affect the work?**

JT: It's not what I prefer. I think because of the size of the work and the way I work, it needs to be separated because it's very messy in here.

There's a lot of paint. Also it's because I have a daughter. That was the main factor. I love the idea of working at home because I can work late hours. I would still like to get back to that again at some point. My daughter is now a seven-year-old little girl and she's begun to understand and respect what's going on in the studio now. When she was a baby it was more complicated. So it's good to have this separation between studio and home. I do miss working at night and on the weekends. It's challenging to have a nine to five schedule but life changes so we have to adapt.

**JF: Did you have a plan for the layout of the studio or did it develop organically?**

JT: This was a big garage. I did a basic renovation. I put up walls but the floor is the same as it used to be and the only thing that I did was separate the office up front from the workspace back here. I can close it off and have privacy if I want and it keeps the office separate. I also put in skylights and the glass window on the front of the building. It's very basic because all that you want is light, space and walls, right. (Laughs)

**JF: Has the location influenced your work in anyway?**

JT: It is different. If I work in Brazil, I'm on my family's farmhouse. It's a different feel than working here. Here it's a white cube, which has become messy with the time. I feel when I am here that I have a lot of reflection on memory of other places. And it's nice actually that it's neutral. It's very quiet.

**JF: It doesn't seem like you're in the middle of New York.**

JT: Exactly, which is nice. I really like that.

**JF: Can you describe a typical day being as specific as possible?**

JT: I get up at seven because of my daughter. I make breakfast for her, and I usually just drink coffee. Then I drive her to school and from school I drive directly to the studio. I drink more coffee and I talk with Teresa about what we're doing for the day. I look a little bit into emails and stuff like that.

Then all I want to do is come back here and paint or just do work on things that I have in progress. The walls are always covered with work. I never like finishing things I love starting things. I love having all the work up and looking at everything and being able to switch from one work to the other.

I stay in the studio until around five and then I have to go home because the nanny leaves and I want to spend some time with my daughter before she goes to bed. That's basically my day. I spend the whole day here. I try to be in the studio as much as possible. Last spring I taught at ICP once a week. That was a nice change to get out of the studio and see young people's work. I think it keeps you thinking, it's good. Other than that I try to just be in the studio most of the time.

**JF: Do you listen to music or have the radio on or the TV on when you're working?**

JT: I listen to music all the time.

**JF: What do you listen to?**

JT: Various things. From Radiohead to Erik Satie. There is a range.

**JF: Can you tell me a little bit about the materials you use and how they came into your practice? I also want to know a little bit about your painting tables?**

JT: I start my large paintings with watercolors at first because I like the challenge of the size. Most people think watercolors are made with little tiny brushes, and are these little precious things. I love the idea of blowing that out of proportion. I started doing these really big watercolors. I used to work in oils but I found I like water. I like how pigment dissolves in water. I started adding acrylic and I started adding gouache and tempera to the mix. I wanted to paint on canvas because I like the texture of canvas so I now mix all those mediums together on canvas. It's a mix between watercolor, gouache and acrylic. They're all water-based.

**JF: Then your tables here, so this table looks like you have like pastels on one, this is for pencils?**

JT: Yeah there is a range of materials. I use watercolor sticks, crayons, a lot of watercolor pencils. They're all on that middle table there and then in the back table are pigments and brushes and acrylic paints and water colored paints and lots of buckets. (Laughs)

**JF: I notice with acrylics you need a lot of containers?**

JT: Yes a lot of containers, a lot of containers.

**JF: What kind of containers are you using?**

JT: First I used to buy them and now we reuse takeout containers. We have all these takeout containers; there are piles and piles of takeout containers because then there is already a lid. I can close them up.

**JF: Do you have a favorite color?**

JT: Prussian blue. It's funny because my dad was born in Prussia at the time. Now it's Poland. It's my favorite color. It always has been.

**JF: So what brands of paints are you using?**



JT: Right now I'm using Golden but I use a lot of pigment from Guerra paints, Rembrandt watercolors and Faber-Castell for the sticks. It's a range. The Guerra paint I started using when I painted a mural in Florida. I wanted to mix my own paints and they have pretty cool pigment.

**JF: Do you have any special devices or tools that you use that are unique to your creative process?**

JT: The costumes [used in her performance pieces] were all made with latex and inflated with balloons. Then I started using condoms instead of balloons to fill in the costumes. I used condoms because of the color, the transparency and because they don't pop that easily and they shape differently. I started using condoms to fill in the costumes and I still do. I had this video piece at the Guggenheim and in it there is a woman dancing and swirling around and she has this huge necklace made out of condoms that look like tears.

Recently I was just in the Amazon shooting a video and of course I had all these condoms with me to fill up the costumes. But people there were wondering why I travelling with all those condoms? I said it's for the work! (Laughs)

Balloons are more rigid. The condoms have shapes are nicer, they're more organic and they're transparent, so this is something that I've been using for a long time in my work. It's a special tool.

**JF: Are there any specific items that you keep around the studio that have significant meaning to you?**

JT: I like to have plants in the studio. There are always plants. There are some little things that I keep on my desk over there. I have little seashells or curiosities, little antiques, just little things to look at, that's important. I love books. To have books around is super important.

**JF: Do you work on one project at a time or several?**

JT: Several, always. I feel trapped if I have to start and finish something. I prefer to work parallel on different things.

**JF: How often do you clean your studio and does that affect your work?**

JT: Once a month we have a cleaning lady that comes. I'm not a good cleaner. It takes me forever, I'm a mess, and so it's a very happy day when she comes. She saves the day because otherwise this place would be impossible. But I don't like it too clean either, because there are the paints and things that I want to keep out and there is certain degree of messiness that I need in order to think. It's always a little messy in here.

**JF: And would this be a typical set up where you always have the different materials out and very accessible?**

JT: Yeah, everything has to be out. If I want something I need to just grab it. I can't put things in drawers and hide them, no.

**JF: How do you come up with titles?**

JT: That's the worst. (Laughs) Sometimes a title pops up in the beginning but if it doesn't then it becomes a really difficult issue. It's difficult. It is super complicated and it takes me a long time and then at some point it pops up. But it takes a long time. It's just wonderful when you find that title that embraces your thoughts and the work, but it's hard.

**JF: Well you have a show coming up, what's the title of the show?**

JT: *The Ghost In Between.*

**JF: The Ghost In Between. Then where did you get that title?**

JT: That title relates to the video piece I made. I was in the Amazon on the Rio Negro, the black river that reflects all the forest around it. The first thing I heard from the guy that was waiting for us in the boat was that people love to try to find the ghost inside the reflection where the water meets the forest and it reflects down. That has stuck in my mind. So while I was surfing around trying to find a title for the show, I kept going back to that. In the end that became the title.

**JF: It's a great title. Do you have a motto or creed that as an artist you live by?**

JT: I don't know? I never did anything else really. It's the only thing I know how to do. If I would do something else I would be so bad at it. I focused on this because I know it's the only thing I can do. There's nothing else really that I would succeed at. (Laughs)

**JF: Then lastly, what advice would you give the young artist that is just starting out?**

JT: You have to keep focused. I know that when you start out you have to do other jobs. You have to work for money; you have to do all kinds of things but you have to keep focused. When you have a project in your head but you don't have money to develop it, that doesn't mean the work doesn't exist. You have to separate yourself sometimes from the material aspect of it. It's easy to get trapped in that which is totally normal because you need to buy the paint, the canvas and materials. But I feel to be an artist you cannot depend on that.

It's like having a studio in your head, even if you can't **buy the material you want**, you have to continue thinking as an artist because that's what keeps you alive and keeps you going. It's easy to get trapped thinking; you can't produce, you can't do this and then you want to give up because you can't survive. You have to be very strong in your head that if you want to be an artist you can be an artist no matter what and no matter what you're doing!

**JF: Great, thank you very much.**

JT: You're welcome.