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The super-gallerist putting women in the picture

Alison Jacques is bringing a wave of marginalised artists who never “got their dues” to international glory

Francesca Gavin | 18 November 2020



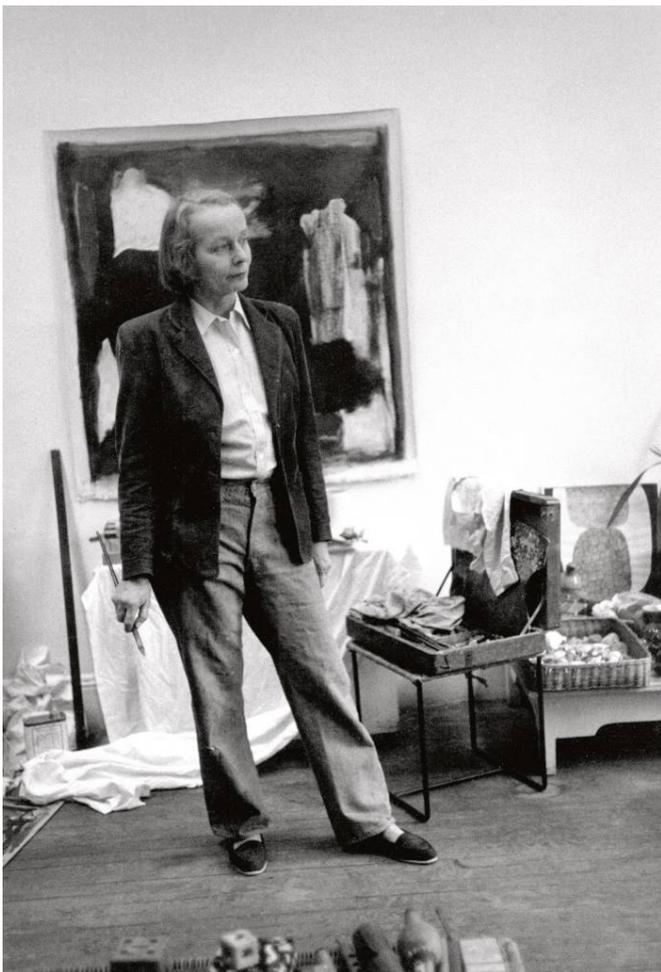
© Hannah Starkey. Courtesy of the Destina Foundation, New York and Alison Jacques Gallery, London. © Artist's Rights Society, New York, and ADAGP, Paris

“Strong women intent on doing their own thing are like magnets for me, I gravitate towards them and their work without even realising it,” says Alison Jacques. The Fitzrovia gallerist has established herself among the most prominent international galleries to focus on repositioning female artists overlooked in the canon of art history. When it comes to the art market, she is the queen of old ladies. Thanks to her, many previously under-the-radar artists are being given major international shows,

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including Brazilian painter and installation artist Lygia Clark at the Guggenheim Bilbao this autumn; textural artist Sheila Hicks at the Hepworth Wakefield next year; and Slovakian sculptor Maria Bartuszová at Tate Modern next November.

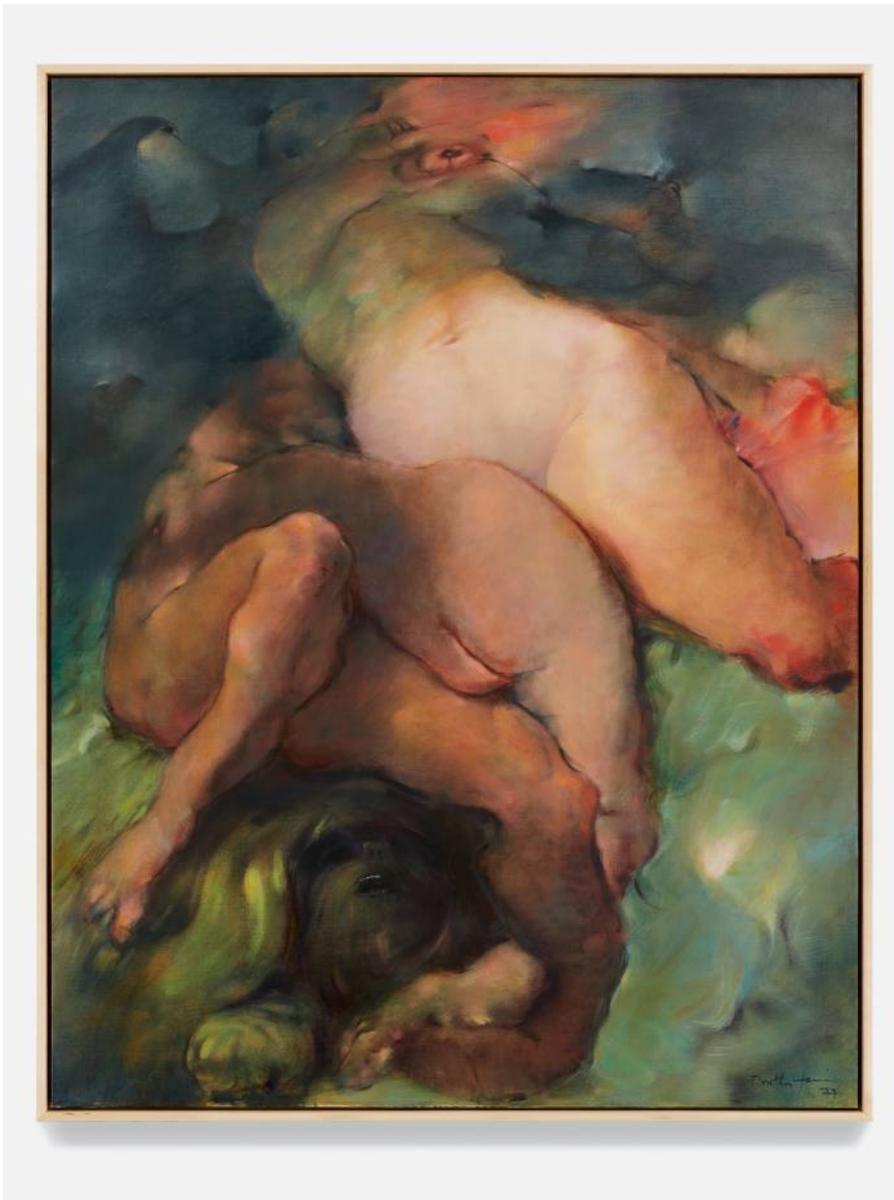
Working directly with women in the later stages of their careers, or posthumously with their families and estates, Jacques has a superlative eye, and a tenacity that's inspiring. She began carving her niche in 2007, three years after opening her eponymous gallery space, with the American performance artist and sculptor Hannah Wilke, known for her pieces exploring sexuality, femininity, and reclaiming the female body from the male gaze. "It was difficult to find her work and see in the flesh. But if you really want something and you search for it, you will find someone, somewhere who can put you in touch with someone else who opens a door," Jacques says of her experience. "Wilke had had a rough ride even from her contemporaries in the '70s. She was too beautiful. It wasn't until she made the body of work when she was dying from lymphoma, of photographs of herself bloated and losing her hair, that people accepted her." The gallery was the first in Europe to hold a solo exhibition of Wilke's work. Tate bought a small piece, and the purchase set in motion a relationship with Jacques and Wilke's estate and archive that eventually resulted in the public gallery purchasing the largest installation Wilke ever made – prices now reach up to \$1m for large installations (though small drawings can start from around \$35,000).



Betty Parsons in her studio © Courtesy Alison Jacques Gallery, London and Alexander Gray Associates, New York © Betty Parsons Foundation

Focusing on the art historical and female artists who were not getting their dues was also a way to future-proof the gallery against “the increasing number of situations when large ‘supermarket’ galleries try to take what we have built,” she says, referring to the poaching of emerging artists just at the point that they start to gain recognition.

Jacques had some experience with estates, having taken on Robert Mapplethorpe’s in 1999, when she was in partnership with fellow gallerist Charles Asprey, running Asprey Jacques. At the time, the American photographic artist was not being shown in museums. Jacques worked with the Foundation to promote some of his lesser-known bodies of work – from Polaroids to unique sculptures to jewellery – and began to build a specialist reputation.



Portrait de Famille (Family Portrait), 1977, by Dorothea Tanning © Courtesy of the Destina Foundation, New York, and Alison Jacques Gallery, London. © Artist's Rights Society, New York, and ADAGP, Paris



Pounding Strong, 1981, by Dorothea Tanning © Courtesy of the Destina Foundation, New York, and Alison Jacques Gallery, London. © Artist's Rights Society, New York, and ADAGP, Paris

Jacques's process for discovering her now-impressive roster of female names has been instinctive. "There is a formula. It starts with my passion and belief in the work. I need to know curators and collectors will respond to the work," she says. In 2010, she spotted a small, forgotten Dorothea Tanning work in MoMA. "A tiny stained-glass painting. It was exquisite," Jacques recalls. She found out that Tanning was still alive and contacted her foundation. "Dorothea was, I think, 100. She wasn't looking for a gallery. I just kept knocking on the door intermittently over the next six months. Eventually I was allowed to go in." She spotted some collages at the back of a hallway that had rarely been shown. Made in the '70s and '80s, these were the only works that Tanning had always wanted – and never had – exhibited in a group. Jacques's hard work helped to get Tanning a well-deserved retrospective at the Tate Modern last year. Today, her paintings can command prices between \$75,000 and \$1m.

Jacques was also able to capitalise on the fact that there wasn't a strong market for a generation of older female artists when approaching Lygia Clark's estate. One of the most important South American abstract artists to emerge in the 1950s, Clark had not shown extensively outside Brazil, partly due to complicated terms with purchasing and export. "A lot of well-known gallerists in New York had tried for years to get through to the Clark family and had been met with silence," she says. But Jacques approached Clark's son with a personal note. She had a response within 24 hours. The relationship was a huge success, and in 2011 Clark was given a solo stand in the Art Feature at Art Basel. Jacques will stage a delayed centennial exhibition in her own gallery next spring, featuring

collages, gouaches on paper from \$220,000, paintings from \$1.7m and sculptures, including Bicho (Creature) pieces, from \$1.2m.



S.O.S. Starification Object Series #4 (Mastification Box), 1975, by Hannah Wilke © Marsie, Emanuelle, Damon and Andrew Scharlatt, Hannah Wilke Collection & Archive, Los Angeles. Licensed by VAGA at Artist's rights society (ARS), New York, DACs, London. Courtesy of Hannah Wilke Collection & Archive, Los Angeles and Alison Jacques Gallery, London

It's a similar story with Betty Parsons, the late New York gallerist celebrated for championing new American painting by the likes of Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock, but whose success often overshadowed her own role as an artist. Jacques's exhibition of Parsons's paintings, gouaches on paper and sculptures last year was the first London exhibition for nearly 40 years, and one of the hottest tickets during Frieze Week.

Jacques's mix of instinct, opportunism and luck has deep roots. In her 20s, a postgraduate curating course in Prato led to a placement at the Kunstverein Düsseldorf, where then-director Jiri Svestka saw her potential and charged her with curating light-installation artist James Turrell's first travelling show. A job as news editor at Flash Art magazine in Milan followed, under whose auspices a trip to the now-legendary UnFair in Cologne planted the idea of having her own space. Among the

stands of Maureen Paley, Karsten Schubert and Jay Jopling, "I really sensed this collegial atmosphere", says Jacques. "It was fun. There was something in the air. Karsten was giving out gingerbread men to all the gallerists. I remember thinking, I'd like to have my own gallery one day."



Lygia Clark in her studio in Rio de Janeiro, c1950s © O Mundo De Lygia Clark, Associação Cultural, Rio De Janeiro, courtesy of Alison Jacques Gallery, London

The female gallerists in London – Maureen Paley, Victoria Miro and Sadie Coles – were a strong inspiration, alongside New York pioneers such as Barbara Gladstone, Marian Goodman and Paula Cooper. "It was much harsher for them as women than I think it is for us now," says Jacques. She came back to London, briefly working for Victoria Miro before Leslie Waddington on Cork Street offered her a full-time job. "He really took me under his wing. He was so knowledgeable. He could be difficult but he was absolutely the real deal." She began as a press officer, but was encouraged by Waddington to sell. Her first client was Charles Asprey, whom she met at an opening, and who bought a work by abstract painter Ian Davenport. After a curating stint at the British School in Rome, Jacques teamed up with Asprey and in 1998 they opened their gallery, which ran for seven years. When she

started her own eponymous space, collectors Charles Saatchi and Jerry Speyer stopped by on her first day and promised their support. From the start, she set an ambitious programme, selling out her first show of Jack Pierson sculptures at £65,000 per work. "The curators came and could visualise the works in a museum. We started selling to museums straight away." Part of Jacques's agenda is to show how well these overlooked female artists can sit alongside well-known contemporary artists. Tanning, for example, with Louise Bourgeois, Sarah Lucas and Jenny Saville. Jacques's aim was to reposition Tanning as something far more than Max Ernst's ex-wife. "Maybe it's a bit idealistic, but I believe that if an artist is truly great then they will get there if given the right platform. You've just got to put energy into it."



The Jade Mountain, 1967, by Lenore Tawney © Courtesy of the Lenore G Tawney Foundation, New York, and Alison Jacques Gallery, London. © Leonore G Tawney Foundation



Amethyst Forest, 2020, by Sheila Hicks © Sheila Hicks, courtesy of Alison Jacques Gallery, London

Many of the artists Jacques has added to her roster have yet to gain widespread recognition. Maria Bartuszová, for example, is a Slovakian artist who, during her lifetime, made distinctive, organic-looking white plaster sculptures, which currently sell for between €65,000 and €700,000. But that is set to change with Bartuszová's Tate Modern show – originally scheduled for this November, but delayed by a year. Two years ago, Jacques also took on the Lenore Tawney estate. She first showed her pioneering hanging thread-based textile works at Frieze Masters, sold a major work to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and is holding the first solo show of Tawney's work next May, focusing on pieces from the '60s to the '80s.

Projects with Glasgow International, Sydney Biennial and the Hayward followed Jacques's decision to represent Sheila Hicks in 2012, after coming across her work at the São Paulo Biennial. At that time, Hicks was seen more as an artist existing in the design realm. "I just remember it was a sea of colour and texture. It was like nothing else I had seen before. It was fantastic," says Jacques. Next autumn, Hicks has a major solo at Hepworth Wakefield, with curator Andrew Bonacina.



Nicola L at her home in the Chelsea Hotel, wearing one of her series of Pénérables, 1989 © Rita Barros, courtesy Alison Jacques Gallery, London, and Nicola L Collection and Archive © Nicola L Collection and Archive



Untitled, 1972-1974, by Maria Bartusová © Courtesy of the Estate of Maria Bartusová, Kosice, and Alison Jacques Gallery, London © The Archive of Maria Bartusová, Kosice

Although a large number of Jacques's roster is female, feminism is not necessarily at the heart of their practices. Notable exceptions are Ana Mendieta and Hannah Wilke, as is the latest artist to join the gallery, the octogenarian French-Moroccan figurative sculptor Nicola L, whose "functional and playful sculptures", also praised in a design context, often explore female objectification and the domestic. Jacques maintains that her focus is talent rather than gender. This autumn saw a solo exhibition of the late African-American photographer Gordon Parks, following a stunning solo booth at Frieze Masters last October. And for two decades, she has worked with artists such as Graham Little – an exceptional British painter with one of the most interesting and sensitive approaches to figurative art. "One thing that unites all my artists, be they male or female, dead or alive, is they all have their own voice."