

Maggi Hambling's Deathly Visions

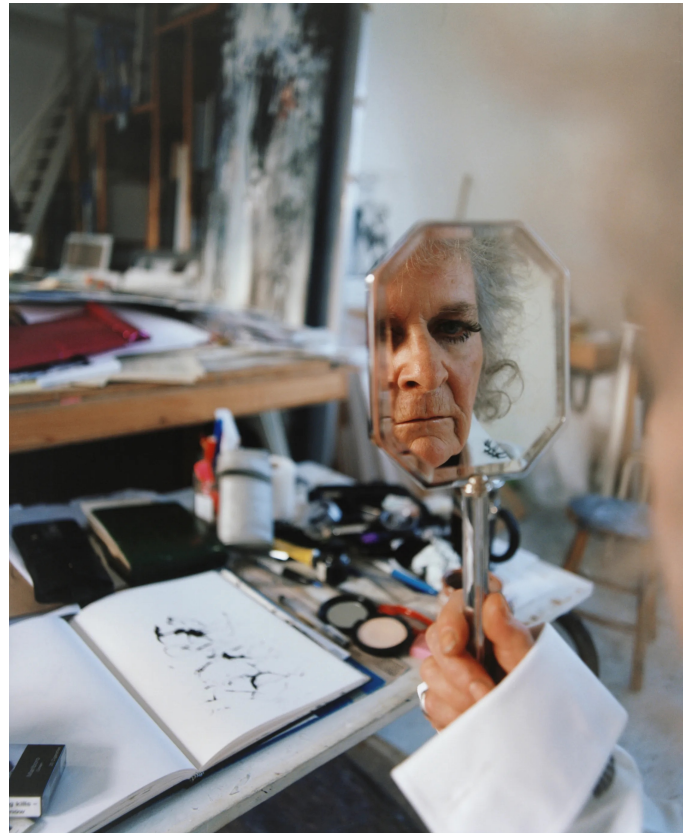
Anna Russell

May 10, 2022

When the first statue dedicated to Mary Wollstonecraft—pioneering feminist, patron saint of loudmouthed women—finally went up in a park in North London, in the fall of 2020, some two hundred years after her death, the public reaction was swift and extreme. Critics objected to the monument's swirling, amorphous base and its silvery color. Mostly, they disliked the small sculpted woman at the statue's top, and her attire: she had none. "Was a tiny, silver, ripped nude really the correct way to honour 'the mother of feminism'?" a writer for the Guardian asked. "Admirers like me never expected to be left contemplating whether she had a full bush." On Twitter, the writer Caitlin Moran joked that the streets would soon be full of "statues depicting John Locke's shiny testicles," and the historian Simon Schama wrote that he had "always wanted a fine monument to Wollstonecraft. This isn't it." Still, when was the last time that Wollstonecraft, the author of "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman," went viral?

In the months after the unveiling, the artist behind the work, Maggi Hambling, gave interviews explaining that the statue was not meant to be a literal depiction of Wollstonecraft, but, rather, as one inscription on its plinth reads, "for Mary Wollstonecraft." (Another inscription: "I do not wish women to have power over men; but over themselves.") The figure at the top depicted an "everywoman," she said. "What sort of surprised me was the objection to the naked figure," she told BBC Radio 4's "Today" program. In an interview in the Guardian, she argued, "There are plenty of schlongs honouring men in art." "The figure had to be nude because clothes define people," she explained. "Put someone in country tweeds and they become horsey. Put someone in period dress and they become part of history. I didn't want to do that to her."

That hasn't stopped critics from making their own sartorial additions. I visited the statue shortly after it went up on a village-like square, called Newington Green, where Wollstonecraft briefly lived and where she founded a school for girls, in 1784. A small group had gathered around the naked figure. Someone had dressed her up in a silver toga-like garment and a knit cap. "I had to take the telephone off the hook when that Wollstonecraft thing blew up," Hambling, who is seventy-six, later told me. "I just thought, Let them get on with it. Let them fight it out."



Hambling, one of Britain's most prolific and controversial artists, in her studio, in 2020. Photograph by Harley Weir / Art Partner

Since at least the nineteen-eighties, Hambling, one of Britain's most prolific and controversial artists, has been letting the public fight it out over her work. (She is fond of quoting Oscar Wilde's maxim, "When critics disagree, the artist is in accord with himself.") In her youth, she dressed in top hats and feather boas for outlandish cabaret nights, and later fell in love with Francis Bacon's longtime muse, Henrietta Moraes, the Queen of Soho. Over the years, from her studios in London and Suffolk, where she lives with her longtime partner, the artist Tory Lawrence, Hambling has embraced, and occasionally played up, a public persona as both a national treasure and a queer icon—an emissary from old Soho and the swinging sixties. Renowned as a portraitist, she has paved a path for a wide swath of younger British artists, including Sarah Lucas, Tracey Emin,

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and Cecily Brown, though she remains difficult to categorize. Her work “doesn't fit that easily into any given period or set of styles or school,” the art critic and novelist James Cahill told me. “In some ways, I think she's always been something of an outsider.” Brown, whom Hambling tutored, told me, “She's always been very uncensored, and not really worried about what people thought. She's a kind of maverick, really.”

In person, Hambling is performative and witty, with wild gray curls and a cap on a front tooth in a shade she describes as Yves Klein blue. For a long time, she had a rule that she could not be photographed without a cigarette and a scowl. This spring, Hambling had her first solo show in New York, “Maggi Hambling: Real Time,” at the Marlborough Gallery in Chelsea. In September, she will have another show in Suffolk. In Chelsea, she oversaw the installation of twenty-nine oil paintings from the last decade or so, including a series of enormous canvases depicting the violent crashing of waves entitled “Wall of Water.” Other works, from a series called “Edge” and a collection about animals in captivity, express her rage over climate change and “the way we're fucking up the world,” she told me. Just before the opening, however, she suffered a heart attack. Her one-week trip turned into several weeks in a hospital bed. When I spoke with her recently, she was in a wry and reflective mood, musing on how her work might change. “We'll have to see what happens now Madame Death has stepped in,” she said.

Hambling was born in 1945 in Suffolk, England, the youngest of three siblings. Her father was a bank teller and, in later life, a painter, and her mother was a teacher. Hambling has described herself during her school days as a “gang-leader and a clown,” obsessed with Oscar Wilde and in love with her biology teacher. In art class, for almost the entirety of an exam, as she has written, she did “nothing but flick paint at people and draw attention to myself,” and then unexpectedly aced the test. She began to dream of being an artist, and stayed up late painting the night sky out of her bedroom window. When other students made fun of her new hobby, a favorite teacher, Yvonne Drewry, told her to brush it off. “She said it has to be water off a duck's back,” Hambling told me. Drewry allowed Hambling to paint in the fields around her house during a school holiday. She taught her how to smoke a cigarette to dispel the insects, the start of a lifelong



Hambling's sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft, in Newington Green, North London. Photograph by James Veysey / Shutterstock

habit.

At fifteen, Hambling took her oil paintings to the East Anglian School of Painting and Drawing, an eccentric art school that Lucian Freud had attended. The school, which was not far from her home, was housed in a large sixteenth-century building known as Benton End, and run by the artists Cedric Morris and Arthur Lett-Haines. She was so nervous at first that she sat in a ditch outside the school and painted the ditch. “It was known as ‘the artists' house,’ and for every vice under the sun,” Hambling told me. “I don't know if that was part of the attraction.” As a student, she worked in the kitchen with Lett-Haines, who became a mentor. He told her, “If you're going to be an artist, you've got to make your work your best friend. You can go to it if you're feeling sad, you're feeling bored, you're feeling tired, you're feeling randy. Whatever you're feeling, go to your work and have a conversation with it.

Hambling arrived in London in the summer of 1964. She was almost nineteen, and still a virgin, she has said, but not for long. She became involved with a series of men and women, lived in a shared house dubbed the Queers Castle, and knocked about the Gateways Club, a legendary lesbian night club, where she claims she was once banned for suggestive dancing.

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She attended Camberwell College of Arts and the Slade School of Fine Art, and hung around with the artists David Hockney, Bridget Riley, and Derek Jarman. In 1969, she visited New York for a few months on a travel grant and went to Woodstock and a Nina Simone concert. When she returned, she began painting portraits of people she'd noticed in pubs—"good places in which to observe," she says in "Maggi Hambling the Works: And Conversations with Andrew Lambirth"—and the arthritic hands of her neighbor Frances Rose. These are tender, slightly surreal paintings, with undercurrents of loneliness. She was with Rose when she died, and later painted a portrait from memory. "It was the first time I had been present at someone's death and I couldn't get it out of my head."

When fame came, Hambling had fun with it. In 1980, she was chosen as the first artist-in-residence at London's National Gallery and painted a security guard. She worked in a studio lined with tinfoil so that she could smoke. As a panelist on the television show "Gallery," in which contestants guessed the names of famous art works, she wore a bow tie and, once, a mustache. In 1998, a sculpture of Hambling's honoring Oscar Wilde was installed in central London, across from Charing Cross station. Titled "A Conversation with Oscar Wilde," it takes the shape of a long granite sarcophagus, which doubles as a public bench. Wilde's head and one of his arms stick out of the top. He's holding a cigarette, looking amiable. "You could sit and have a chat with him," Hambling told me. The piece is inscribed with the quotation, from Wilde's play "Lady Windermere's Fan," "We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars."

Critics of the sculpture, and there were many—the Independent's reviewer called it "wilful tack"—wondered why she had placed Wilde in a tomb. Hambling told me that people have an idea of Wilde "pirouetting around the Café Royal or something, up in the air," and that it was important to her to show him "down on the ground." But Hambling also has a long history of interrogating death in her work. Before the Wilde piece, she had made coffin sculptures for the actor Max Wall, whom she painted many times, and others, including "War Coffin" and "Rocking Coffin with Erection."

Hambling has drawn many of her loved ones as they lay dying, or just after their death: Derek Jarman, Cedric Morris. She drew both her



Hambling smokes a cigarette and stares at the sculpture she dedicated to Oscar Wilde, in central London.

mother and her father just after death, and painted her father from memory again afterward. When her lover Henrietta Moraes died, Hambling drew her in her coffin. She is in open conversation with the past. In "The Works," she describes a trip to Mexico, and her appreciation for what she perceives as the country's attitude toward death. "It's there, like the flip side of the coin, life and death together," she said. "Death not constantly shuffled out of sight as it is in England."

On March 8th, two days before the official opening of Hambling's New York show, Cecily Brown went to see the paintings with her at the Marlborough Gallery. Afterward, they took a taxi with Hugh Monk,

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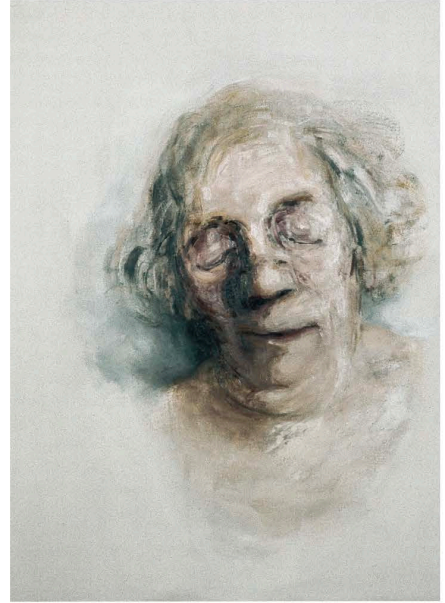
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"Cedric Morris on his deathbed," 1982.
Artwork courtesy the artist



"Henrietta Moraes in her coffin," 1999.
Artwork courtesy the artist



"Frances Rose, painted from memory," 1975.
Artwork courtesy the artist

Hambling's agent, to Brown's house in the East Village for dinner. In the car, Hambling asked Brown about a painting Brown had made of her father having a heart attack. "We were talking about heart attacks in the car just a half hour before," Brown told me. When they sat down for a drink, Monk noticed something was wrong. "I just had one swig of whiskey, and then everything just went," Hambling told me. The paramedics arrived, and then an ambulance carried her away. "I tell you, New York saved my life," Hambling said. "It was like a miracle."

One brisk April day, I went to visit Hambling. She had been laid up in the hospital for several weeks, including a stay in the I.C.U. and ten days of isolation for covid. At Mount Sinai near Columbus Circle, I followed the winding corridors until I found a room with a sign that read "hambling." Inside, she was lying down in a striped robe and a T-shirt printed with Hokusai's wave. A student of hers had sent a stuffed parrot, which was perched nearby. Occasionally, she felt

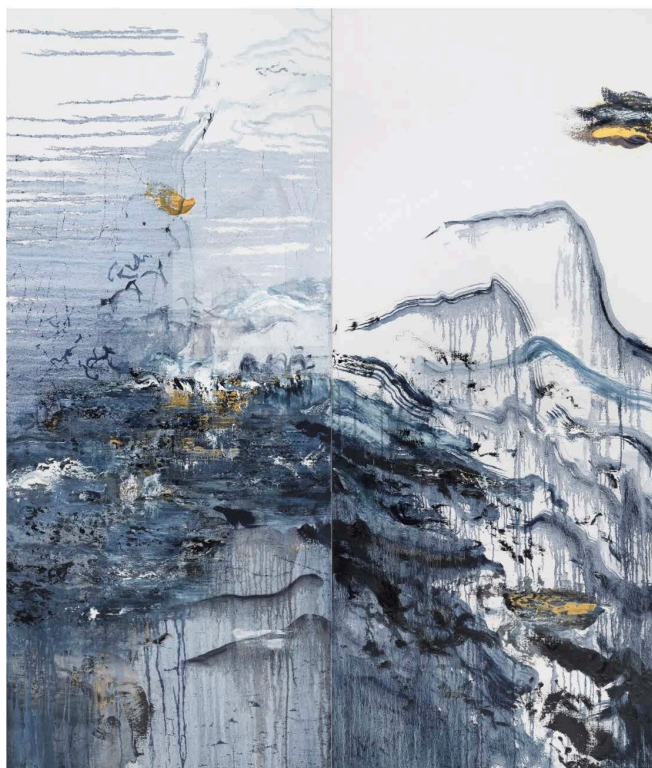
"like one of those poor animals of mine—constricted," she said, and laughed.

In recent years, Hambling's work has become larger, and freer. But death still nips at the edges. In "Real Time," many of her paintings focus on the vulnerability of the natural world. Just discernible in the latest "Edge" paintings, which she made last year, are towering mountains, or perhaps icebergs, which seem to drip off the canvas in shades of white and blue. Some works are more explicitly focussed on climate change; in "Edge XVI," there's an outline of a polar bear, drifting in an icy landscape. In 2018, Hambling began painting a series of works depicting animals dying or in distress. There's a felled lion, its paw resting awkwardly, and an elephant without a tusk, its beady eye staring out. These are challenging works that ask the viewer to sit with an animal's pain. Some of them left me cold, but others, like "Rhino without horn," which shows a collapsed mass—all twisted muscle and

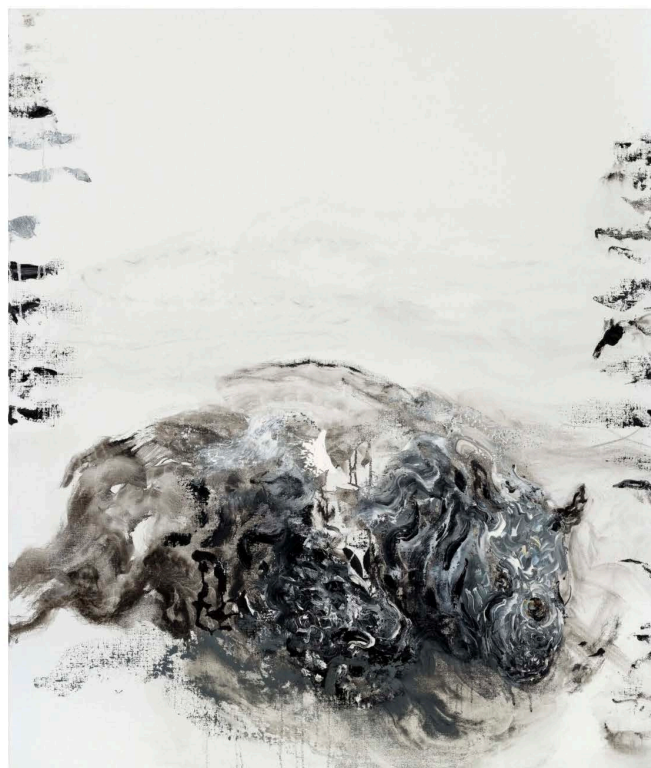
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"Edge XIII," 2021.
Artwork courtesy the artist



"Rhino without horn," 2019.
Artwork courtesy the artist

an animal's pain. Some of them left me cold, but others, like "Rhino without horn," which shows a collapsed mass—all twisted muscle and bulk—beneath a heavy expanse of white, were almost unbearably sad.

Some of Hambling's strongest recent work grows out of her fascination with the sea near her home in Suffolk. The oversized "Wall of Water" paintings, which she made in the twenty-tens, show towering waves in the moments before they come crashing down. Looking at them—at the sea's foamy chaos—I felt the power of the wave, as well as its transience. It's an instant full of drama that will soon be gone. It reminded me of the portraits she has made throughout her career of people laughing. For Hambling, laughter is a

"metaphor for the relationship between life and death," Cahill told me. "It's this kind of eruption of energy, which lasts but a moment, and has disappeared and is retrievable maybe just in the memory."

This elegiac quality also extends to her self-portraiture. In 2019, she painted herself on a white canvas using a swirl of inky black, blues, and yellows. Her recognizable curls are there, but her features are semi-obsured, as if they were made out of smoke. Another self-portrait, included in the New York show, is even starker. She has painted herself just in outline, a ghostly figure fading into the background. In the lower right-hand corner, she painted her dog, recently deceased, who seems to be running out of frame. "The older

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I get, I try to say more with less," she told me.

The weeks that Hambling spent recovering from her heart attack have been the longest stretch of time she has been away from her art since she was a teen-ager. This has been difficult; she's itching to get back to work. At home, her days usually begin with a drawing at five or six in the morning and end with a cigarette. At the hospital, she has gym sessions twice a day ("I've never been to a gym in my life") and can't smoke. Brown dropped off a sketchbook and some graphite pencils, but Hambling hasn't picked them up often. "Normally, I say if I don't work for a day and a half, I go potty. Pottier than ever," she told me. The title "Real Time" comes from "how I've lived my life," she said. "Real time is when I'm in the studio trying to make something, and the rest is just the rest."

At the hospital, I asked Hambling what she had been thinking about while waiting to be well enough to fly home. "Death will obviously dictate what I do next," she said, thoughtfully. And, then, "Well, it's quite a big thing!" When Moraes died, Hambling launched into a period of furious productivity. She drew Moraes in her coffin, but also made sculptures of her laughing, licking her lips, eating a meringue. "Drawing my parents and Henrietta in their coffins seems to me quite an obvious thing to do, because it's the last time you're going to see them," she told me. "Anyone you love goes on being inside you, don't they, when they die?"



Self-portrait, 2019.
Artwork courtesy the artist

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