



←• Nicole Polonsky, *A Nervous and Sensitive Spirit*, 2018, light projection on fabric, photo Vanessa Short.  
(*La Folle* appears by kind permission of Museum of Fine Arts of Lyon © MBA Lyon.)

# A NERVOUS AND SENSITIVE SPIRIT

Nicole Polonsky writes a letter to an unknown woman, the subject of a painting by Théodore Géricault.

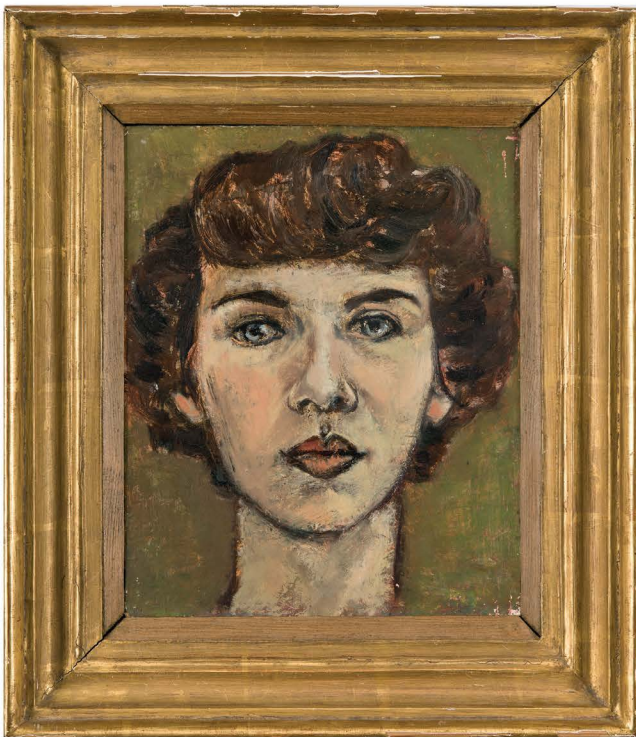
*Madame,*

Your depiction as *La Monomane de l'envie* has haunted and beguiled me in equal measure since I first encountered it. In 2003, the canvas was included in Tate Britain's exhibition *Constable to Delacroix, British Art and the French Romantics*. I still have the postcard. Painted by Théodore Géricault, you belong to a series of ten portraits of asylum inmates, of which only five artworks are extant. Although you have resided in the Lyon Museum of Fine Arts since 1908, you were first captured — a horribly apt term — in about 1820 in the Salpêtrière, an institution in the French capital that had, from the middle of the 17th century, been mopping up all nature of Parisian womanhood.

Let me begin by acknowledging a glaring lacuna. I have no idea how to address you; posterity has not done you the courtesy of recording your name. You would have been one of thousands corralled within the Salpêtrière's vast and imposing walls because of supposed sexual or social deviancy, poverty, sickness, learning disability or mental illness. The epithet by which you are known, *La Monomane de l'envie*, refers to 'monomania', a term coined by psychiatrist Jean-Étienne-Dominique Esquirol to describe a form of partial insanity, '[a] delirium... limited to one or a small number of objects [or ideas]', in your case, envy.<sup>[1]</sup> It reduces you to a pathology. Another designation is even more dehumanising: *La Hyène de la Salpêtrière* (*The Hyena of the Salpêtrière*). Meanwhile, the museum's own inventory lists you simply as *La Folle*, or *The Madwoman*.

[1] Jean-Étienne-Dominique Esquirol, *Mental Maladies: A Treatise on Insanity*, E.K. Hunt (trans.) (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1845).

↓ Beata Herzfeld, *Self-portrait*, c.1948, oil on board, photo Matthew Booth.



The title of my creative response to your portrait is *A Nervous and Sensitive Spirit*. My work comprises an image of Géricault's original temporarily projected on to fabric. With it I have sought to refer to your marginality as a woman denied liberty — indeed visibility — because of your alleged monomania. The ephemerality of a portrait in light (albeit one recorded photographically and then printed in a journal) is intended to suggest an unstable condition — something ungraspable. By depicting you as an almost wraith-like being, I hope to allude to your social and reputational insubstantiality during your enforced stay at the Salpêtrière. The cloth references green screens used in the production of digital imagery. They are surfaces which conceal one set of pictorial data and over which another can be superimposed. As an embodiment of monomania, you yourself were a surface on to which nascent psychiatric postulations were projected. At the same time, the viridity in my new work is there to conjure that colour's symbolic association with envy. This accentuates what is already there: Géricault portrays you clothed mostly in that hue, possibly deploying it as a trope for a sitter supposedly consumed by the 'green-eyed monster'.

Over time you have been subject to the vagaries of fortune. From the low point of your confinement, you transitioned into a very public figure. When not on display in Lyon, you have racked up a lot of exposure: Paris, Amsterdam, Brussels, New York, Kamakura, Kyoto, Fukuoka, San Francisco, Atlanta, Taipei, Flers, Le Havre, Minneapolis, Frankfurt, Ghent, as well as London, have all hosted exhibitions in which you have featured.<sup>[2]</sup> Envy broke and envy made you. An excess of it led to your obscurity behind asylum walls; that same impulse, with Géricault's intervention, turned you into a spectacle for an ever-expanding audience. I want my work to encompass this later visibility, too.

The title *A Nervous and Sensitive Spirit* is borrowed from a 19th-century description of gunpowder.<sup>[3]</sup> It refers to the unstable physical properties of the propellant. The land on which the Salpêtrière was built had, until 1634, housed a gunpowder factory. To this

[2] Museum of Fine Arts of Lyon.

[3] Charles Munroe, 'Notes on the Literature of Explosives', *Proceedings of the United States Naval Institute*, (11, no 2, 1885).



day the name of the institution recalls those origins, and the chemical compound saltpetre that is a main ingredient in the manufacturing process. A space once dedicated to the production of explosive matter was to morph into one for the containment of ‘explosive’ behaviour.

But why do you continue to exert such a lure over me? What is it about you that compels me to keep your image close to hand? It’s time to come clean. You remind me of my mother. Her self-portrait watches over me as I write this. She had many more freedoms than you ever enjoyed, but life did not turn out too well for her either. From the outset, though, the auguries would have seemed nothing but favourable. An artist and linguist, she left her New York birthplace to study overseas, including a stint at Fernand Léger’s atelier in Paris. She was to take up residence in, and become fluent in the languages of, France, Italy, Germany and Switzerland, before settling in the UK. During a speculative trip with her portfolio to the Redfern Gallery in London’s Cork Street, Jacob Epstein dropped by, liked what he saw (in more ways than one), and invited her to his studio. From an early age, I got to hang with my mom during ‘Ladies’ Days’, leaving behind the males of the family to explore together the enticing splendour of central London and its playground of galleries. I accompanied her to screenings of *Yellow Submarine* (1968) and *Around the World in 80 Days* (1956), with its Saul Bass title sequence, where the ingenuity of their visuals was impressed upon me. My mother was intelligent, talented, discerning, charismatic, empathetic, and especially attuned to innovation in art and design.

As already intimated there was, however, another narrative. From early on, my mother experienced periods of mental ill health. The daughter of eastern European Jewish émigrés to the US, she was cocooned from the immediate horrors of the Holocaust. But the murder of her aunts Ester and Gita, as well as that of her young cousin Menachem, during that conflagration — on top of the seismic disruption of the war itself — must have preyed heavily on her mind. And later, as wife and mother in a particularly enervating corner of British suburbia, her inability to grasp fully the liberation so enticingly envisioned by women in the 1960s may have proved an enduring source of pain. Following a series of cataclysmic episodes, she too was withdrawn to an institution (in a provincial English town, not the French

capital), to emerge conclusively — and fatally — nine years later via an expedient jump from a tall building.

The self-portrait shown here was completed when the artist was about 20. By then she had already experienced some of the worst losses she was ever to know, as well as the death of her cherished father when she was just 17. Like yours in *A Nervous and Sensitive Spirit*, my mother’s face radiates from a green background. Unlike you, however, she appears to stare out of the picture plane and confront spectators fairly and squarely with her green eyes (nothing monstrous there) wide open. Your gaze is to your right and seems to be focused intently on an object — or is it a thought? In Géricault’s rendering, your exposed forehead may have been intended to offer viewers a chance to dabble in a spot of phrenology, the pseudoscience of interpreting a person’s psychological traits from their cranium. My mother’s brow, by contrast, is concealed beneath an orderly row of curls. Who knows what’s going on inside?

While I chose to articulate you, Madame, as somehow liminal and transient, my mother, in her oil-paint-on-board substantiality, presents as more corporeal in every way. And having lamented your lack of a suitable moniker, I should at least share with you my mother’s name, which (unlike yours — sorry to rub it in) I and others in her circle can attest to. It appears on her artworks as a single-word flourish — her first name only. Beata. But scrutinising this self-portrait, I am suddenly transfixed: this succinct attribution is nowhere to be found. Which leads me to ponder: is my mother already yearning for, or at least toying with the possibility of, an erasure even more unarguable than the one imposed on you by the consuming edifice of the Salpêtrière? Maybe the lack of a name here presages her final act four decades later, one of defiance and despair, a short hop, skip and a jump towards a deletion and eternal absence, and a release from the very thing that was her greatest burden — herself. A nervous and sensitive spirit.

*Je vous prie d’agréer, Madame,  
l’expression de mes sentiments  
distingués*



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