



GILDED BIRDS

A snapshot of contemporary ideals of beauty

GB Tell me why you chose this.

FWW I think they're the most beautiful and precious objects that I own. They're like jewels to me, except that they're from nature and the sea. I bought them when I was in Tokyo with my sister last December. I was just wandering around this area called Koenji on my own and they have a lot of beautiful shops full of antiques and vintage clothes. I saw this tiny sign by a door and I walked upstairs and there was this tiny shop full of really inexpensive old objects. It was like a magical cave. The man who owned it had a pot of tea brewing and when I looked at this object it was as though it had an aura. The cover has calligraphy on the front and then there are nine layers containing 130 shells. Each shell has its own label. The inscription shows that it was gifted to someone on May 14th, 1937.



Photo courtesy of Gilded Birds

GB Do you display it?

FWW I keep it stacked. I have so many objects in my studio and if I'm feeling uninspired I'll look through them and it will spark something in me. Ever since I got this, I've been adding shells to my paintings. I'm really drawn to the pearlescent pink ones and some have beautiful copper green colours. They're all varnished. When I was young I went to Crete with my family. I remember how we walked on the beach looking for shells and it felt so rewarding when I found one. My dad was obsessed with finding perfectly round black pebbles. They change so much when they dry out and

go matte. I feel like whoever made this box of shells varnished them so they look like they've just come from the water.

GB Do you know anything about the person who made it?

FWW I think it was some old fashioned company and you could order it from them. The labels look as though they've been cut out from a printed sheet.

GB Do you think man-made things can be as beautiful as nature?

FWW I think things made by the human hand can be really beautiful. Because I paint, when I see other paintings or hand-crafted objects I find it really touching. You can feel it in your heart when someone has put a lot of detail and time into doing something.

GB Your work is beautiful. Is that something you aim for?

FWW I think so. I love the process of painting and there are a lot of things in my work that are classically beautiful like the sun or flowers or even Greek sculpture which is an idealized form of male beauty. I think beauty makes you look more deeply at the world. I lay these symbols on the canvas like a bag of tricks and it's an amazing feeling to see that I've created something from nothing when a painting is complete. Paint is like colourful mud to me, moving it around a surface until it stays there. I do use the paint quite thinly so the marks look like they're made very quickly but they're actually made quite slowly. The first seashell I painted was wet on wet paint and I felt like it was a really strong mark, and forming this shell on the canvas taught me new things about painting. I know this is dark, but I feel like seashells look like severed ears that are listening to the secrets I'm revealing to myself through the work. Maybe because of that thing you do as a child where you put a seashell to your ear to hear the sea but you're really only listening to your own body. I'm interested in painting figuratively because you can tell so much from a face and every time you draw a new one it has such a specific feeling or emotion that people respond to. They see familiar people, like a boy they used to love, and I like that reaction.

GB Were there lots of other painters at your art school?

FWW There were lots of great painters, but painting wasn't considered to be cool. In the second year I wanted to make film or installation but that's not the way I think. The great thing about painting is, you don't need to rely on anyone else to be able to do it. You can stretch your own canvas and do the whole thing alone.

GB Do you like Abstract Expressionism?

FWW It seems very masculine to me. It is beautiful and I love the way Willem de Kooning made compositions that were very full of feeling, but I feel they have a very masculine energy, there's something aggressive about them.

GB What's the most important thing you learned in art school?

FWW I went to the New York Studio School for a while. It was very different from the Slade. I think at the Slade you learn how to have a practice and a work ethic – and how to think about art. But the Studio School is more old fashioned and we really honed in on the skills. We did life drawing three times a week. My teacher would sit next to me and suggest we spend a day looking at something like the mouth. So we'd sit next to each other and both draw mouths. There was

one moment when I was painting where she took a brush with white paint on it and very slowly pushed it into the canvas and made one mark. I learned a lot about mark making from her. Very few art schools do that. At art school, the biggest criticism of my work was that it was too sweet or romantic. But I was young and that's what I wanted to express. It was considered feminine and seen as less serious but it is serious. I am serious.

GB What makes something worthy of the word Beauty to you?

FWW When you find something beautiful, I think it pierces you, emotionally. In Roland Barthes 'Camera Lucida' he uses the term 'punctum' to describe the feeling of finding something in a certain photograph that's poignant to him. It literally means to pierce. I thought that was really useful in defining what it is about these certain precious things I find beautiful in the world I surround myself with.