

# Sara Anstis

SELECTED PRESS

# Galerie

## 8 Must-See Solo Gallery Exhibitions Around the Country This October

From Beatriz Milhazes at Pace in New York to Aaron Curry at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles, here's what not to miss this month.

PAUL LASTER  
OCTOBER 03, 2022



Sara Anstis, *The Hunt*, (2022). PHOTO: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND KASMIN.

[EXTRACT]

[...]

### 5. Sara Anstis at Kasmin, New York

Mining mythology for a more feminine interpretation, Sara Anstis makes dreamlike figurative oil paintings and haunting soft pastels on paper of naked young women enchantingly communing with nature. Born in Stockholm and raised on a small island in Canada, the London-based artist constructs surreal scenarios with barren landscapes and playful creatures for her femme fatales to traverse. Exhibiting internationally since 2019, after nearly a decade of studies, Anstis is making her New York solo show debut with such strong, psychological paintings and works on paper that we anticipate seeing more of her compelling artworks for years to come.

Through October 29.

## Sara Anstis: Subterranean Art

JACKSON HARVEY



One can notice something especially inexplicable in Sara Anstis' recent presentation of otherworldly artwork at Various Small Fires (VSF) in Seoul. A figure rests on a hammock, barring visible ties to the branches, inspecting a giant flying feathered starfish. That wasn't it though. Nor was the mysterious shadow hunched over at the forest opening. It's the minor character in pink, at the foot of the silver, blonde, figure, floating, with a hand on the knee of the other. You can enjoy imagining that they are, in fact, flaunting a remarkable feat of calisthenics while facetiously preoccupied.

Perhaps, Sara Anstis' artwork is letting us know that when we have others to hold onto, we can attain the, otherwise, impossible. Sara Anstis' art is full of these interrogative, questioning, scenes, perhaps touching on the wealth of experiences prone to the human psyche, or perhaps not. Positively charging the imagination of the viewer in either case. Here is the artist's interview with METAL. See Bundle on show until 2nd April.

I love the meta quality of *The Drawer*. I found the scene to depict a kind of meditative state. The figure appears to emit a creative energy, and it is interesting to find a set of eyes unaware of others, protected by their bubble. Does creating art feel meditative to you?

I identify with The Drawer while also being aware of the idealisation of the act of drawing within it. The figure appears to have only one arm, as if the left non-drawing arm is so superfluous to the act that it's been forgotten. She forgot to use it and I forgot to draw it; there's something there about being single-minded in the studio.

Contrary to the idyll of The Drawer, the studio is a painful space to occupy. At the worst times, it is an extraction room for the unconscious, in which what's needed for the next image is wrestled and set into cement while the reluctant patient thinks only of their next meal. Thankfully, there is also; colour, joy, form, negative space, humour, menial tasks, and other voices entering the dialogue.



**Anemone stages a vital array of colours, from the stormy interior of the central figure and the fire brick red of the titular flower. Does art imitate natural life in the great sweep of chromatic vividity in your works?**

I love that you picked this work to frame your question, because in this instance, it was a direct case of imitation. I was growing anemones at the time and their red was blinding. Often the paintings that stay with me, the ones I can bear to look at years later, are made almost by accident or in an overflow of small actions. Being surprised by a red flower or a similarly uncanny observation can be the necessary jolt needed to finish or start an image.

**Ekphrastic writing; describing art or music with words, can be a useful prompt for setting off creative literary ideas. Have any written works held an influence on your art?**

What I read finds its way into my works alongside everything else I take in. But I find writing and drawing to be useful comparatives. I dwell in half-narratives. The form of the short story, where one expects more pages after turning the last, could be a literary approximation of what I am trying to achieve through painting. Lately I have been transfixed by Bruno Schulz's short stories.



*Pink Cloud*, the part-embroidered, part-drawn collaboration has a breath-taking, self-referential quality, as in *The Drawer*. The drawn split-figure to the left meets and leaves in eternal Schrödinger fashion with the woven figure to the right. How was it to join forces and incorporate different forms?

Collaborating with my mother is so obvious that it should have happened sooner. It's interesting to step away from the single-authorial voice. My work often references where I grew up and how the landscape shaped my experience of the world. There could be a parallel drawn with primary relationships, with those who raised me and taught me to see. How relationships and landscapes hold me has a big influence on my work. So, I find it appropriate, and significant, that the hand of the mother be directly visible in my work.

There is also an affinity between media, as embroidery, and pastel hold historical connotations of the feminine and the domestic, of the small and private and portable. Combining them and exhibiting them feels like holding these histories upside down.

This year alone you have published and showcased your largest exhibition to date *Pencil of Rays*, alongside further exhibitions in Manchester, Oslo, New York, and Paris. Do pressing deadlines or relaxed timeframes suit your artistic process best?

The work is done when it's done, but I do my best to predict my patterns, and it's worked out so far.

What are your plans for the coming year?

It is a year of firsts. My exhibition, *Bundle*, opened last month at VSF in Seoul; the first time I've shown in Asia. I have another solo show planned for this year at Kasmin Gallery, and this will be my first solo exhibition in New York.





ART OF CHOICE

# Sara Anstis builds a world filled with desire

EMMA GRAYSON  
JANUARY 13, 2020



Courtesy of the artist.

There are few young artists as daring as Sara Anstis. With a BFA in Studio Art and Sociology from Concordia University (Montreal, Canada), an MFA from Akademin Valand (Gothenburg, Sweden), and having recently completed the Royal Drawing School's postgraduate program (London, UK), she showcases her knack for form and imagination in each of her unique canvasses. She explores female sexuality and nature, punctuating her works with piercing gazes of slightly blurred, abstract figures. Common themes include these undulating nude figures as well as soft landscapes achieved through her skillful use of pastels. Rather than shirk away from sexual desire, Anstis embraces it and encourages her viewers to do the same. Look out for her at Fabian Lang in Zurich in February, 2020.





Courtesy of the artist.

**Tell us a little bit about yourself. Where are you from originally and when did art first enter your life?**

I'm from Canada and Sweden. I don't know when art entered my life, but my conception of it changes all the time and it enters and leaves when it wants, like a pussycat.

**It seems that ocean or water scenes are a common theme in your work as well as the female body. Could you elaborate on that?**

I went swimming in California this summer with my partner and some friends. When we arrived at the carpark, someone told us that there was a body in the river. A parent had drowned while rescuing their young child from the water. Their body would be recovered later that day, but in the meantime, they advised us not to go down-river.

We headed up the river to the nudist section. A naked man with long brown hair lay on the rocks and changed position every few hours between swims, an exhibitionist well-practiced in the art of posing. A group of women were sitting in the water like a circle of nymphs. We spent the day sun-bathing and swimming, feeling the strong currents of the water, how it could pin you to a boulder and kill you if you made a series of ill-informed decisions. These beautiful hours were made more beautiful by fear.

I grew up on an island and spent a lot of time in the sea and in lakes. Skinny-dipping features heavily in my childhood and teenage memories and I can't separate water from my sexuality. I am not a great swimmer and I was always scared to swim far out in the ocean, for fear of what may lie in its tentacular depths.

Water spirits, sea foam and semen, Naiads, arriving newly born at the sea-shore in a scallop shell; Ceto, Scylla. We are slowly coming to know the oceans in a different way, as they lap at houses with unprecedented familiarity.



Courtesy of the artist.

**Are there specific historical artists or movements you are drawn to that you could speak on?**

Someone recently sent me Arnold Böcklin's paintings of mermaids. They blew me away. John William Waterhouse's painting "A Mermaid" from 1900 has also been a recent strike of lightning. She's a gritty moist-eyed doll. I'm on a mermaid kick.

A manatee or a beluga, from a certain angle and with a certain rippling of fat and flesh, can appear feminine. Sea creatures are so other-worldly that they have been mistaken for women. The characters I paint are increasingly of the water: they have slick, smooth skin, the way you'd think a dolphin's skin would feel. They are willful and their pussies are usually the most reflective part of their bodies. As a child I loved a book about a fish who had one shiny scale. They made this one scale sparkly on every page and I wanted to rip it out, but I wasn't sure what I would do with it after that. Now I'm making sparkly things and it's way more rewarding than owning them.

**What's a day in the studio like for you?**

I spend the day telling myself I have a routine. I have tea now, and take a break between 16:00 and 18:00, and wash my hands when they get too dirty. I hide my phone from view. I listen to music that makes sense in relation to the work I'm making. But I'm terrible at making rules for myself so this all falls apart. Each day is different and I just try to get some work done.

**What is your process like? How do you begin a work?**

Usually I come up with an idea when I first start, a gesture, or the angle of a shoulder for example, and go from there.



Courtesy of the artist.

**Has your work always taken on the style it currently embodies?**

I went through a phase of pushing away drawing and painting to see what else I could do, but it was always really drawing and painting, even when I was writing or performing. I made monochrome, cross-hatched meticulous drawings for a long period of time before doing what I do now.

**It seems that you have used multiple materials (pastel, charcoal, casein, etc.) in your works. Do you have a preferred material, and how did you come to use these different mediums?**

I adore soft pastels. They are so luscious and vibrant. I started using them because they looked good in their little shelves in the art store. I prefer Unison pastels, which are handmade in the UK, Sennelier for when I need something with less resistance, and Rembrandt when I need more resistance. Oil and casein paints are more recent additions to my materials. I love that casein is made from milk protein, that it comes from what feeds young mammals. I have many nipples in my work and it feels appropriate. Milk paint has a long history and it smells really good, like a hand cream or a lipstick.



Courtesy of the artist.

### How do you come to title your works?

Titles either come or they don't. When a piece is finished, if a title hasn't come up, it probably never will. Or I end up giving it a name and the title and the work need to figure out how to grow into each other independently of me.

### Could you also talk a bit about the "Survival Handbook?" How did you get involved in the project, and what it was like being an editor versus being a contributing artist?

I was the editor and a contributor for that project. The "Survival Handbook" publication was for an exhibition I co-curated called "I Will Survive" that was hosted by Galleri CC and Alta Art Space in Malmö, Sweden. I invited artists who worked with the theme of survival to be in the exhibition and write or design a chapter for the publication. It

was empowering to be in a dual role and to collaborate with these artists. I would love to put together a similar text-based project in collaboration with an organization.



Courtesy of the artist.

# ELEPHANT

## Sara Anstis Celebrates Female Sexuality with Humour and Tenderness

The young Canadian artist uses sensuous pastels to build a fantasy world of mischievous women, where eroticism and empowerment go hand in hand

LOUISE BENSON  
FEBRUARY 4, 2019



Girl in Landscape, 2019.

The women who appear in the drawings of Sara Anstis are up to something. The young Canadian artist portrays ladies at leisure—smoking, lounging and preening—in deft, sensuous strokes of pastel. Their eyes dart around them, as if they were aware of being observed by an unknown voyeur. The naked body is celebrated and, at times,

transformed into new hybridized forms: a set of fingertips are given five pink nipples in one particularly surreal drawing, while genitalia is frequently emphasized and enlarged throughout. The female gaze is central to Anstis's work, offering up a worldview that transcends and refutes the shame that is so often conferred upon women unafraid of their own sexuality. Her subjects are larger than life, powerfully sexualized and dominant in a feminine fantasy world.



Nipple Fingers, 2019.

**Why do you draw and paint mainly female figures in your work? Who are they, and what are they up to? They often look quite mischievous...**

I'm still figuring it out. My work has changed a lot in the last year—I moved to London, I started using colour, I came away from a close use of source imagery. I became more open to being influenced by the images and people around me, mostly because I had nothing to lose. I was unhappy with how I was working in the studio. There's a vulnerability in moving somewhere new that made it possible to escape certain repressions.

I'm building a world that I'm excited to work on every day. It's emerging from what I drew as a child, and how I negotiate sexuality with humour and tenderness. My figures are in a world of their own but much of their mischievousness comes from being caught by a look and having a largely powerless witness for their actions and moods.



Ciggy After Murder, 2018.

**You previously studied sociology. How has this informed the compositions that you create now in the studio?**

It informed my work more when I was basing my drawing installations on very loose participant observation research I did with social groups. I visited nudist groups and other people who have interesting relationships with their own notion of landscape. I was never completely comfortable in this role as it was a one-sided interaction, and this discomfort does influence my current work. I felt like a voyeur much of the time, whereas now I am peeking in through a keyhole at a group of people—my primarily female figures—who I can interact with on a different level and on mutual terms.

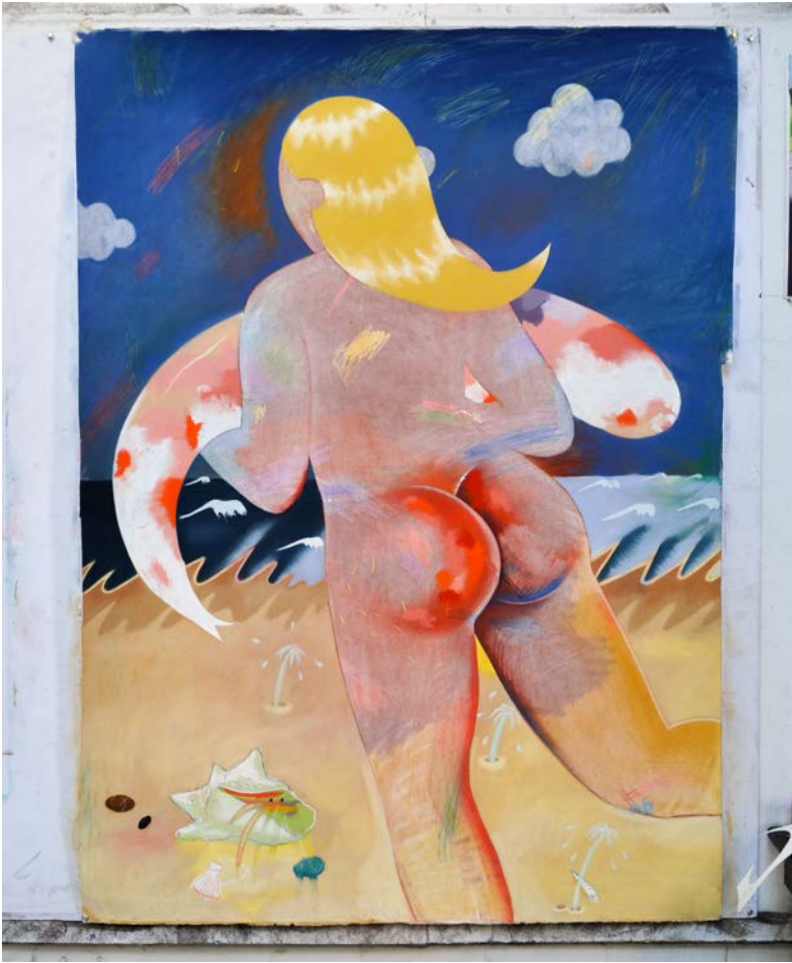
My research process consists of looking, exploring my unconscious, collecting and making up stories and spending time with animals and plants. There's a series of books called *Les Malheurs de Sophie* (Sophie's Misfortunes) I've been remembering from my childhood lately. They were written by the Comtesse de Ségur, a nineteenth-century author. In one of her books, Sophie cuts up her mother's small pet fish, without knowing why she does it or what will happen to them, though she sees them writhing and dying under her knife. I remembered this story and I was drawing a lot of fish at the time. I like stories that exemplify our lack of understanding for other beings, and for complicated animal worlds. In my images I want to stay in that space of not knowing, where something is not quite right and an other-worldliness can be sensed, where guilt and wonder are hand in hand and things are getting slippery.

**Nudity is a common feature in your work. How important is the erotic for you in this context?**

Nudity isn't always erotic but the nudity in my drawings usually is. I can't think of anything more boring to draw than clothing, though I love seeing how others do it. The exaggerated characteristics of my figures, the beautiful and



enlarged labia and breasts that seemingly have their own agency, are created out of a bodily knowledge of sexual pleasure and the power this brings.



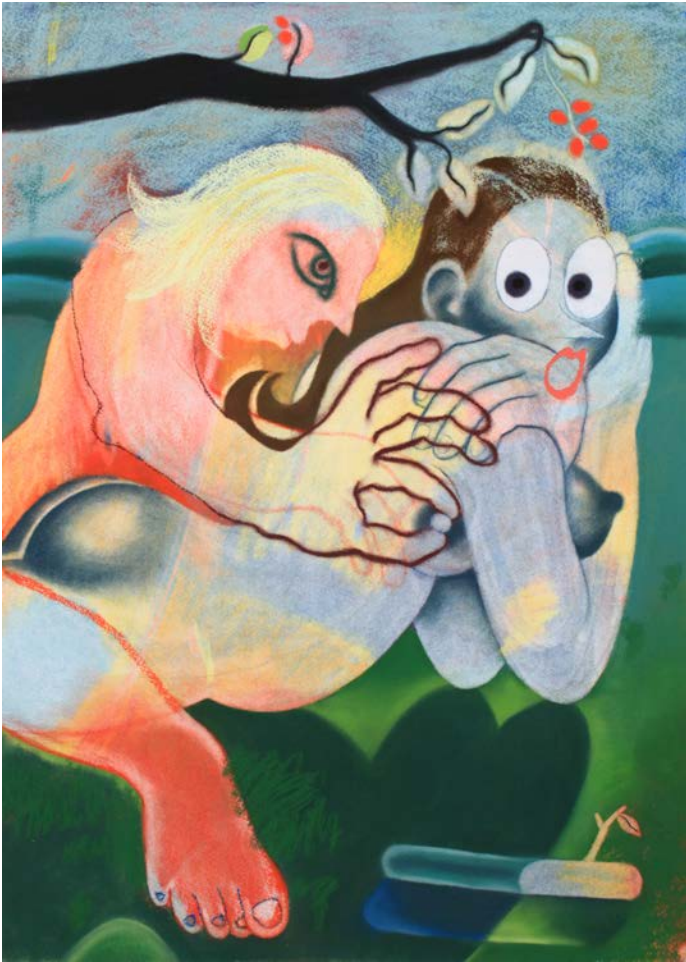
Slow Motion, 2019.

**You work primarily with pastels on paper. What appeals to you about drawing in particular?**

Soft pastels are a very sensual medium. I need a haptic relationship with the thing I'm making. I can rub pastels around on paper and my fingers have an unmediated connection with the surface. Paper is like skin: it remembers and it shows its history. Also I am impatient, and drawing is immediate.

**A number of young female figurative painters have found success in recent years, each with their own distinctive take on gender, sexuality and female representation. Where do you see your place in this burgeoning movement, and who are some of the artists (past and present) that have inspired you?**

I couldn't say where I fit in there, but I do feel I fit and it's very exciting to see the work that's coming out of this development currently. Some artists who I admire include Tala Madani, Ambera Wellmann, Cheyenne Julien, Leonor Fini, Paula Rego, Paula Modersohn-Becker, Dorothy Iannone, Camille Henrot. I'm looking forward to seeing Carol Rama's watercolours and rubber paintings in the flesh for the first time next week at Lévy Gorvin in New York—I've been preoccupied with her for a while now—that and the Hilma af Klint exhibition.



Pinch, 2018.

# It's Nice That

## Artist Sara Anstis weaves together mythology and female sexuality

REBECCA IRVIN

JULY 8, 2019



Sara Anstis: Slip Spill.

“My earliest memories of drawing are of making a friend laugh by drawing breasts,” reveals artist Sara Anstis. Her ethereal soft pastel pictures, drawn onto paper and walls, merge mythic imagery and symbolism with female experience, bodihood and sexuality.

Sara’s artistic education has taken her far from the “small idyllic island in Canada,” Salt Spring, where she grew up. Having attended art school at Concordia University in Montreal, where she also studied sociology, Sara moved to Gothenburg for an MFA at the Valand Academy, and then to London, where she completed the postgraduate drawing program at the Royal Drawing School, taking time off in between her studies to work on personal projects and make money.

Speaking of how her distinctive style evolved, with its tumescent curves, vivid colours and hazy, bruise-like shadows, Sara tells us: “At Concordia, I felt most comfortable in the drawing studio. I worked solely with charcoal on paper in a very detailed manner during my undergrad and for about three years after that. So for seven years I refused to use colour. Then a switch slowly and painfully flipped and colour rushed in, starting with green. I also eventually let go of the detailed line work that I had forced myself to do, and also the idea that the amount of discernible labour justifies the art object. The women in my current drawings are maybe the murderers of all those little lines.”



Sara Anstis: Thief, By The Sea.

The predominant concepts that Sara's works embody are, in her words: "Gendered subjectivity, Eros, humour, colour, personal mythologies, misunderstandings and anthropomorphisms." These themes are woven together in the pictures among a plethora of otherworldly elements – surreal landscapes, strange creatures and plants – by which Sara's figures lay claim to female erotic desire, taking unconstrained delight in their bodies, each other and their environments, at a remove from heteronormative and patriarchal societal conditions. As Sara describes them: "My images – I waver between calling them drawings and soft pastel paintings – are populated by mainly female figures. I get to know them gradually and they end up shamelessly doing whatever they want within their landscapes. Sometimes they are interacting with companion species, or, as in a recent series, they are accompanied by unknown protean beings."

Sara's artistic influences are eclectic and broad – she lists Carol Rama, Semiha Berksoy, Stanley Spencer, the Chicago Imagists, Milton Avery, Miriam Cahn, Britta Marakatt-Labba and the Assyrian stone reliefs depicting the royal *Lion Hunt of Ashurbanipal*. Drawing on these visual references, her creative process is one that takes place as a kind of prolonged imaginative inhabitation of the fantastical realm that breeds the stories and mythologies played out in her work. She tells us: "I imagine situations and make fast drawings. I think while I draw and this usually means I don't have a specific image in mind before starting something new. When I start a new pastel drawing I scribble on the paper and rub pigment into it to make it a less precious object. This scribbling and rubbing makes a beautiful image in itself, and I tell myself that one day I'll leave that abstraction as is – but that's probably a lie. I am too in love with aiming gazes and fleshing out bodies."

With fish decorating their hair, hands full of seaweed and caressing the tentacles of eel and snake-like creatures that loop between their legs and around their waists, the women in Sara's images consummate a deep and mystical connection between female subjectivity, sexuality and nature.



Sara Anstis: Hello It's Me.