

Fisher, Alice, *Maureen*,
Fantastic Man, Autumn/Winter 2009, pp.148-155.

the
gentlewoman

maureen

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MAUREEN's favourite piece of jewellery is a skull cuff by the designer TOM BINNS, which she bought from MAXFIELD on Melrose Avenue in Los Angeles. MAUREEN's watch of choice is a vintage ROLEX.

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MAUREEN PALEY is a legendary London gallerist of open mind and precise thought. A New Yorker who found herself in London's East End long before it was fashionable, MAUREEN champions artists like WOLFGANG TILLMANS, GILLIAN WEARING and BANKS VIOLETTE, all of whom fit with her independent, subversive spirit. MAUREEN is devilishly good company, and an art event cannot truly be said to be happening until her beehive enters the room.

portraits
by
paul wetherell

text
by
alice fisher

MAUREEN PALEY's gallery was under siege. A hailstorm—unheard of in October—had silenced cobbled Herald Street in East London outside, but her showroom was bursting with young Shoreditchers, who'd tracked in slush, and other art folk buttoned up against the weather, determinedly clutching beer bottles in mittened fingers, here for the private view of video artist DARIA MARTIN's first solo show. Illustrator JULIE VERHOEVEN and artist PAUL NOBLE appeared in the crowd. INTERNATIONAL HERALD TRIBUNE design critic ALICE RAWSTHORN wandered past in a very nice coat. An impatient queue built up to see MARTIN's artwork—the film *HARPSTRINGS & LAVA*, based on a friend's childhood nightmare—jamming the pristine white corridor with damp boots and big jumpers.

MAUREEN and I watched the crush through the glass door of her office. The noise, beer and melted snow of the private view seemed very far away. In here, everything on the four clutter-free desks was at right angles and MAUREEN's uniform black outfit was pristine; her dark hair, neatly pinned in a roll at the front, looked so perfect it could be carved from wood. I had to fight the urge to touch it to see if it moved. "Private views," sighed MAUREEN in a voice soft enough to make you lean in, but clear and precise. She still has a hint of an American accent, despite being based in Britain for nigh on 30 years. On the other side of her office door, three people were

trying to squeeze past each other in three different directions.

At the time I didn't realise that this was as flustered as MAUREEN gets. I'd imagined that the gallerist renowned for being a pioneer of London's East End art scene, the woman who represents Turner Prize winners WOLFGANG TILLMANS and GILLIAN WEARING and who champions new talent such as LARS LAUMANN, SEB PATANE, DONALD URQUHART and BANKS VIOLETTE, would be more outré. But when I return to her gallery, the atmosphere in her office is distinctly studious.

MAUREEN was very involved in the gallery design and has definitely succeeded in her efforts to create a lab-like interior. Three members of staff—SUSANNA CHISHOLM, PATRICK SHIER and OLIVER EVANS—sit at their neat desks staring intently at their screens; the phone is answered after two rings, inquiries handled with quiet efficiency and the ping of e-mails is the only sound other than MAUREEN's mellifluous voice as she answers my questions. And what answers! She replies in perfectly formed sentences as if reading from a script. The effect is like listening to a radio show concerning the revolution in British art.

MAUREEN arrived from New York in 1977 to take a Master's in photography at the Royal College of Art after studying at Brown University and Sarah Lawrence College in the USA. "I came in the punk

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the gentlewoman

It was at the SEX shop on the King's Road that the SEX PISTOLS auditioned JOHNNY ROTTEN. He made the grade by accident. Long story.



period," she explains. "London was in turmoil. The RCA was near the King's Road, so I got to go and look at BOY and VIVIENNE WESTWOOD's SEX and SEDITIONARIES. I had to see SIOUXSIE SIOUX and the PISTOLS. Everyone hung out in Soho—you'd meet people at the FRENCH HOUSE, MAISON BERTAUX, and THE CLASH would be having a cup of tea at the next table. There was a sense of old London then, with its formality. Punk seemed genuinely shocking and flew in the face of that.

After the fizz of British punk, MAUREEN felt like a fish out of water in New York after her RCA studies ended, so she just stayed and stayed in Lon-

don and didn't go home. "When you're a person who thinks long about things and plans carefully, to have your whole life based on an extraordinary accident, it's fascinating. It's probably due to a whole series of reasons. Ancient, probably, former-life reasons."

MAUREEN set up her first gallery in 1984. The experimental project space, where she lived as well as worked, was in a row of dilapidated 19th-century workers' cottages on Beck Road, Hackney, which was owned by the ACME art collective and allocated as artists' residences. Sculptor RICHARD DEACON showed her round the near-condemned house before she moved in; artist HELEN CHADWICK lived in the same row, and art band THROBBING GRISTLE were up the road. "I saw all of the house as a gallery and let artists do things everywhere. We did one show in 1985 called WINDOW, WALL, CEILING, FLOORSHOW—there was photographic work by HANNAH COLLINS on the house front, a billboard work on the rooftops of the houses opposite and the artists dug up the floorboards, installed lights and changed the internal structure of the house. I saw those risks as an extension of the experimentation in the 60s, which got converted into punk. That pretty much informed how I worked."

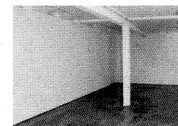
Although MAUREEN now adamantly declines to discuss the financial side of the art world, her long career and the enduring presence of her gallery says enough, especially at a time when many galleries are going down faster than a ROY LICHTENSTEIN plane. She is an astute businesswoman, but one who prefers to talk about art instead of economics.

"I came to London during the most difficult economic times," says MAUREEN, "and I think that having the resilience to survive then will help me to do it again in these current times. One must be even

more committed during this moment and not lose one's vision and resolve. I actually think that art dealing is part business and part magic. There's a sense of alchemy in art, bringing value to what might be otherwise overlooked. Times like these can enhance work rather than robbing it of its artistic integrity, and make it possible for more art to be created. For me, there is a ROBIN HOOD-ish quality about being an advocate for the arts."

The Beck Road house saw its last major redecoration in 1999—in a style that she calls "minimal Regency", Regency meaning neo-classical—and that was to turn it into a proper home for MAUREEN. Though she says that her flat in Hove, near Brighton, feels more like her real home, now. That's a real Regency place, in a square facing the sea. "I've had it going on five years now, and it's changed my life. I really relate to what Regency was trying to do—bringing this architectural elegance to the merchant class. I love the beauty of seeing the sea; and in the area they talk about how there are black witches in Lewes and white witches in Hove."

The MAUREEN PALEY gallery in Herald Street is now the place for experimental projects, and MAUREEN's reputation as one to take a chance on untested talent and help young artists build international careers is impeccable. Unlike other gallerists who



The interior of the MAUREEN PALEY gallery, Herald Street, London E2, between exhibitions.

make their names and fortunes with particular art movements or scenes and then endure their ICARUS moments, MAUREEN PALEY has been a steady force in the art world since the 80s.

"I like to think the gallery is like an indie record label," she tells me. "It's for artists who still want to feel connected to reality, who don't feel they've compromised in order to have commercial representation. I've always wanted to be like JOHN PEEL—someone who could take people from obscurity, play their song on the radio and help it find a fan base." The JOHN PEEL comparison is an astute one, and is shown out in ART REVIEW's annual international POWER 100 list. While celebrity gallerists and artists sit in the upper echelons—LARRY GAGOSIAN at no.2, JAY JOPLING at no.6—MAUREEN has always been a constant presence at around no.70 on the list, on the outside but with a subversive strength.

With a stable that includes two Turner Prize winners (WEARING in 1997 and TILLMANS in 2000) and one shortlisted (REBECCA WARREN in 2006), three nominees and one winner of the BECK'S FUTURES contemporary art prize (video artist

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SASKIA OLDE WOLBERS) and a runner-up in the CITIBANK PRIZE for photography (HANNAH STARKEY), her work is now recognized and lauded by the establishment, too. "When GILLIAN won the TURNER PRIZE it was a first and very exciting and formed a cornerstone in the gallery's history that was something to build upon."

MAUREEN's relationship with WOLFGANG started in the 80s when the pair met in Hamburg. "I was 20 when I met her at an art fair in Hamburg," says WOLFGANG. "I was making pictures with this laser copier, which I'd naively smuggled into the fair in order to show them to gallerists—a big no-no thing to do. But MAUREEN, who I approached because she looked cool and I loved London, somehow volunteered to look at them and so we started to talk." She soon took on his work. "He gave me the picture of LUTZ AND ALEX SITTING IN THE TREES to show at the UNFAIR, an experimental art fair in Cologne," she says. "It's an iconic photo now—and from then he became very known. At the time, photography was very much about high production values, framed and glossy. It's hard to imagine how astound-



Legendary BBC disc jockey JOHN PEEL always lovingly referred to his wife SHEILA as "the pig". PEEL passed away five years ago and is sadly missed.

ing his presentation was because there've been so many imitators—but it was so fragile and open. For him to have taken that risk was quite something. I was very moved by his imagery."

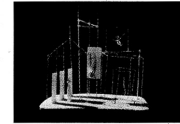
The only time that MAUREEN's conversational flow falters is when I ask truly personal questions. I wonder who she'd like to have create her portrait and she ums and ahs before saying she'll get back to me. When I ask what work of art she'd love to own if money were no object, she's quite flummoxed. She picks up a newspaper supplement called 1000 ART-WORKS TO SEE BEFORE YOU DIE from her desk, which came free with THE GUARDIAN newspaper. "This is quite good," she says, and it's not clear whether she's using it to jog her memory for works of art or as a way of changing the subject. In the end, after much pondering, we decide she'll get back to me on that, too.

And she does, promptly. An e-mail arrives the next day: "It was a pleasure to meet with you yesterday. I have given your two questions more thought and if I could have had my picture painted by anyone it would be MANET, I think. The artwork I would most like to own would be THE PALACE AT 4AM (1932) by ALBERTO GIACOMETTI."

She e-mails later suggesting we meet again and says that she's been thinking about the first signs in her life that she would be a gallerist. "When I was

about 10 or 11, I was very interested in marine biology and grew up near the sea. That must be why I love visiting my place in Hove so much. Anyway, I remember creating a shrine in my room with all my sea-based treasure and labelling all shells and such in both English and Latin, can you imagine? It looked as if my bedroom was a room in the PITT RIVERS Museum in Oxford! One of my favourite places in the world. These things start early I guess."

I'm already waiting in the lobby when MAUREEN arrives at private members' club SHOREDITCH



THE PALACE AT 4AM by GIACOMETTI, a sculpture from before the artist honed the isolated figures for which he became famous.

HOUSE for a drink. She's dressed impeccably in head-to-toe black as usual—she's worn black pretty solidly since 1980, a remnant of her punk days and also due to her commitment to all things Gothic and the aesthetics of PERSEPHONE, goddess of the underworld. Though she does make occasional concessions, wearing some white in summer, and she will even wear pink in Hove. "You must go out and see the moon," she tells me, gesturing excitedly outside. "It's full and it's beautiful. Go out and look while I sign in." I step outside but see nothing between the tall buildings on Ebor Street and I shrug through the club's open door to MAUREEN who's standing at the reception desk. She points enthusiastically down the street so I walk to the end of the road before finally spying it, bright as a searchlight, low and large in the sky. It's quite something.

MAUREEN talks about the moon's association with female energy as we take the lift to the rooftop bar. She's very cheerful and very chatty. Artist MAAIKE SCHOOREL came down to visit her in Hove recently and they wandered through a music festival in the town together. She's driven down to Sis-singhurst with photographer ANNE HARDY to look at the gardens ("designed by VITA SACKVILLE-WEST, very inspirational") and she thoroughly enjoyed meeting BETH DITTO at a PONYSTEP



A still from TRAUMA (2000), a video by GILLIAN WEARING in which she invited participants to tell of traumatic childhood experiences while disguised by masks.

party. We sit on a sofa by the full-length windows in the rooftop bar so she can look out over the City. "I wanted to see the view," she explains and stares out over the landscape before ordering a power juice.

"I think it's important in terms of expressing love to others—moon goddess activity—that you have a

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the gentlewoman

Artist CERITH WYN
EVANS conduct-
ing MAUREEN and
friends at a London
pub, in a picture
by WOLFGANG
TILLMANS.



real appreciation of love in your own life. One of the great things in my life is that when I was very young I met a boyfriend who soon became my husband. We got together when I was 14 and we were together for 14 years. I grew up in the suburbs but we would sneak away to heady Manhattan."

MAUREEN admits she was a precocious teenager and that the pair immersed themselves in art and film. They spent their time at the Waverley and Thalia art cinemas watching seasons of films by TARKOVSKY, BERGMAN or FASSBINDER. "There was a real intensity to it. I was lucky to have a childhood romance be the thing that guided me. It gives you an incredible perspective on what is possible to share—I don't think anything's lived up to it since.

But at the point I would have settled down further, had children, I ran for the door. I have a dedication to my gallery and my artists that goes beyond what you could give if you had your own family."

MAUREEN's not big on specifics. She has the gift of talking in complete, complex sentences that somehow bend around facts she doesn't want to reveal. So she'll say that her parents lived in the suburbs of New York, but not quite who they are or what they do. Though she does say that her father loved THE GOON SHOW and collected British sports cars. Similarly she only says her husband, who studied at Harvard and MIT, as well as at Brown University with her, is a scientist who loves art. "He was quite renaissance." They're no longer in touch, but she still feels "fondly and strongly about that period".

One consequence of their break-up was that MAUREEN could pursue her interest in destiny more freely. Her husband thought astrology was claptrap, though even he admitted that practices such as alchemy could simply be science described in archaic language. MAUREEN feels differently about fate

and the unknown. She consulted an astrologer after her divorce.

"I saw this extraordinary woman called LIZ GREENE who's written about Jungian psychology and looks at astrology very scientifically. It was like consulting an oracle; I was quite shaken by it. Her reading wasn't the easiest thing to hear. She described a huge task I would undertake." She's had a few readings since. "I think most people shouldn't tamper with it; it can be very influential and should be treated with care."

MAUREEN herself seems so consistently calm and happy, it's hard to imagine her not getting on with someone or ever losing her temper. She chortles when I ask her. "I try to avoid confrontation. I'm almost like a bomb disposal expert; I take the potential danger out of a situation. When I was younger I had issues with everyone and everything, but that's because I was trying to put the world to rights. It's not that I don't continue to have those thoughts, but I now see you can structure things so it's not the only way to be."

WOLFGANG TILLMANS puts it more directly: "In life and work she's never jaded or takes anything for granted, so MAUREEN gets happiness out of anything that went well, be it a sale or an especially good chocolate dessert—by the way her favourite: anything dark rich and chocolatey." He thinks the most important things for readers to know about her are: "In the 80s she had closely cropped hair and hung out with GENESIS P'ORRIDGE of THROBBING GRISTLE who lived in Beck Road. Also, when disapproving of someone, she loves to say: 'So-and-so is by now pretty much out of the picture.'"

At SHOREDITCH HOUSE, I catch sight of my watch and gasp. I was meant to be somewhere else a long time ago. As I gather my coat and bag, I tell MAUREEN that time seems to vanish with her and she laughs. I ask what she's up to tonight and she—of course—has a private view and a party ahead of her. "Until then though," she says, smiling, the moon visible behind her in the bar's picture window, "I'm quite happy here."

notes

ALICE FISHER met and talked with MAUREEN PALEY over the course of a year at various locations in London. ALICE is the style correspondent of THE OBSERVER newspaper and has previously worked at THE FACE and British ESQUIRE.

MAUREEN PALEY's wardrobe contains a multitude of different materials, shapes and textures to give her signature monochrome style variety and edge. She looks to AGNÈS B. for basics. For bags and shoes she goes to MIU MIU, PRADA and MARC JACOBS. She chooses her clothes mainly from PRADA, COMME DES GARÇONS, VANESSA BRUNO, 3.1 PHILLIP LIM and JOHN ROCHA, though there are odd items from TOPSHOP and FRED PERRY in there, too. She's newly impressed by LOUISE GRAY. She uses EVE LOM cleanser and is very devoted to Dr. SEBAGH's serums and face creams for day and night.

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Fantastic Man, Autumn/Winter 2009, pp.148-155.



The beehive hairdo has more than just its rebellious heritage in its favour, though it does still carry that bad-girl air from its origins in the girl groups of the 1950s. The modern beehive, which accentuates the head rather than exaggerating it, adds a certain presence to MAUREEN's silhouette. It's a look she achieves with simple backcombing and the application of hairspray.