

# An Interview With Jennifer Sullivan

By Omer Soylemez | June 19, 2019



Image courtesy of Jennifer Sullivan Studio.

Jennifer Sullivan is a New York-based multidisciplinary artist working in painting, performance, and video. Jennifer got her BFA from Pratt and MFA from Parsons. She has exhibited at various prestigious galleries and museums such as Peter Blum Gallery, PS1 Contemporary Art Center, and The New Museum. In this interview, Jennifer shares with us her artistic career and what inspires her on a daily basis.



Image courtesy of Jennifer Sullivan Studio.

**Omer Soylemez: How would you describe your work and philosophy as an artist?**

Jennifer Sullivan: I wrote in a statement for *the soft animal of your body*, my last solo show at Five Car Garage, that I make “big, bad, girly paintings”. Art is a place that I’ve found where I don’t have to be “good”, which often means trying to form ones’ self to the shape that others would like you to be. It is a place where I am trying to self-actualize and to know myself on a deep level. If you have ever seen Freud’s diagram of the mind, it’s drawn like a giant iceberg, and consciousness is only the very tip of it that pokes above the surface. So, there is all of this unknown material, all of these parts of ourselves we don’t even know about, and I feel like making art, is a way to literally draw or paint these parts out, to bring them above the surface and into view. My work is an excavation site for knowing myself and thus for knowing and touching the

world around me, since our world is always a mirror reflection of our mind.



Image courtesy of Jennifer Sullivan Studio.



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**Omer Soylemez: What do you want your work to say about you?**

Jennifer Sullivan: I want my work to say I was here, I was alive, I was human, that I was in a process of becoming and growing. I want my work to be full of love and feeling, I want people to feel a sense of connection and intimacy when they look at it, like I am bringing them into my inner world and they feel at home there and they see themselves in it too.

**Omer Soylemez: A lot of your works incorporate humor, what is the appeal of this style of expression for you?**

Jennifer Sullivan: Humor for me is a way of mastering pain. They say that the formula for comedy is tragedy plus time. I think humor has a lot to do with shame and detaching from a false image of ourselves, and owning the parts that we

may want to hide. Franz Kline said that “creating is to have the capacity to be embarrassed” and I think that is ultimately what humor does – it is a willingness to show the embarrassing parts and laugh at them.



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**Omer Soylemez: You use a lot of lively colors in your paintings. What is the reason behind this choice?**

Jennifer Sullivan: Yes, I do love color! I dress very colorfully and I like to surround myself with colors in my home and in general. Color is a very emotional and intuitive medium, it's also very relational. It's very alive and it hits you at a gut/heart level. I love that color can express things in an emotional way that goes beyond language, and brings you into experiencing the world through your body rather than through the intellect.

**Omer Soylemez: How did you get into video and performance art? How would you compare them to the other mediums you work with?**

Jennifer Sullivan: I started making performance art because it scared me, and because I've always liked the idea of blurring the boundaries between art and life. I wanted to be in the art, to use myself and my life as a material. I started making videos right after undergrad and I was never really trained in how to

do it, but I've always been a film lover, and the directness of it appealed to me, and the collage-like aspect of editing as well. More recently I've been moving away from performance and video to focus more on painting, but I feel like I'm coming at it from the perspective of a performance artist. It's still trying to use myself and my life as a material, and I feel like painting also allows me to try on different characters, roles, costumes and feelings in the same way that performance has done. I've compared painting to method acting at times because I use my emotions and sense memories to imbue the work with a sense of real feelings and an authentic energy.

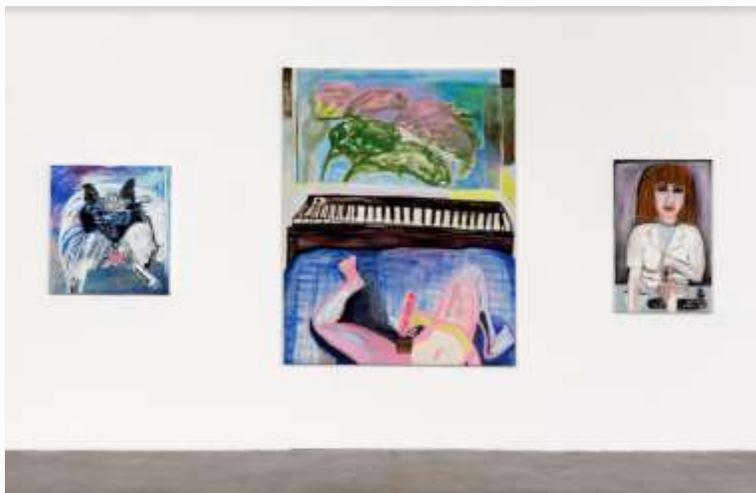


Image courtesy of Jennifer Sullivan Studio.

**Omer Soylemez: Do you think live performances are more engaging for the audience?**

Jennifer Sullivan: I think live performance is definitely more engaging than watching a documentation of a performance after it happened. It's never quite the same. However, I think there are pros and cons to live performance vs performing for the camera which I have done a lot of too. In a live performance there is more energy and direct connection and collaboration with the audience. In a video performance, it is more intimate and I am connecting with myself in a less self-conscious way. There is a delayed sense of connection that happens, you imagine someone seeing it eventually in the future, but it could potentially be more raw and unfiltered in some ways since no one is watching you make it. Painting is the same way, it feels like a private performance and the canvas is the document of my actions in the studio.



Image courtesy of Jennifer Sullivan Studio.

**Omer Soylemez: What prompt you to get into stand-up comedy? Would you say you are a funny person off-stage?**

Jennifer Sullivan: I think my father introduced me to a comic sensibility, he is always trying to make jokes and puns and he showed me a lot of absurdist comedy shows when I was a kid like Monty Python, 70s SNL, SCTV, Benny Hill and Laugh-In. I love comedy of all kinds, and I particularly like stand-up as a very direct form of expression –it's very similar to drawing in that way. You use your natural thought process as a jumping off point. It made a lot of sense coming out of my background of making autobiographical videos too, which often involved voice-over, so a humorous monologue was something I'd already been doing in that format. I would say I'm also a funny person off-stage too, or at least I try to be. I like to think on my feet!



Image courtesy of Jennifer Sullivan Studio.

**Omer Soylemez: Who or what influenced your work and style? In what ways would you say your work is similar and dissimilar to these works?**

Jennifer Sullivan: I've been influenced by so many artists! Some of my favorites are Martin Kippenberger, Cady Noland, David Hammons, Joan Brown, William Copley. I'm also very inspired by filmmakers and performance artists like Robert Bresson, Agnes Varda, Claire Denis, John Cassavetes, Carolee Schneemann, Allan Kaprow, Cheryl Donegan, Kirstin Stoltmann. I love so-called outsider artists too even though I hate that word. William Hawkins is someone that I've fallen in love



Image courtesy of Jennifer Sullivan Studio.

with recently – his work is incredible – so colorful and clear and inventive. The British painter Rose Wylie and Sophie von Hellerman are also recent favorites. What I feel an affinity with in all of these artist's work is a sense of humanism, and a desire to be subversive in some way against the status quo – to reveal something that is not usually seen or talked about. I think there is a sense of wit and presence and of “keeping it real” in all of this work too that I also strive for as well. In the best work there is a sense of flow – nothing is forced or trying too hard, it is just being itself.

**Omer Soylemez: Do you take on common themes in your paintings and videos? If so, what themes would you say are the focus of your work?**

Jennifer Sullivan: I've been in psychoanalysis for several years now where I lay on a couch and do the whole Freudian thing. I feel like my work is the same process – a practice for seeing myself and become more authentic and free. My work has also been quite informed by my experiencing the world through a female body and how that feels and attempting to forefront a feminine sensibility and give it the significance it may not always be given in the culture at large. I think vulnerability is often seen as a weakness, but I want to propose vulnerability as a courageous and radical action.

**Omer Soylemez: What have you been working on recently? What can people expect to see from you in the future?**

Jennifer Sullivan: Recently, I've made a return to source material through film stills. I had a solo show earlier this year called *Exiled Parts* at No Place gallery in Columbus, OH and it was the first time I had used sources outside of my own photos or imagination in while, but I have begun to have a returned interest in film recently, and my only commitment to myself is that if I am using a source image that I must transform it enough to make it my own. I am particularly interested in the idea of the female gaze right now as well and using film as a way to talk about psychological states – there is a synergy between filmic images and thoughts, because they're both fantasies, they're both projections. So right now, I am working on some new works, some of which include film stills but also include the computer monitor and the interior details of the space around the screen. I am also getting very excited about the idea of portraiture lately – I consider all of my work an ongoing self-portrait, but I've done a lot of literal self-portraits as well as portraits of my cat Queenie, and earlier some portraits of my mother after she passed away. But I want to make portraits of other people now, especially men because it seems like an extension of the female gaze idea and a reversal of all the images of women as subject, and it also just seems exciting, and fun, and an interesting challenge. I'm going to make a big portrait of my father soon! I hope to exhibit all of this work as the constellation of ideas in my next solo exhibition in the next year. I'll also be hosting a comedy night performance on Governor's Island later in June as part of NADA House, which is presented in collaboration with Five Car Garage will include performances by Zuriel Waters, Amy Khoshbin, Peter Labier, Jenna Rosenburg, and Aaron Storck.



Image courtesy of Jennifer Sullivan Studio.

**Omer Soylemez: You are also a professor in Parsons, what has this experience been like so far?**

Jennifer Sullivan: I love teaching at Parsons, my students are great and very inspiring. I teach a class called *Time: Embodied* which definitely draws quite a bit on my knowledge/history as a video and performance artist, and from the language of filmmaking. The idea of the class is that time is a medium, a construct, and a tool. I love that I can expose young artists to some of the works that I have been most influenced by and it gives me the opportunity to keep revisiting them and thinking about them anew and seeing them through their eyes.

**Omer Soylemez: Can you talk about your work that is being displayed in the “20/20” group show?**

Jennifer Sullivan: Yes! I currently have a painting included in *20/20* at Peter Blum gallery, which is a really interesting group show that opened recently and includes both video and paintings side by side. The show is curated by Vlad Smolkin. My painting is called *Pickpocket 2 (film still)*, a work from

**PETER BLUM** GALLERY

2015. It is based on a still from the Robert Bresson film *Pickpocket*, which is a beautiful black and white film which I “colorized” in the painting. The moment I chose to paint is from the final scene in which the *Pickpocket* character finally experiences a moment of connection through the bars of his jail cell with this woman Jeanne. It’s a really powerful climatic scene in which the character finds a sense of intimacy and transcendence, and I’ve been kind of obsessed with this image for years. I chose a moment which poses the viewer from the women’s POV looking at the man, kind of reversing the male gaze. Ultimately, I am both characters – it is a bit unclear who is on which side of the bars. In a sense, we all feel imprisoned in our minds and bodies and we are all trying to connect to each other, I think that is ultimately what everyone wants – connection. We usually see ourselves as separate, and we don’t know that we are actually all connected. It could also be a metaphor for the artist and their audience on two sides of the frame, trying to reach each other. If art is really working, that connection will happen and you can break through the fourth wall.



Image courtesy of Jennifer Sullivan Studio.