

Masnyj, Yuri, "Hope Gangloff", BOMB, Number 124/Summer Issue, 2013. P. 24 – 33.

*E. Starbuck*, 2010, acrylic on canvas,  
60 x 108 inches. Images courtesy of  
Susan Inglett Gallery, New York City.



Hope Gangloff by Yuri Masnyj



It was sometime in the fall of 1995, when I was an undergraduate art student at Cooper Union in New York City, that I first met Hope Gangloff. Cooper Union is exceptional at attracting talented, hard-working, self-motivated, socially awkward, and obsessive misfits from all over the US and from abroad by giving them a tuition-free opportunity to learn how to make stuff, which was, in our case, sometimes art. It was there, in the plaster studio, while suffering through some unresolved sculpture project (the details of which I have intentionally forgotten) that I first met Hope. I'm not sure what it is about friendships I forged in college, but they are intense and lasting. Hope and I have remained fiercely supportive and fiercely competitive with regard to our work. It is an unspoken contract that keeps us going and that we enjoy.

Since our student days, I've been one of a rotating cast of characters in Hope's paintings. Her ability to capture likeness in a pitch-perfect exaggerated clarity is

one of the many things that make her work so striking. Hope's compositions have an immediacy and freshness that make them look easy, but I know they are not. For years we had a studio on the same floor of a Brooklyn building, and I sat for long hours in her comfy chair, procrastinating the day away while watching her process in action. With a movie or music playing (sometimes both), Hope would alternate between long periods of deliberate consideration and short bursts of manic fury. As someone who does not paint, and whose process is slow and belabored, I both admire and envy Hope's dexterity at handling her plastic medium.

I was curious to dig deeper into what past experiences informed her development as a painter, so I sat down and talked with Hope about her work. Over the years I have known her to make extraordinary drawings, but I have always thought of her as a painter in the grandest sense.

— YURI MASNYJ

**YURI MASNYJ** Many people were introduced to you through your drawings. I remember that you were making murals in high school.

**HOPE GANGLOFF** I was doing large-scale paintings in my parent's barn. They had built out the top half of an old barn, so I had a nice high ceiling and a carpeted floor. I also had a barn door that opened so I could pull weird bits of furniture and stuff into it. It was a really nice after-school hangout.

**YM** But it wasn't on a farm?

**HG** It was Amityville, on Long Island, but it was the original Powell Farm. The entire block was the farm, right in the center of the town.

**YM** Your parents were into collecting tons of stuff—antiques and bric-a-brac.

**HG** Yes, they're like the Little Mermaid, Ariel. If they don't have 15 of any one item, they'll hit the garage sales. At the time my mom was collecting pigs but also all manner of chairs, jam cabinets, knickknacks, and tchotchkes, like a blackball box. My parents had really interesting, weird stuff.

**YM** Did their collection encroach on your space?

**HG** While I was away at Cooper, the folks' stuff would start to creep up into my barn and every summer I'd have to kick it all out to use my space again. It was like rising water in Venice. The stuff would just gather. It was always swirling at my ankles, but if I left, it would rise into the top of the barn pretty quickly.

**YM** What did you paint back then?

**HG** I made these dorky and really melodramatic oil portraits of my friends. A few were bearable, like a portrait of my uncle as a carpenter, a portrait of my writing teacher's kid, and one of my first boyfriend. I can't even tell you the stories the paintings were about; I would be embarrassed, like one is embarrassed of one's diaries. I never wrote in diaries because I was afraid of someone reading them. But I guess my diary form was making these awful gigantic paintings. I keep trying to throw them out as I find them, but my mom has them stashed all over the place.

**YM** You worked on a mural in a science museum? What was that?

**HG** Oh, that was actually between freshman and sophomore year at Cooper. The science museum wasn't really accepting kids my age, but they let me come on anyway because I'm kind of bossy. *(laughter)* It was the DNA Learning Center on the north shore of Long Island in Cold Spring Harbor. We had to paint microscopic DNA strands on the walls and the ceiling of a 30-by-50-foot room.

**YM** Did working on a painting that large make you want to make your own work on that scale?

**HG** Well, I applied for this job because I do like working large. I like to feel that I'm in the color-field with the paint. It's an immediate way to abstract your space.

**YM** Didn't you make a painting for a hotel too?

**HG** Those were four paintings I failed on. I was hired to make large backdrops for some real estate party in a hotel on Long Island—a sunset, a beach, an underwater scene, stuff like that. They wanted the paintings to look realistic and, to me, impressionism is realism. I thought the murals were coming along nicely but my patrons wanted to see bikini strings on the people walking on the beach. And I was like, Holy shit, these paintings look great but you can't see the individual palm fronds. My brother is a scientist but he can also paint well. So I got him up in the barn working on the fish details while my friends and I popped any caffeine pill you could get at GNC back then to keep ourselves up at night. We had only three days left before flying to Las Vegas (a random trip my friends and I had scheduled before I took the job) and, when it came down to the wire, I hadn't finished the paintings. I left them in the barn with my mom and dad and they finished them for me, using a blow dryer and Bob Ross techniques.

**YM** *(laughter)* I must have met you around that time, 1995.

**HG** That's right, we were 21. You saw those paintings when they were looking impressionistic.

**YM** So, Cooper Union in the mid-1990s: you were already there when I started, and I recall you making large paintings with house paint.

**HG** I would unroll butcher paper and tape it together vertically—12 or 15 feet tall. I must be hardwired to think of scale in this way. When I draw large, I feel I can



*Study of Olga Alexandrovskaya, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 48 inches.*

really express the gesture and what I want the line to do.

**YM** And what were the images of?

**HG** Y'all—always of my friends or people I was hanging out with or liked at school or wanted to tease or get some kind of reaction out of. It was a way to communicate. It's my sense of humor too: I do whatever I want visually and then just pretend that I don't know what the big stink is—like people's reactions to being teased.

**YM** In a way, you were monumentalizing the people around you.

**HG** That's entirely accurate. I was definitely painting my artistic community, my peer group, people who I loved and respected. I was imagining circumstances that translated well into a painting.

**YM** They were monumental-size figures often in situations that you thought that the person cared about. I remember a giant painting of Diko and his car—

**HG** The painting implied that you guys just hit a deer with a car. I painted a lot of snow scenes, like Elizabeth falling out of an airplane to land somewhere in Antarctica with her parachute tangled in barbed wire. All kinds of weird outdoor stuff. I think I was longing for nature.

**YM** What was your experience of New York in the '90s?

**HG** I remember living primarily at the studios at Cooper. I'd work late until I was kicked out. I remember taking a lot of bike rides and runs through the city. New York at night in the springtime now is the same as it was in '95; you get the same rush of everybody doing stuff. It's very compelling. But I had a very abstract anxiety back then. Now I know how to focus my anxiety, so it's a lot more fun.

**YM** What do you mean by focusing your anxiety?

**HG** We all went to school working really hard and came out of school working really hard to be able to afford to live in New York City. You have to make enough money and, at the same time, keep calm enough to keep the biggest passion in your life, your artwork, playful and joyful, which is really important.

**YM** The mid-'90s period is quite

romanticized at this moment. The New Museum is doing their 1993 show.

**HG** The curators are our age now.

**YM** Well, that's possible. But I remember feeling that we were in a transitional time, the end of one era and the beginning of another. We went into school without knowing what an email address was and graduated having them. It was before any of us had cellphones. We had a totally different way of relating to each other and moving through the city. What did you do after you graduated from school?

**HG** I hightailed it out of New York. I spent three months in Jersey working as a dish washer in a German restaurant near my friend's farm. I raised enough money to go out to Montana to live with my brother in Bozeman, and I got a job working in a bronze foundry out there in Bear Canyon—Northwest Art Casting. It was what I needed.

**YM** I can't think of a more distant place to get away from New York than Bozeman, Montana.

**HG** Not if you have an older brother there. He was the most important thing in the world to me at that moment. He's such a cool guy. After the city, I needed some space, so I lived with him.

**YM** And you worked in this bronze foundry—

**HG** Yes, I beat out a ton of men for this job chasing metal. My hand was already good from drawing but it got really strong from using the blower tools. And I learned to sculpt with an air tool to perfection, which is pretty difficult.

**YM** What kind of things did they make in bronze?

**HG** They make large-scale bronze animals, like a life-size salmon affixed to a vertical log that was the base of a lamp. It was like furniture art. In the evenings, after work, I had a lot of solitary time, and I worked on a graphic novel with a friend of mine. I established a very good work pattern there.

**YM** When you came back to New York, what did you do?

**HG** I got a job at the New Foundry in Greenpoint, a foundry for contemporary art. Working there was really fun—the artists would come in and work directly with the foundry. I was a metal chaser, never a welder. I graduated to moldmaking and I was better at that. It was hard work—hot, cold, wet, and unpleasant. I got a pot of hot wax poured on my head one day; I slammed my fingers in doors; I got metal in my eyes—all sorts of stupid accidents happened constantly at the foundry.

**YM** It's admirable and dangerous work.

**HG** My former boss, Paige Tooker, lives for it. She's like a wild and awesome



*Serious Snack*, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 36 × 48 inches.

adventurist. I'm kind of a klutz and I don't want to get hurt. I was dying to get back to drawing. My next job was doing drawings of scenes from movies for *Built by Wendy*, a clothing and accessory line. God, I can't even remember how many movies she had me draw.

**YM** Were you making any paintings at this point?

**HG** I wasn't; I didn't have any space. So I just kept doing drawings, documenting my peer group, which I've done all through high school and Cooper, up until now. I always have my camera on me. I take fewer pictures now, but my camera is my second sketchbook for ideas, details of things that I want to paint or draw.

**YM** So you used photography to collect images and then created images from that collection?

**HG** Yes, I have my Encyclopedia Britannica of things.

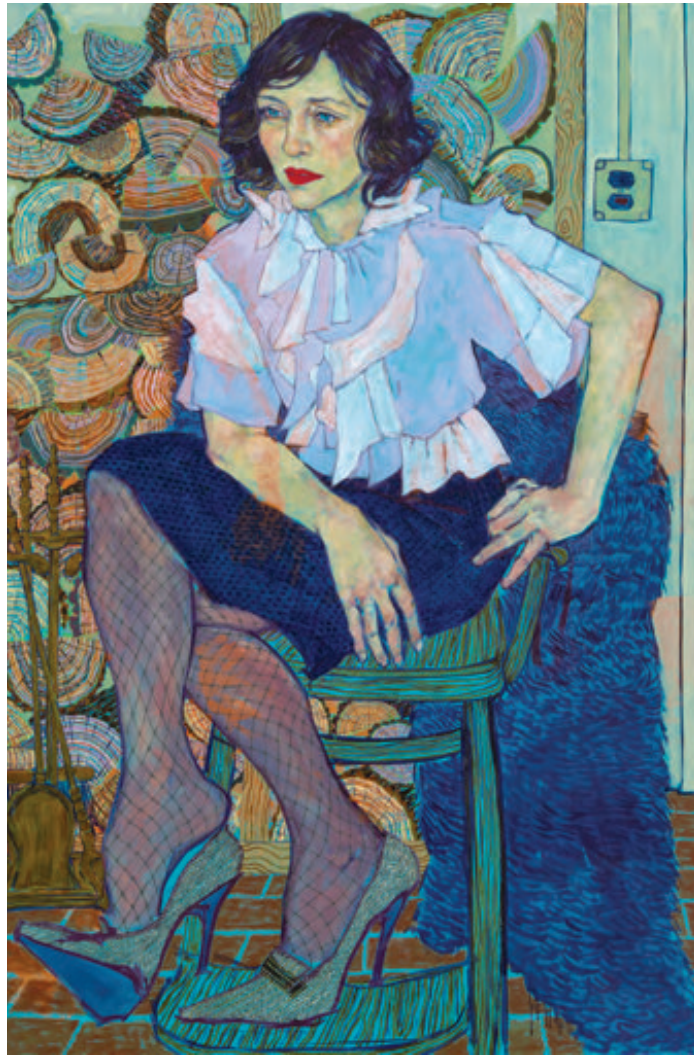
**YM** And how would you describe the things that you were looking for in drawings of the people around you?

**HG** I was always looking for a way to articulate my friends' senses of humor. Everyone's so unique and interesting, so I tried to make drawings that highlighted or showcased what I really like about them.

**YM** Your drawings from this time have a feel of being documents but, knowing how you compose them from multiple images, they're not really a document of anything that actually happened.

**HG** Yeah, they are more a feeling of a thing. I don't take photos and then pick one and draw it. The photo is already its own thing. When I use photo references, I use lots and lots of shots of the same part—maybe one image has the clearest nose, so I'll use that one for the nose. Proper perspective is not important to me. It's more about what works compositionally. There are a lot of made-up details in my work.

**YM** Just to stick with illustration a little bit longer: It's interesting that there's some blurring the lines between what was commercial work and what was your own work. The characters or the subjects, myself included, have appeared in multiple places—in the artwork but also in the illustration work.



*Vera*, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 81 × 54 inches.

**HG** You were drawn as a psychiatrist in the *New York Times Magazine*. I drew you with a notepad, treating your then-girlfriend as a patient lying on a couch. (laughter)

**YM** How did you separate subject and character? That could be confusing—

**HG** I use what's most immediately available and whoever's willing. I have a roster of volunteers on a nice long list. I think about how I would paint or draw them, or, if I have an idea for a

composition, I think, Who do I have who could be doing that?

**YM** Getting back to the drawings from this time, there is an industriousness to all your work. What I mean by that is the level of detail—there is always a passage in the drawing that has a lot of work in it. How important are these areas of patterning?

**HG** I could have a different answer for that on any given day because sometimes I'm just not feeling it and I want the line



*Meta-Progress, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 48 inches.*

just to do everything. A lot of times I make a pattern to space out with. There is a pattern in randomness. See that ink drawing over there of all the different drawings hanging on a wall? It's a pattern, but a random one. I like looking at things for a long time so I guess it's natural to me that I want to look at patterns.

YM It was around 2004 that you started to have some gallery shows and people really fell in love with your drawings.

HG I was in a show called *Ache* at La MaMa curated by the artist Louis Laurita, and then Ernesto Caivano put me in a group show at Susan Inglett, which became my gallery.

YM You have an obvious ability to capture people's likenesses. Sometimes, in portraiture, resemblance is not that significant. In your work, likeness seems to convey your thoughts about that person. How important is it to you?

HG Saying that it is important right now

makes me think that maybe someday it won't be. I could change my mind completely tomorrow.

YM But you're really good at it!

HG It's hard to get a full, clear picture. When I'm looking at you, I look at every little part separately and intensely. I cobble together the bits that make somebody identifiable and then squash in the limbs to make the composition work.

YM Is this process related to your vision?

HG It might be related to my vision. For instance, I can read in a car forever.

YM Without becoming dizzy?

HG I don't get carsick. My peripheral vision—it's like this soft, blurry space. Cars can whizz by me but the only thing in focus is what I'm concentrating on.

YM So do you wear glasses?

HG I don't like wearing glasses. I don't like seeing clearly.

YM Is that related to the impressionism?

HG When I put glasses on while painting, my brush marks get all super tight and I don't like that. I also don't want to see my own pores in a mirror. It's just too high-def for me. If I paint without glasses, I'll put them on after I'm done, and the painting will look okay. Whereas if I paint with my glasses on, I'm forever not comfortable with the painting.

YM So your slightly impaired vision works for you?

HG Yes, you can cut that whole segment down to that one phrase: slightly impaired vision. (*laughter*)

YM I was going to ask you about exaggerated features—hands, feet, noses, eyes... What about that?

HG I prefer to draw people with exaggerated features. It's no small accident.

YM So you choose, you selectively... This is natural selection!

HG I choose people with large features and then the slight exaggeration makes them seem bigger than life. More is more sometimes.

I like immediate gratification. I don't trust photographs—I trust my eyes and my sense of space when I step back from something.

**YM** How did you make the transition from drawing to painting?

**HG** It was a transition I made the second I was able to afford a larger studio. I had some abandoned stretchers and started painting. It was more than a natural shift.

**YM** So did you use the same—

**HG** Dude, I don't—

**YM** —the same process as in the drawings, working from photography at first? Did some of the methods you used for the drawings just translate into painting?

**HG** Yes, for sure. And introducing so much color all of a sudden freaked me out. I did that really long oil painting of what I imagined to be the coat check at the Met—a whole bunch of crazy colored hats and coats and these two people kind of canoodling in the coat check room.

**YM** Are you imagining these scenarios and then creating them as drawings or paintings?

**HG** I imagined this particular scenario because the two friends whom I painted have such extremely long, strange-looking noses that I couldn't wait to put them

in a painting where the noses would just barely touch. I have another friend who used to work at the Met and the stories she told me about working there made me want to paint the coat check.

**YM** Why did you make the transition from oil to acrylic paint?

**HG** It was a rough start with that big oil painting. I decided that I didn't like oils, and then I decided that I wasn't ready for color. So I went backwards a little bit, and I did that painting of you and the dogs. I used acrylics, kind of fast and loose—using red, blue, black, white, gray, and orange—and it felt just like making large-scale ink drawings, which I really loved because you can paint over things really quickly. The immediacy of the fluid acrylic paint was a real thrill for me. The lines can look as crisp as in an ink drawing, but you can also clear out a patch of something that isn't working very easily. And on top of that you can have these great layers going on. It felt wonderful. It totally beats using house paint.

**YM** Your earlier drawings were based on composite photographs from things happening around you, whereas now the environment you create is one that's

posed. Why did you shift?

**HG** I'm using it to my advantage that people will pose for me. They will come over and model, and I get to have a freshness that wasn't there before, when working from a composite of photos.

**YM** But it's not Cézanne's 80 sittings for one painting.

**HG** No, no. I'm just trying to get the lines down. At that moment, I'm not bothered by accuracy of shadows. I'm interested in line and how it can make space look—not in how light actually is or how space actually is.

**YM** But in terms of getting the overall structure, it seems to reference something very different than compiling photographs together.

**HG** Yeah, it's a very frantic, almost desperate couple of hours that I'm working to get the lines down. I always look forward to the challenge of painting a person who can't help but move.

**YM** It almost speaks of another time. I don't often hear of people sitting for a painting anymore.

**HG** I like immediate gratification. I don't trust photographs—I trust my eyes and my sense of space when I step back from something.

**YM** Would you say that *your* ability to translate the image is stronger than the camera's?

**HG** Definitely. Anybody's! Are you kidding me?

**YM** What do you mean?

**HG** I know what I want to look at and what I want to convey in a painting. A camera just snaps off and makes funny hard angles.

**YM** In many of the early drawings the imagery was of a few things: people partying, working, or relaxing. Since you moved to the country, the imagery has changed.

**HG** When I was in the city, I could get people in their own environments. Now



*Masnyjs*, 2007, ink on clay-coated paper, 14 × 17 3/4 inches.



people are coming into my environment in the country, and it's relaxing for them.

YM But they look more composed—

HG The sitters are in my environment, and they are just there for me to play with. I play with their shapes and their characters. In the city, I have the ability to physically move my canvas into their environment.

YM Most of your works are figurative but some are of only objects, and they're not still lifes exactly. I see them as referencing people, yet with the absence of the individual.

HG I would agree with that. Landscapes are people too, Yuri.

YM That's true. Can you talk about the Kim's Video painting, *Punk's Not Dead*, for example?

HG It's a painting of the gorgeous stairwell and the peeling posters in the old space of Kim's Video on the south side of St. Mark's Place. I was in love with that place for years. The entire collection got moved to Corsica. The East Village has never recovered.

YM And then there was a painting of a pile of books—

HG Wait, books?

YM Yeah, wasn't there a painting of self-help books? And one of them was like *Hope for . . .* something? And there was a painting of a pile of debris—

HG *Bourgeois Landfill*.

YM Oh—what is a bourgeois landfill?

HG All the crap in my studio that I couldn't throw away for some reason—because of color, design, typeface, or all three, or just conceptually. I like things. I have a big collection of sparkly and pale colored buttons and other notions for sewing that I'm going to paint.

YM Do you see the objects as characters in the painting?

HG I've collected them all from specific people, so it's not that I'm referencing myself by painting this collection of shiny buttons. I'm referencing the people that hung onto these weird objects—like a family portrait. (*laughter*)

YM Do you see the new works as portraits? I'm asking because you create this image around them.

HG Honestly, I don't really think about it in specific terms. I think about what I want the character to feel like and what an image might need compositionally or what I'm interested in painting at that very moment—or something that would indicate the weather. I don't like overthinking it.

YM In the most recent show, there is a painting called *Meta-Progress*. It's an image of a Cooper Union student, Olivia Ahn, who is dressed in a sash—

HG —of her own creation—

YM She's in front of a historical painting.

HG She's standing in front of a painting entitled *Men of Progress*, which is in the Great Hall in the basement of Cooper Union. I placed her so she's directly in front of where Peter Cooper is in that painting and the figure on her right is kind of mocking her pose. I had people take pictures of the painting for me; the student came upstate over last Christmas and modeled for me. She's a very driven and smart young architect and artist. She's so good at rallying and encouraging unity throughout the three schools. She's such a strong character, and I felt that it was important to paint her because my heart was breaking over the Cooper thing and the fact that they are going to start charging tuition.

YM I love that it's a historical painting within a historical painting!

HG Yeah, that's why it's called *Meta-Progress* instead of *Men of Progress*. She's doing this weird and historical pose being political in front of a hugely political and historic painting.

YM It comes full circle in a way, being an homage to a really strong student and your alma mater, and being about a decisive moment in the history of the school—

HG I'm thrilled and humbled to know the Cooper students that I know. They're amazing kids. Man, it's hard to get me on tape talking about Cooper stuff.

YM Well, it's important because there are very few artists who are making a statement about this issue.

HG Cooper gave us the chance to have a go at being artists, to get out of school without being drowned in debt, so we could experiment and find our footing. I'm so grateful for that. And it has a community surrounding it. The kids that come out of Cooper, they don't only impact their peers who went to the same school. It's like—and I'm going to say something corny—a quilted blanket and it just keeps picking up pieces and quilting them into this intense creative community. There's an attitude of enthusiasm that's intoxicating.

I've had more Cooper students come up to model for me. Two of the four paintings I have started in my studio presently are of Joe Riley and Casey von Gollan. They are two of the kids who locked themselves in the Cooper Union clock tower.

YM Just to clarify, they are part of a group of students that occupied the historic eighth-floor clock tower for one week in protest of the school wanting to charge tuition for the first time in over a hundred years. Painting them was a way to monumentalize them?

HG You bet. Like the squeaky wheel gets the oil, right? I obviously don't know how to talk about political issues.

YM But it's an issue you care about deeply—

HG But that's my point: you're sitting here and I'm red in the face trying to articulate how strongly I feel about Cooper, when the most natural thing for me to do is to go back to my studio and finish painting those Cooper boys because it'll say more than I can say in words.



*Bourgeois Landfill*, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 52 x 80 1/2 inches.



*Punk's Not Dead*, 2007, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 72 inches.