



INSIDE BURGER COLLECTION

# THE BODY GETS LOST IN THE GESTURES

Rita Ackermann in conversation with  
András Szántó



**RITA ACKERMANN**, *Mama, August*, 2020, oil, pigment, acrylic, and china marker on canvas, 193×190.5 cm. Photo by Lance Brewer. All images courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth, London/Somerset/New York/Los Angeles/Zürich/St Moritz/Gstaad/Hong Kong.

Some 30 years after they first met as Hungarians who had moved to New York, the painter Rita Ackermann and the author András Szántó reconvened in 2021, reflecting on Ackermann's trajectory as an artist. Their conversation touches upon the experience of emigration, the influences of classical training, the evolution of Ackermann's large-scale expressionist paintings, and connections between the artist's personal biography and public role.

**AS** We must start from the beginning. You and I are from Budapest. I believe I picked you up from the airport when you arrived in New York as a very young artist. Where do you now feel you belong?

**RA** I belong where growing is possible. I have heard from others who left their countries at a young age that you truly become rooted in rootlessness, and I believe that is a good thing. It is helpful to lose your roots and relearn everything within a new culture, without losing your core self. Then you are able to grow closer to your essence and mission—to understanding why you are here. Willem de Kooning is an excellent example.

**AS** One thing you got in Hungary was rigorous academic training. What was it like to be an art student in Budapest in the late 1980s?

**RA** From 1989 to 1991, Budapest was the epicenter of a social upheaval, and the Hungarian Academy of Arts served as one of the revolution's intellectual and cultural headquarters. As students, we were constructing a new culture. Suddenly, we had freedom of speech, a hand in our future. The changes ushered in a group of progressive professors, young thinkers broadly informed by the latest trends in Western art and philosophy. Their lectures were packed. My aesthetics professor Péter György introduced me to Paul Virilio's books, which have continued to serve as inspirational references. He was prophetic.

**AS** Even so, you received a very rigorous, classical training, in the old style.

**RA** That classical training started at the age of 14 at a specialized art high school. If you did not have that rigorous classical background, you had nearly zero chance of getting into the academy. I went to a normal high school, so I had to do my training after school to catch up. The competition was fierce to get into the academy. After acceptance, for the first year, the classical training continued with mandatory classes in anatomy, geometry, and chemistry. It felt like liberation once we could start making art and working on our own ideas.

**AS** The other foundational influence on you was family. Your recent *Mama* paintings (2018– ) are about your mother. A previous body of your work relates to your brother. You brought this history with you, but it means something else now that you are in New York.

**RA** During my first year in New York, my focus was to get a job and blend into the environment, before processing the experience of separating from my loving family and my "safe" Hungarian future. Even though Hungary and New York are both melting pots of different cultures and ethnicities, they could not be more different. In the 1980s, Hungary was still a sealed-off bubble. New York was a wild, limitless, open field. The memory of being an embarrassingly exotic Hungarian is still somewhat fresh for me. It took me two years to digest the shock of moving. Once settled, the shock resurfaced in my subconsciousness, first in drawings and later, around 1993, in paintings.

**AS** I want to pause here on a Hungarian idiosyncrasy. We come from a place where people sometimes change their names. Tell me about your name. When you landed in New York, you were still Rita Bakos.

**RA** Ackermann was my grandmother's maiden name. I changed my name to get rid of the stigma of being eastern European. My lack of a sophisticated English vocabulary and my heavy accent gave away too much about my background. I wanted to have at least a name that instantly fit in. "Ackermann" protected me, in a way. It concealed parts of my life to which I could retreat privately, to be the person whom I left behind in Hungary.



**AS** You quickly found your way into the underground New York arts scene of the early 1990s, and this set you off in a certain trajectory. How does this journey look now in the rearview mirror?

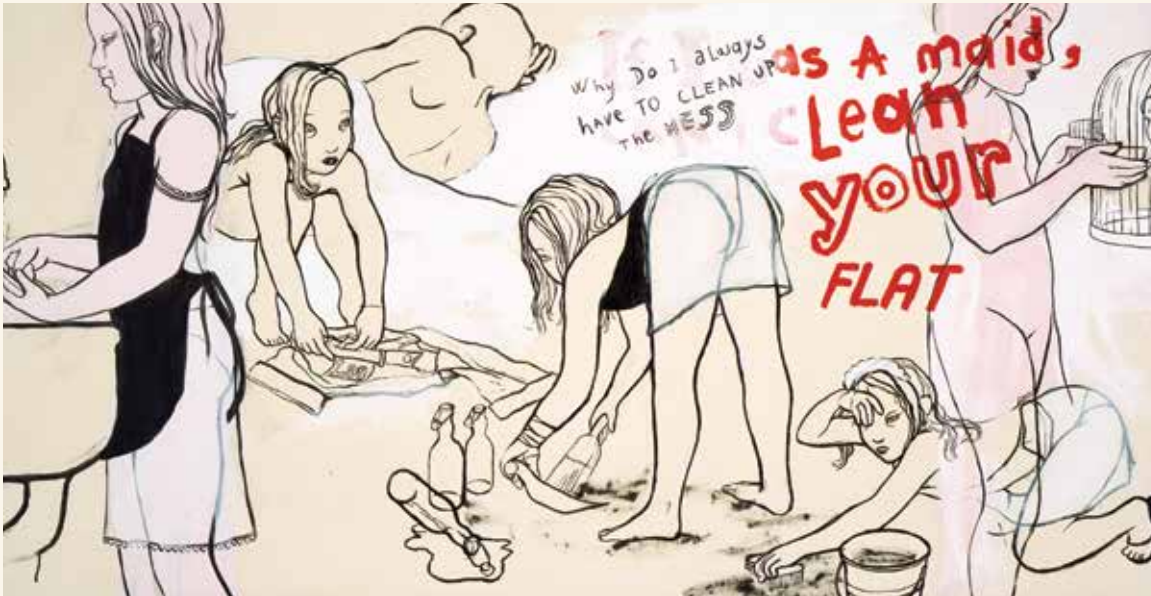
**RA** Looking back, I see moments of providence. I was gifted with a certain naïveté, and this helped me through the challenges of assimilation. New York's subculture at the time had a similarly childlike attitude of openness and non-judgmental acceptance. It was romantic to be self-made and to be engaged in a collective creative effort. Being a multidisciplinary artist was not a label, but a natural condition for collaborating with others in the downtown art, music, film, and fashion scene. We were effortlessly creating culture together. We had few aspirations for mainstream success. It was all just for the sake of getting our ideas out there—to be heard, seen, recognized.

Still, hearing about the downtown art scene today from my college-age daughter, there are more similarities than differences. There are a lot of things in our current cultural atmosphere that I cannot get behind, but I can see that good things are happening. Good people are building the future modestly, under the radar, with optimism, disengaging from the angry mainstream.

Top left: **RITA ACKERMANN**, *Mama, Let me in*, 2020, oil, acrylic, and china marker on canvas, 190.5 × 165.8 × 3.8 cm. Photo by Jon Etter.

Top right: **RITA ACKERMANN**, *Mama, the Correspondence*, 2021, oil, acrylic, and china marker on canvas, 193 × 188 cm. Photo by Thomas Barratt.

Bottom right: **RITA ACKERMANN**, *Mama, Rapture*, 2021, oil, acrylic, and china marker on canvas, 195.6 × 167.6 cm. Photo by Thomas Barratt.



**RITA ACKERMANN**, *If I was a maid...*, 1994, acrylic and pencil on canvas, 137 × 270.2 cm.

**AS** When you came to the United States, you would sit and draw in these little notebooks, which you still use. I think of them as both journals and laboratories. What roles do they play in your practice?

**RA** They are records of a visual vocabulary. I do automatic drawing and writing in these notebooks. An automatic drawing or gesture is a starting point for a painting. That's why it's great to have the sketchbooks. They provide source material, a perpetually recorded vocabulary of lines, figures, and forms that can be incorporated into a painting. But it is equally satisfying to me when a double-page drawing doesn't evolve into a painting and stays hidden in the book.

**AS** Let's talk about your drawing. At heart, you worship the line. It has been a constant in your work.

**RA** I have always been drawn to contours. I remember in my youth preferring children's illustrations with strong contours around the figures, and disliking the patchy style of watercolors. Colors didn't matter much to me, but the lines were always important. Not surprisingly, Vincent van Gogh was the first painter I was drawn to, because of the harsh lines surrounding his figures.

It was clear to me that a line can contain a universe within itself. I would start by drawing a line, and then I would decide whether it was a figure or a movement that was translating a story or a sentiment through a figure. It was a fulfillment to create clear boundaries with lines, or to obscure the figures into abstraction, so that only I knew what had been there before.

**AS** People often underestimate the tactile, physical joy artists get from certain actions. John Chamberlain once told me his sculptures made of used cars are not commentaries on consumer society but originated simply because he likes to crumple things. He used to crumple paper until his dealer said, "you need something more lasting for collectors to buy it." So he went to the junkyard to crumple metal.

**RA** Funny that you mention Chamberlain's pleasure in crumpling paper. When I saw the permanent installation of his sculptures in Marfa, Texas, my first thought was that they are like monster balls that a giant had created out of crumpled toy cars. Dan Graham used to tell me that artists who are Aries have a tendency to continue living out their childhood through their work. His works have a youthful undertone. He likes to draw conclusions about Chamberlain, himself, and me from astrological signs. We are all Aries.

There is another funny parallel between my work and Chamberlain's explanation of why he works with metal and not paper. Around 1993, when I first showed my sketchbook drawings to a young dealer, he similarly advised me to use them to make something larger and more durable, so I went to the Pearl Paint store on Canal Street and bought raw canvas, rabbit-skin glue, and acrylic ink to make larger paintings composed of my line drawings. The paintings are raw and violent, but also graceful. They somehow are able to communicate with an unusually broad audience.

**AS** Painting comes naturally to you, and your practice is particularly expressionistic. Such gestural painting used to be the domain of male painters. What are you trying to achieve?

**RA** I didn't choose painting to achieve anything. Painting chose me. From a young age, seeing art meant experiencing a different dimension. The abstract expressionists' works resonated with how I liked to handle paint—with large, gestural strokes that essentially consist of multitudes of random pictorial events. Abstract Expressionism wasn't about expressing oneself, but losing oneself in painting to reach a higher place than the self.

I was inspired by Franz Kline and de Kooning, but also Chaïm Soutine and van Gogh. I admired Arnulf Rainer's drawings and the early works of Oskar Kokoschka. When I stopped painting those girls, I wanted to get away from instant recognizability. The brother paintings in 1996 balance the innocent figure in the foreground with violent abstract-expressionist nature in the background. This opened up new possibilities. Painting became more about painting, instead of finding out who I was. I can't call it thinking when I paint. The decisions about movements on the canvas come from deep within. The whole body is involved in the execution. Body and mind both get lost in the gesture.

**AS** That's when you became widely known for this waif-like figure, a mainstay in your early work. I remember her appearing in unexpected places, like the entryway of Max Fish, a bar on the Lower East Side. The girl became your signature, but you gave her only a short life. Why?

**RA** It all happened very fast. After my first solo show in 1994, at the Andrea Rosen Gallery, and painting the windows of the New Museum, the works went viral. It was intoxicating to work with endless inspiration on multiple shows in Europe. The works were pouring out of me. I was in an enchanted state, but soon, neither I nor the audience was able to separate the girls in the paintings from my identity. Looking to Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) as source material turned out to be a perfect recipe for disaster. It culminated in a powerful exhibition in Zürich, followed by a nervous breakdown.

That was the summer of 1995. I had to stop telling made-up fables with these girl figures. I could not handle it anymore. I had fans who became obsessed with these girls. It wasn't healthy. A Japanese publishing company, Rockin' On, released a book about my works from 1993 to '96. In Tokyo, people made shrines around it in the bookstores. I didn't know manga culture, so I could not understand what it meant for someone to invent a new manga character. Looking back on this odd, intense phase of popularity in Japan and all the hype, I now realize that a survival instinct dictated that I do something different. I consciously closed that chapter.



**RITA ACKERMANN**, *Washing Dishes...*, 1995, ink, crayon, and acrylic on linen, 134 × 162 cm.

**AS** I know that after painting for hours, you become exhausted. How does the process start? More importantly, how do you know it has reached its endpoint?

**RA** I let the painting take the lead. What works best for me is creating numerous fields of chaos first. Naturally, it begins with hanging large untouched canvases on the wall as a physical warm-up, and proceeds into complete battle zones. The abrupt motions of painting make me fall out of real time and space, into a place where I'm able to better receive instructions from the painting itself. Each one has something else to say. Sometimes it takes several months until a work speaks up and pushes through with clarity. It didn't even need me to be made. It preexisted somewhere. I just grabbed it off the shelf of another dimension.

**AS** Is there anything that can still be said and done with painting? What can an artist add to the story of painting, working in this overstimulated, hyper-digitized present, with hundreds of years of art history behind you?

**RA** If we allow the painting to be a soulful, living entity, then this question is already answered. Of course, there are also soulless paintings, and I have seen paintings that suck the soul out of you, so why attempt to make another painting? Precisely because there are hundreds of years behind you, with that primal, raw desire that each painter had when they painted their pictures. It is the ultimate mission.



**RITA ACKERMANN**, *Mama, Deer Hunter*, 2021, acrylic, oil, pigment, and china marker on canvas, 195.6 × 190.5 cm. Photo by François Fernandez.

**AS** We both come out of eastern Europe, where things evolve and then are periodically torn down. I feel a similar drama in some of your works, not historically, but more cosmically. Am I wrong?

**RA** Absolutely true. Our background has taught us to be always ready for the unexpected, and to crack jokes atop the ruins. Likewise, I believe a painting must have strength to bounce back from lost places. The decision to push a piece through deconstruction is fueled by restless optimism. Each painting offers the prospect of making the best picture I've ever made. The ultimate purpose of destruction is to excavate greatness.

**AS** This is a time like no other. Things that we once took for granted are suddenly uncertain. Where do you see yourself in this moment of change?

**RA** The world brings us plenty of drama and destabilizing challenges. My job is to not be numb. To be renewed every day. To not fall into some sort of comfort or monotony. To be always alive. I do not think my work should stand behind any ideology or political sentiment. It should not represent fashionable trends. Right now, I feel like I am reflecting mostly the positive in times of war in the homeland. My work should always be clean, honest, as spiritual as possible, and impossible to copy.

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**ANDRÁS SZÁNTÓ** is a New York-based author and strategic advisor to arts institutions and initiatives worldwide. His latest book is *The Future of the Museum: 28 Dialogues* (Hatje Cantz, 2020).

Opposing impulses of creation and destruction mark the touchstone of Hungary-born, New York-based artist **RITA ACKERMANN**'s practice. Ackermann's compositions occupy a space between the figurative and the abstract, where human forms simultaneously disappear and re-emerge. Her latest *Mama* series has been shown at Hauser & Wirth's spaces in Monaco, Zurich, and New York. Her other recent solos include "Movements as Monuments," La Triennale di Milano (2018); and "The Aesthetic of Disappearance," Malmö Konsthall (2016), among others.