

# ELIZA DOUGLAS

*In the Future We'll All Fantasize in Color*

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Cayla Mihalovich, *In The Future We'll All Fantasize in Color*  
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ELIZA DOUGLAS. "A PIECE OF FATE" (2017). OIL ON CANVAS. 210 X 180 CM. COURTESY AIR DE PARIS, PARIS. PHOTO: THOMAS MÜLLER.

# ELIZA DOUGLAS ASKS ME IF I SIT IN A CHAIR OR LIE DOWN ON A COUCH WHEN I GO TO THERAPY.

“I sit up on a couch,” I say.

She laughs mildly. We are two quiet people talking about what it’s like to do all the talking. It’s mid-February in California and the hot orange sun won’t stop kissing the ground. Outside my window, the trees bloom in confusion, their small orbits of valentine pink fall onto shaded concrete.

I call Douglas on a Friday morning as mild lemon light peels through my blinds. She answers from Frankfurt, Germany, a place she has lived and studied for the past few years. I wonder what color the blossoms are over there, but we don’t talk about the trees, a winter that is too warm, or a spring that is too soon.

We talk about hands.

“I just remember thinking: a painting that has well rendered hands dissolving into pure paint—have I ever seen that painting before? Why not?”

At age 30, Douglas decided to chase a fantasy that had been haunting her for a long time. For years, she paraded through careers that didn’t resonate with her, including time spent as a social worker or playing backup in freak folk bands, until she finally admitted to herself that the one thing she wanted to do most was to paint. “What was so scary to me about doing art in general was particularly scary in the realm of that medium. It somehow seemed like it would be the hardest thing to do well.” After hearing that most art schools in Europe came at a minimal cost, she packed up her belongings in New York City, a place she grew up, and enrolled in Staedelschule school. After only a year at the school she began creating the series she is best known for today, “I Am All Soul.”

When I ask Douglas to tell me how she would describe her body of work, she says that she doesn’t know how to summarize it just yet, but she would love for me to.

I have never broken a bone before, but when I look at Douglas’s work, I wonder how much it would matter. With the absence of most body parts, the emergence of hands and feet connected by washy, colorful brushstrokes become the essential vestibule for expression: reaching, grasping, holding, as though the hands and feet alone could supplement any shortage the rest of my body might face. Perhaps it is a reflection of Douglas’s own yearning: her desire to bend in ways that our physical bodies cannot, to strip the body down, leaving only what’s needed.

At any painting class, they will tell you that hands are one of the most difficult constructs to perfect. When I ask Douglas about this, she tells me that she hires assistants to help her with these precarious areas. After taking photographs of her own body parts and organizing them in Photoshop with the consistency and tone she likes, Douglas determines the future of the painting and from there, guides the work based on

her instincts. The process “feels entirely directed by me,” she says. We talk more about this: how common it is to outsource work. Even some of the most skilled painters she knows, even Rembrandt himself, many of them prefer to act as the canvas orchestrator rather than holding a brush in their hand. “If I could swallow a pill and be an amazing painter, I would take it,” she says. But even then, Douglas would prefer to spend time taking in the world around her instead of learning how to address the heart line of a hand.

But hands were also viable. “I wasn’t going to think of a huge detailed painting because it wasn’t even a possible resource for me at the time,” Douglas tells me. From the beginning, she was pragmatic about her work and gave herself permission to not be confined by the technical limitations in making the things that she wanted to make. When she first started at art school, she felt exposed working in a studio with people who had thought of themselves as artists for all their lives. Having inserted herself into a competitive landscape, it was challenging to feel judged by the things she’d hang on her studio walls. “But it was pretty great for me from the beginning because whatever was so hard for me I had already done. Moving away and leaving my life for a new life: that was where the real leap had come in. I was unstuck for the first time in so long and it was thrilling to not be paralyzed.”

Douglas and I don’t just talk about hands, though. We talk about young boys in small rooms, mythical green creatures and playful cookie monsters. Her work, even as a new face in the art world, adopts an impressive breadth, spanning from the absence of body entirely, to the body being overtly present: eyes staring directly at the viewer, pointed. She eventually finds her way to a fantastical and whimsical world: a return to the place that first pushed her into a new, unstuck frontier.

“One of my first nights in Frankfurt, I had this really vivid dream where I was vomiting green paint...” Douglas tells me. She begins to trail off, and we sit in an untethered silence for a few moments before she says, “It makes me so sick to have to hear myself talk for even five minutes.” I can relate, I tell her: I hear a buzzer ring in the background, and she puts the phone down for a moment in order to let someone in. When she picks back up, she asks me about growing up in northern California. I tell her about my own trials with stagnation, and when she asks what it would take for me to be unstuck, I begin to feel as though I am sitting upright on her couch, handing over my secrets.

Fantasy is most often about what feels right; it cannot be summarized by a tidy quote or a linear, unquestioned path. I learn this from Douglas, who will, over the course of our phone call, often respond to my questions with, “It’s hard to describe.” It is gut feeling, rooted in an agreement with chance and a possibility of failure. “Painting is a place in which I develop my thoughts. It seems like a clearer way; like I can work things out in that space as opposed to this vague interdisciplinary multimedia world.” In a few weeks, Douglas will move from Frankfurt to Berlin, where she will live with her partner, artist Anne Imhof, for the next few months. To add to her existing gallery appearances at Air de Paris and Overduin LA, she has been asked to exhibit later this year at the Jewish Museum in New York.

Before we hang up the phone, Douglas says, “Maybe in five years we’ll do another interview and it will feel like you’re talking to a whole other person.” The sun now edges to the corners of my room and I wonder about five years from now. Maybe then, the seasons will be on schedule again. As for Douglas, it seems likely the fantasy will continue to bloom in new, beautiful directions.



ELIZA DOUGLAS. “US AND THE ANGELS” (2017). OIL ON CANVAS. 210 X 180 CM. COURTESY AIR DE PARIS, PARIS. PHOTO: IVAN MURZIN.