

## Troubling Our Trouble with Difficult Women

By Sky Goodden

In terms of timing, Tony Scherman's *Difficult Women* presents an auspicious inquiry, one that could be witnessed as a searing – even insensitive – challenge to its contemporary audience. What makes a woman difficult? he asks. Who do we associate with the term, and how do they get portrayed? The contemporary moment's regard for the subject of women – and their difficulty – is rife with unseen hazards. Without naming names (because they'd quickly become dated, but also, they don't really matter; recent celebrity citations regarding the perceived subject only serve as footnotes to a greater body of commonly-shared experience, as we're quickly learning), the world is actively reflecting on what makes a woman difficult, and what her punishment or reward has been – and ought to be. It's a heady time to frame this ever-shifting subject.

On reflection, however, history doesn't suggest a moment when this set of questions – and their presentation by a male artist, no less – would not feel timely, challenging, and both obtuse and overdue. Indeed, this series presents a provocation of contradictions and constancy that is ripe, and deep, and deserving of our fierce and prolonged consideration. At its base, Scherman asks us what a difficult woman is, and what it means to frame one. How does this subject go embodied, and portrayed? What's the difference between these? In our looking, we should know an answer.

Continuing his decades-long articulation of the figure in encaustic painting, Scherman produces built-up impastos that take on new meaning, and drive down into new metaphysical layers. He develops on past series that similarly named their subjects (*The Rape of Callisto*, *Black October*), but here, their description in a medium that both shrouds and appears to reveal (like a wax-veiled altarpiece in the middle stages of its cleaning) resonates in profound and enduring ways. This can be explained by the sensitivity of its subject, but also the nature of its author's chronicling. Here is a man, describing women, and calling them difficult. And he's painting them as unresolved.

The works' troubled description, then, feels significant. Some are built up (*The Bread Thief*), others laid bare (*Cixi*). Each one, though, has been marked by its making, and these gestures to process – and as such, thinking – feel important to this series. An outbreak of irresolute strokes darting out from a woman's neck; a network of drips and dabs maligning a woman's nose and mouth; a

clouding of some features, and a clear illustration of others (Scherman describes his as “notational” painting), carries an emphasized significance when he’s lending a brush to subjects whose portrayal (and canonical position) is anything but clear. This long-established technique of his (continuing a process established by the Egyptians and continued through artists like Georges Rouault, Diego Rivera, and Jasper Johns, and in so doing, infusing a sense of historicity in his contemporary portraiture) quickly shifts from gesture to comment in *Difficult Women*. His subjects go *remarked* upon rather than treated; their status becomes justly complicated. And rightly so: a resolved portrait of these subjects just wouldn’t feel true. Scherman troubles the surface so that his material might trouble us, too, the way that it should.