

purple MAGAZINE

— *The Brain Issue #33*

ELIZA DOUGLAS

interview by OLIVIER ZAHM

portraits by NADINE FRACZKOWSKI

from the performance of ANNE IMHOF's faust, 2017

**fearless, empowered, and unique, the american artist, model,
musician, performer,**

and balenciaga muse incarnates

today's shifting mind-set



OLIVIER ZAHM – *What do you do to rest your brain? And to train it?*

ELIZA DOUGLAS – I've had a lot of different phases: meditation at the Zendo, Ashtanga yoga, antidepressants, veganism. I joined a Lacan reading group, didn't understand it. I even had a guru once and a mantra. Lately I love watching TV shows, especially while eating pizza.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *You've spoken openly about having low self-esteem. How has that affected your painting?*

ELIZA DOUGLAS – Yeah, I think it's something that most people deal with in one way or another, but often like to pretend they don't. In terms of how it's affected me as an artist, it took me so long to push through my own discomfort and fear. I really wanted to do it, but didn't believe I had talent. This was mostly it, but then there was also a grandiose part of me that only wanted to do something if I could be instantly perfect at it. So I couldn't do anything. The combination of grandiosity and low self-esteem is really brutal and paralyzing. For most of my 20s, I was unable to make any art. I even gave up entirely at one point and started down the path to becoming a social worker. Luckily, I came to my senses and finally mustered up the courage to try.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *How has performance challenged your mind and thought patterns? Has it forced you into different ways of thinking? Has it empowered you?*

ELIZA DOUGLAS – I've performed in bands on and off for the past 20 years, but often in the background. I often had a more quiet, subtle presence. I wasn't a very performative performer – mostly I just stood there and did my job, and I often felt very nervous and had to drink a lot to get myself onstage. More recently, I've gotten into performing

in a different way. I've just evolved enough as a person that I can stomach the risk and vulnerability that comes with it. And I also have grown to feel like I have something to contribute, whereas I used to be quite crippled by self-doubt. Performing in Anne Imhof's work helped a lot. It forced me to quickly get over my stage fright. The shows were so big, and I was really exposed, and also there are a lot of improvisational and unpredictable elements to the work. So I often have to let go of control and outcomes. And being attached to those things was part of what made performing so difficult for me in the past. I especially feel empowered when it comes to singing, because a few years ago I felt I didn't have much of a singing voice, and had no plans to use it – and now it's something that can feel really good.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *What is your musical background?*

ELIZA DOUGLAS – In my late teens I got into noise music, so I started playing guitar and bass with a lot of distortion and effects. I also got into experimenting with effects and using pedals to loop my voice. I was asked to play in some bands. I was lucky enough to get to tour internationally and see a lot of places, but was always a background member. At some point I stopped because I didn't think I was good enough to make anything worthwhile. When I met Anne she inspired and encouraged me to make music again. Along with her and Billy Bultheel, I wrote the music for her performance works *Angst*, *Faust*, and *Sex*. I also perform the music live in the pieces, do art direction, and do the costume design. Music-wise, I'm also doing some vocals for the next *Hercules* and *Love Affair* record, and at some point, maybe I'll make a record of my own.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *What inspires you to paint? You've explored so many different media – film, performance art, modeling, music.*

ELIZA DOUGLAS – I think it centers around image-making being the thing I connect to most. It's possible it could manifest in another medium – for instance, the passion of my youth was photography – but for the time being, the images I want to make most often end up being in the form of paintings. We've found paintings made by Neanderthals 64,000 years ago. There couldn't be a richer history to play around with and reflect upon. It's also extremely challenging – it's a lot more difficult to make something interesting or new when working with an ancient medium. Sometimes contemporary art can draw its strength from the fact that it's made through the use of new technology, and I think if an artwork relies on this for its power, it's inevitably not as rich as one that doesn't.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *Your paintings – those I’ve seen – include hands, arms and feet, legs – the extremities of the body – but never faces or bodies. Why focus on these elements?*

ELIZA DOUGLAS – I have painted faces and bodies, actually, but omitted them from the “Hands and Feet” series you’re referring to. It was a combination of things. I was in an early stage of studying painting, there was a lot of talk about the figuration/abstraction dichotomy. I remember once sitting in a class starting to think about this series and wondering, “Why haven’t I seen a painting like this?” One that contains well-rendered body parts and then really abstract/expressive areas. I liked the idea of using a figurative element in which only a little portion of the canvas is covered but that would go a long way in terms of the visual implication on the rest of the canvas. Hands and feet made the most sense for this. Plus, there’s also this saying that you can judge a painter’s ability by how well they can render hands. I was really inspired by Monika Baer’s work, paintings that have a real presence of something well rendered and then something more abstract, or messy. Another reason I suppose the motif came to be was that before going to art school I’d been into psychoanalysis for a while, so I had ideas about fragmentation of the body in the back of my mind.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *You live in the heart of a creative community. Do you think artists have a different way of thinking?*

ELIZA DOUGLAS – In my experience, professional artists are often more self-centered than the average person. And usually it’s quite helpful to be ambitious and socially clever, although there are of course exceptions.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *Approaching 2020, how would you define the mentality of the younger generation?*

ELIZA DOUGLAS – For the first time in my life I feel I’m no longer part of the “younger generation,” so it’s a bit difficult to generalize about something that I feel on the outside of and that’s so broad. One thing is, it seems it’s a bit more common these days to be more ecologically and politically minded as a young person now than it was during my youth. And then, of course, there are smartphones, which younger people all grew up with, and which in many ways probably define their lives. Obviously, having portable Internet access and social media has totally changed human existence. A large part of my youth was spent without these things, and so in those formative years, my generation had a vastly different way of relating to each other, information in general, and the world.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *Do you think we need to disconnect our brain from the Internet?*

ELIZA DOUGLAS – I feel the Internet is inseparable from social media, since that is what so many people spend the majority of their Internet time doing, and it's also proven to have a significant effect on dopamine levels and actually rewires the brain. In a lot of people's lives, it functions similarly to any other addiction (drugs, gambling, etc), and so in those cases, disconnecting would of course be good. But everyone has a different relationship to it. For me at least, the Internet is of course very useful at times. And it's nice to easily connect to people who we are not physically near, but on the flip side, there's the possibility that this ability discourages a more direct and intimate kind of human relation. Also, there's no getting around the fact that the Internet compromises our privacy, and allows evil corporations like Amazon to flourish, forcing independent businesses to die.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *What does having style mean to you?*

ELIZA DOUGLAS – I don't know... I like that what I wear changes the way I feel.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *If you had to draw the brain of someone living in 2020, how would it look?*

ELIZA DOUGLAS – It would look like a rotten potato.

END