

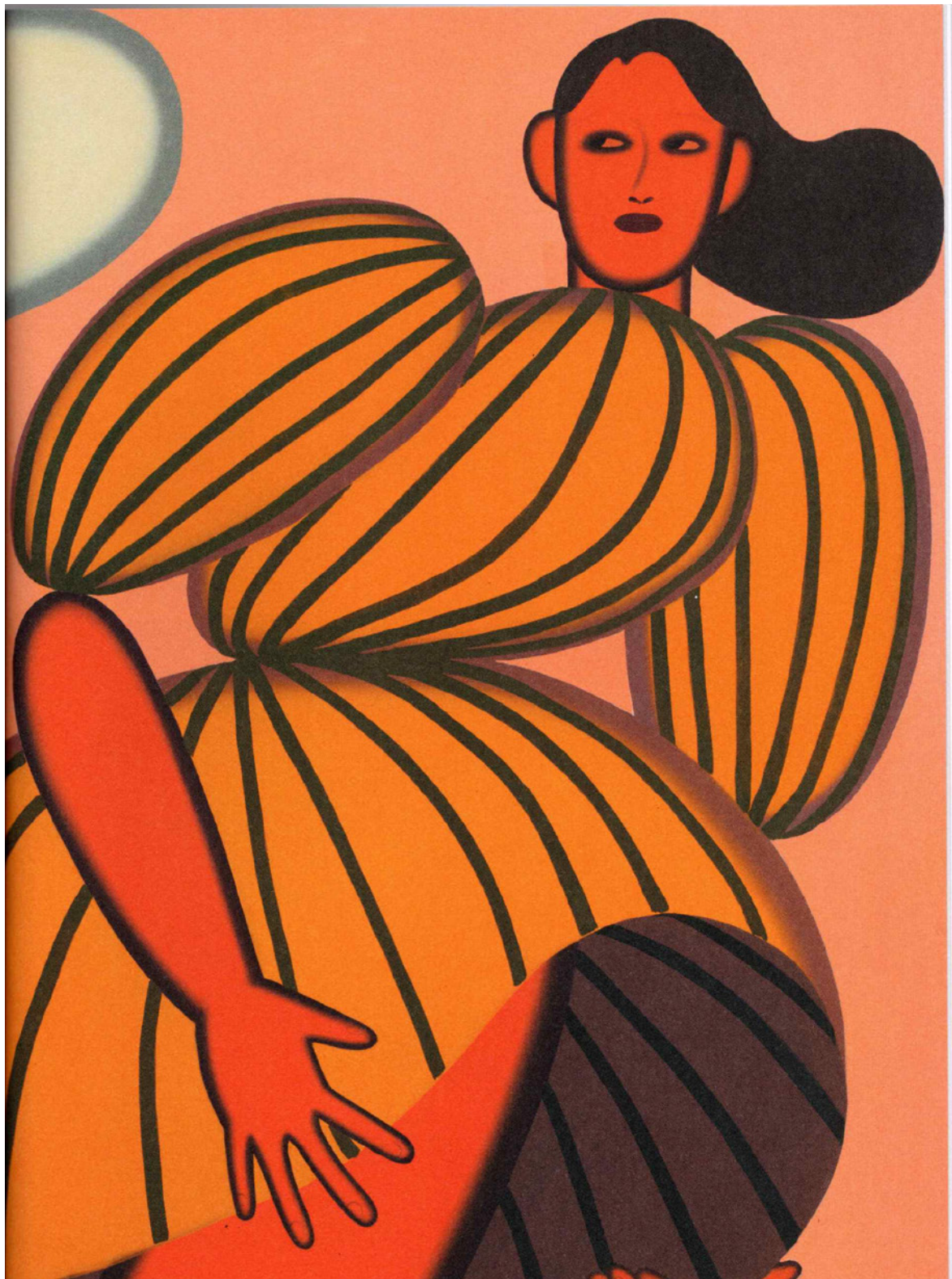
The-Art-Form
Grace Weaver
Issue 6, 2022

GRACE WEAVER

Grace Weaver's striking paintings portray the tragicomic everyday, contemporary life and all its complexities. Her work examines the social and cultural conditions that underlie self-concept, intimacy and individual experience.

In Weaver's paintings, psychological narratives are suggested with an economy of expression, through the sideways tilt of a glance, the subtle curl of a lip, or the droopy slouch of a shoulder. Occupied with observations of self-conscious performativity and awkward aspirationalism, her work is grounded in an insistent empathy with her subjects.

AFFRONT, 2020
Oil on acrylic
71x69"



TO TRY AND CAPTURE
FEELINGS THAT EVADE
WORDS ... IN THE HOPE
THAT THE RESULTING IMAGES
RESONATE WITH SOMEONE
ELSE'S INTERIOR WORLD
AND THE WORD-ELUDING
FEELINGS/YEARNINGS/SENSATIONS/
INTUITIONS/ANXIETIES THEREIN.





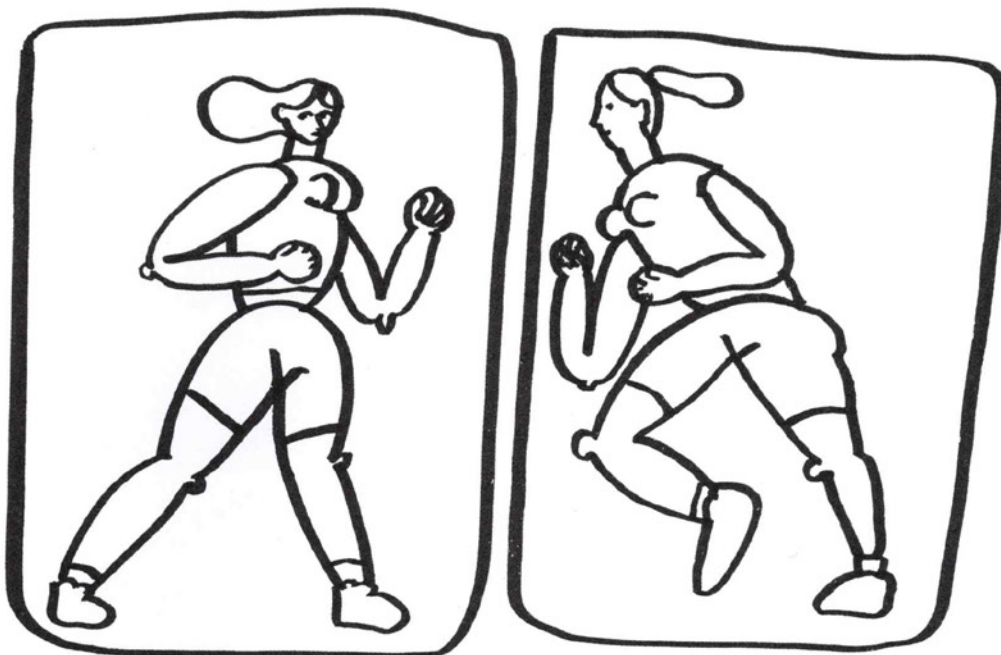
MISSTEP, 2020
Oil on canvas
69x71"



UNTITLED [WOMAN], 2021
Oil on canvas
95x89"

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WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON AT THE MOMENT?

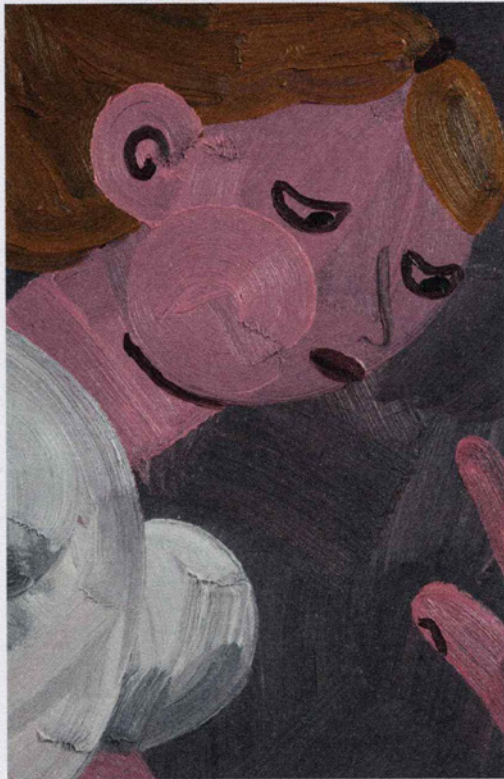


A SERIES OF **XL**-SIZED
PAINTINGS OF BIG WOMEN.
WALKING + RUNNING

SOME SMALL ONES TOO:



(MOSTLY SHOES + FEET)



DESCRIBE YOUR ART

● MONUMENTAL - SCALE
PAINTINGS OF NON-
MONUMENTAL MOMENTS/
AMBIVALENT EMOTIONS/
ORDINARY SCENARIOS...

FROM THE PERSPECTIVE
OF A YOUNG WOMAN
LIVING IN THE
YEAR 2021
IN NEW YORK.

DESCRIBE YOUR WORKING PROCESS WHEN MAKING ART

99% DRAWING
1% PAINTING

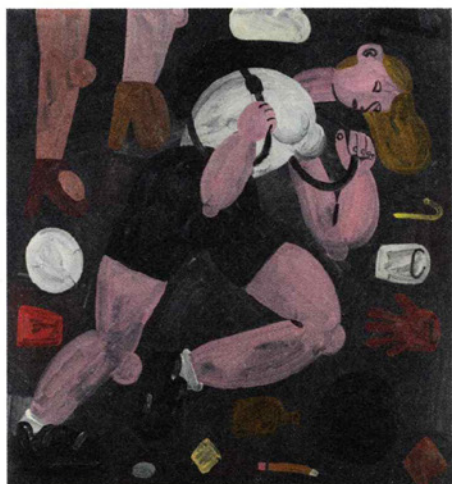
FOR ME, DRAWING IS A
WAY TO BUILD UP A PERSONAL
VOCABULARY OF SHORT-HAND
FORMS AND IMAGES...

DRAWING, I THINK IS THE
MOST DIRECT WAY TO ACCESS
UNCONSCIOUS IMAGES...

MOST OF THE TIME, I HAVE TO
DRAW A THING HUNDREDS OF
TIMES FOR IT TO BECOME
SUFFICIENTLY DUMB /
AUTOMATIC/PERFECT.



UNTITLED (WOMAN), 2021
Oil on canvas
95x89"



UNTITLED [WOMAN], 2021
Oil on canvas
95x89"

WHAT ARE YOUR INFLUENCES? WHAT INSPIRES YOU?

AT THE MOMENT...

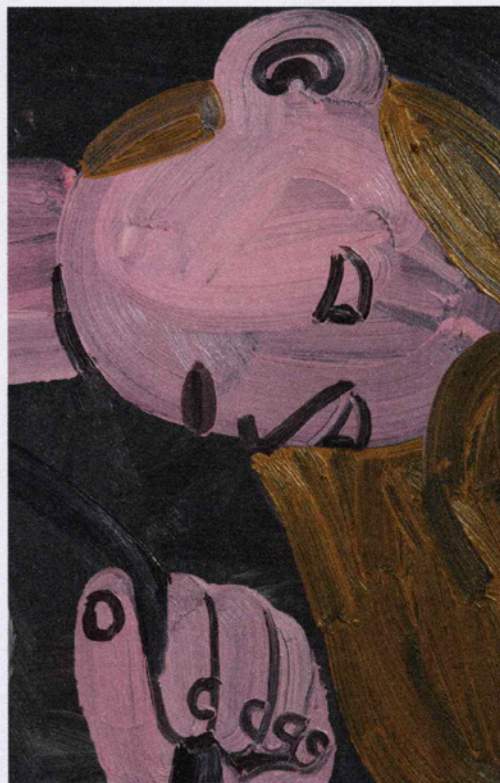
- ROSE WYLIE • KATHERINE BRADFOOD
- GEORG BASELITZ • ANDRÉ DUTZER
- LEON GOLUB • JOAN MITCHELL
- GRACE HARTIGAN • SOUTINE • GUSTON
- DE KOONING • R. CRUMB • AMY SILLMAN
- SUSAN ROTHENBERG • ALEX KATZ
- MIRA SCHOR • ROSA LOY • HOLLIS SIGLER
- FLORINE STETTHEIMER • KARL WIRSON

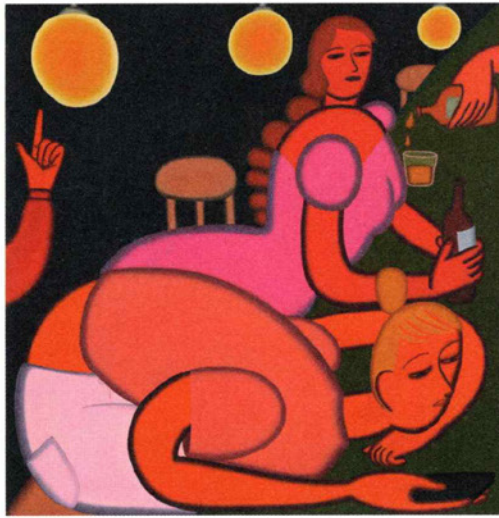
ALSO.....

- RUNNING • WALKING AROUND NEW YORK
- KIDS' DRAWINGS, • GRAFFITI • CHERKOV
- GOGOL • DOSTOEVSKY • NABOKOV
- LYDIA DAVIS • SALLY ROONEY
- JONATHAN RICHMAN • PODCASTS!
- MARINE SERRE • BATSHEVA HAY
- REALITY TV • HÖR BERLIN
- HELENA HAUFF
- ELLEN ALLIEN

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF ART?

- CONNECTION / COMMUNICATION
ACROSS DISPARATE
TIMES / GEOGRAPHIES / IDENTITIES.
- ART SHOULD ACT LIKE
A MIRROR, REFLECTING
HOW IT FEELS TO
BE ALIVE RIGHT NOW.





WHY DID YOU FIRST BECOME INTERESTED IN ART? DID YOU ALWAYS WANT TO BE AN ARTIST?

No, I wanted to be a naturalist for a long time, somewhere between a David Attenborough and an E.O. Wilson. Perhaps that evinces a preoccupation with observing and categorizing the natural world. In a way, that is analogous to my current preoccupation with observing and describing the affects and emotions of the social world that I find myself in.

I never thought that being an artist was a viable career path, although I drew a lot from a very young age. There was a stage [age 3 maybe?] during which I learned to draw faces and quickly covered our whole house [cat included] in yellow Post-it notes with ball-point pen faces. That feels like a precursor to what I do now. I still draw with a kind of compulsive fervor. Somewhere along the way I came to think that as a more academically inclined person, art wasn't for me—that being analytical and creative were somehow mutually exclusive conditions. Everything changed when I met some great professors in the Art Department at the University of Vermont [specifically Steve Budington, Frank Owen, and Pamela Fraser in Painting and John Seyller in Art History] who helped me realize that there was a way for me to be an artist, and that art was open to a huge range of ways of thinking, including my particular mix of interests and inclinations.

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WHEN DID YOU REALIZE YOU COULD MAKE A LIVING FROM BEING AN ARTIST?

I sold a painting at the end of grad school in 2015. Because of that sale, I was able to sublet a tiny room in a Ridgewood apartment for the summer. I painted that summer in a shared studio in Bushwick with a bunch of other VCU grads, which was provided by the VCU Painting Department. Having the freedom to work in the studio full-time that summer was amazing. Not too long after that, I had my first solo show in New York and then I left to do a residency in Berlin and had my first solo show there that fall. Things just grew from there, little-by-little. I still find it miraculous and hard to believe, that doing what I love pays for me to continue doing what I love.

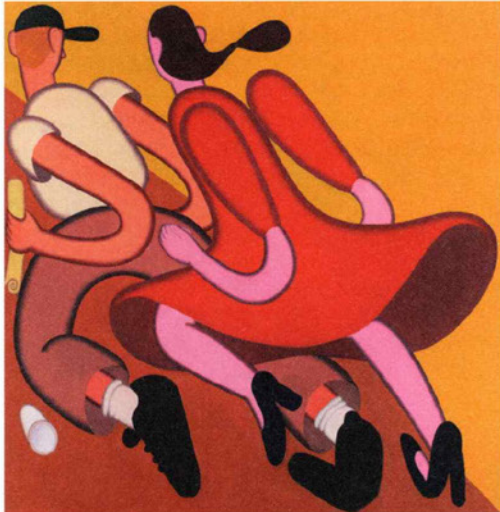
CAN YOU REMEMBER THE FIRST PAINTING YOU SOLD?

When I was maybe 9 or 10, my next-door neighbor Helen and I had a "card shop" that we would set up on a nearby street-corner, lemonade-stand style. We made handmade greeting cards with markers that became increasingly elaborate and specific, and charged between 25 cents and a dollar for them. We still have most of the cards, so I don't think it was a financial success, but we were very proud. I'm sure that something of that foundational experience lodged itself deep in my psyche—a love for the whole progression of making pictures, showing them to a random passerby, and talking about their meaning.

WHEN WORKING ON A NEW BODY OF WORK, IS THERE ALWAYS AN OVERARCHING THEME OR NARRATIVE THAT CONNECTS THE PAINTINGS TOGETHER?

No, not really. From drawing to drawing and painting to painting, I try to work as intuitively as I can: pursuing obsessions, indulging the very dumbest ideas. It's only afterwards that I can make any sense of why I paint what I paint, within a given body of work. I trust my intuition more than my own capacity to pre-plan an exhibition with a determined theme.

UNDERTOW, 2020
Oil on canvas
71x69"



HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR STYLE OF PAINTING?

I paint in a simplified flat style, in an expressive visual shorthand that relates to a variety of influences—from cartoons and emojis to miniature paintings, Matisse and Picasso, German expressionism and neo-expressionism. Drawing is at the core of my work, and paintings are built around an initial expressive line.

I don't use any reference material or photographic aids. Instead, I build up figures from accumulated sensations of being inside a body: how a certain posture feels, how a facial expression feels. I've always been enamored with Maria Lassnig's idea of "Körperbilder" or "body awareness painting": the idea of painting "from the inside out."

WHO ARE THE CHARACTERS THAT YOU PAINT?

I guess you could refer to the figures in my paintings as a small cast of characters. It's true that they function a bit like the personages in commedia dell'arte—they are more general "types" than representations of unique real-world individuals.

You could even compare them to Barbies. As stand-ins, or surrogates, or dolls, they are essentially props to organize in a composition in order to explore the resulting interpersonal relationships.

Recently though, I've been focusing singularly on an isolated female protagonist. I think that is the result of my concerns shifting and becoming more existential, more grounded in embodied experience.

CAN YOU TALK ABOUT YOUR PAINTING 'MISSTEP' FROM 2020?

I think of Misstep as a painting about failure. More specifically, it is a painting about high expectations [her ballooned sleeves] and unforeseen consequences [the treacherous stairs]. The cloud could be a looming threat on the horizon; a further failure around the corner.

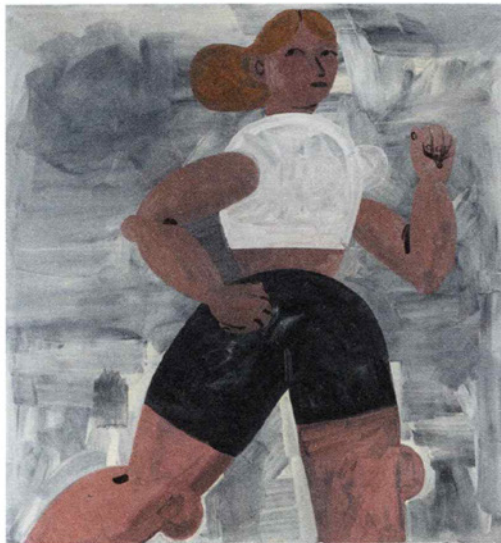
YOU HAVE REFERRED TO YOUR PAINTINGS AS "EMOTIONAL SELF-PORTRAITS" - CAN YOU ELABORATE ON THIS?

"Emotional self-portraiture" is a shorthand for the idea that I don't think of my figures as unique personae outside of myself. They are all doppelgängers, useful mannequins for projecting emotions onto. When I'm painting, I have a feeling or an emotion in mind, and I go outward from there, from facial expression to pose to objects to ground. As a result, the figures don't necessarily resemble me [or anyone else] in literal terms. Still, I hope that the emotions in the paintings are identifiable and relatable to a wide audience of people.

IS THE VISIBILITY OF THE ARTIST'S HAND IMPORTANT IN YOUR WORK?

Yes. Recently I heard Kara Walker describe drawing as a "connective tissue," a necessary tool for processing the world; both a privilege and something totally indispensable. I agree with that. For me, drawing is the most elegant way to transform thought into form [I'm paraphrasing Beuys, among others I'm sure]. This partially explains why my paintings have changed. In my recent paintings, I am trying to foreground the thought-into-hand-into-form operation of drawing.

LIMBO, 2020
Oil on canvas
71x69"



YOUR RECENT PAINTINGS, SUCH AS 'HEROINE' 2021, USE QUITE A SOMBRE AND DARK COLOUR PALETTE, WHEREAS PREVIOUSLY YOUR PAINTINGS HAVE BEEN BRIGHT AND COLOURFUL. WHY HAS YOUR COLOUR PALETTE CHANGED RECENTLY?

The palette has gone from what might have been called fauvist-informed to something more naturalistic—browns, blacks, greys, fleshy pinks, dirty whites, etc.

I went on a big Russian literature tear this past winter. I revisited a lot of the classics—Chekhov, Gogol, Dostoyevsky—that I hadn't read since high school, if at all. Something about those Russian writers had a resonance with life in pandemic-era New York: the bleakness, the greyness, and the dark sense of humor that permeate their work felt familiar.

There is a passage about an artist in Gogol's *Nevsky Prospekt* that I found both funny and instructive. Gogol describes this typical St. Petersburg artist as a total sad sack—living in cramped quarters in a city that is "wet, plain, level, pale, grey and misty." As a result, his paintings are all cramped and "greyish dull." Gogol even suggests that if one were to transplant this sad northern painter to Italy and if fresh Italian breezes were to blow on his face, surely his paintings would instantly cease to be so grey.

However satiric that characterization is intended, I found it compelling. Should painting not reflect the mood and the physical setting in which it is made? During quarantine, I found it impossible to look around New York City—which felt thoroughly post-apocalyptic in its trash-strewn emptiness, its greyness and gloominess—and go into my studio and make bright colorful paintings. I wanted to be a bit more like Gogol's painter, reflecting the literal colors of the outside world [those of asphalt, concrete, trash, and traffic cones] in my paintings.

HOW HAS THE PANDEMIC EFFECTED YOUR WORK?

It has been a very strange time, and I'm sure I'm not the only one who has re-considered their painterly priorities. I had to take full stock of my painting process: what was consuming my time, energy and attention, and whether that was in correspondence with my deepest intentions.

In the past [in my show *STEPS* and previous bodies of work], I spent a lot of time making preparatory drawings, refining a composition, working out an underpainting, and then applying color in thin layers, changing and rearranging color and composition many times, sanding down surfaces to be smooth, and obscuring brushstrokes by painting over and over them [a process that took anywhere from one month to a year]. Essentially, I was re-painting my own paintings to achieve a level of finish that was matte and tidy. Any shred of process was hidden. I had to make a change. To borrow a distinction that I think is from a Tal R lecture, I wanted to stop "designing" my paintings and instead to paint my paintings.

During this same time, I read Alexander Nemerov's biography of Helen Frankenthaler, *Fierce Poise*. This quote is from an interview that my dad [an editor at the University of Vermont, Nemerov's undergraduate alma mater] did with Nemerov, answering a question about what the idea of "freshness" means specifically in Frankenthaler's painting:

HEROINE, 2021
Oil on canvas
95x89"

"What I understand that freshness to represent is the experience of life unfolding, what we call lived experience –seeing Lake Champlain change color, feeling our feet on the grass as we look at it, anything really, holding a warm cup of coffee in one's hands. She was portraying life as lived and turning it into representation before it could become fossilized, petrified as a kind of semblance of itself."

This idea [and the book itself] made a big impact on me. Perhaps it sounds cheesy, but I realized I wanted to paint in a way that felt "alive" [à la Frankenthaler and the other first generation Abstract Expressionists]. Now, I am aiming to foreground the most important activity [the act of composition, including mistakes and revisions] that used to be hidden in the underpainting. I am trying to make the act of picture-making simultaneous with the painting's final surface, rather than covering that work up. I hope that my new paintings have a reverberation that approximates a feeling of "aliveness."

HOW DO YOU WANT THE VIEWER TO FEEL WHEN STOOD IN FRONT OF ONE OF YOUR PAINTINGS?

Honestly, I don't want to have that much control over the viewer's feelings. For that reason, I try to leave the paintings deliberately open, never overly prescriptive. It's infinitely more interesting to me to create an ambivalent open-ended image and see all the manifold ways that a simple motif can be interpreted.

DO YOU FIND INSPIRATION FROM LOOKING AT THE HISTORY OF PAINTING?

Yes, of course, though the specifics are always in flux. Lately, both Baselitz and Golub have been helpful for me to look at, in terms of pushing towards the grotesque and other ugly emotions. I've also found it helpful to look to abstract painting –Günther Förg, Christopher Wool, Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell—to challenge the boundaries of my mark-making.

HORRYMART, 2021
Oil on canvas
49x45"

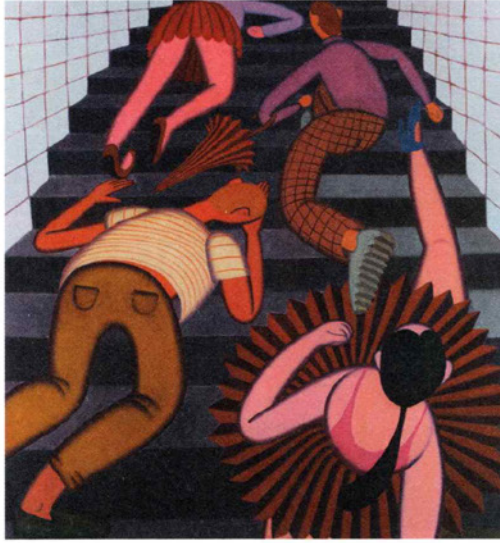


WHICH ARTISTS DO YOU ADMIRE? HOW HAVE THEY INFLUENCED YOUR WORK?

I greatly admire how Amy Sillman talks about both painting and drawing. Reading her essay collection *Faux Pas* this past winter helped me to make necessary changes in my work—particularly the passages about awkwardness, erasure, and shape. Sillman has such an amazing knack for pinning down precise vocabulary to describe otherwise obscure feelings one has in the studio. I really admire artists who write well about art—David Humphrey, Alexi Worth, and Carroll Dunham are a few more favorites.

DO YOU LIVE WITH OTHER ARTISTS WORK AT HOME?

My husband Eric takes photos and makes abstract paintings and works on paper. Between those piles, and my piles of drawings, there are mountains of artwork around. We have a back-and-forth dialogue going in our work, in which we swap ideas, materials, and techniques. Eric is an inextricable part of my studio practice—he will order me crazy new brushes to try, throw unexpected colors into a paint restock order, and challenge me with suggested motifs for drawings. He also builds my stretchers and stretches my canvasses. When we run in the morning, we'll talk through titles, critique a show we've seen, or just talk about painting in general. It's a pretty art-suffused life, and that is how we like it.



DO YOU LISTEN TO MUSIC WHEN PAINTING?
DOES MUSIC INFLUENCE YOUR WORK?

At times, I really appreciate the intensity and repetitiousness of electronic music as a backdrop for painting. A few recent favorites are Helena Hauff, Ellen Allien, Simina Grigoriu, and Nina Kraviz.

Increasingly though, I am conscious of how much sway music can have over the mood of a painting. With that in mind, I try to keep the audio in my ears very low-key—e.g., cooking podcasts, news, nonfiction audiobooks, lectures on YouTube. That way, the painting must determine its own energy and music doesn't do too much of the work for me.

WHAT DOES SUCCESS MEAN TO YOU?

For me, success simply means having the time to do my work. I'm so grateful for the privilege of having a self-sustaining art practice. Maybe it sounds trite, but as long as my life continues to accommodate thinking about, talking about, and making art, I think I'll be happy.

TRANSFER, 2020
Oil on canvas
95x89"

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HOW DO YOU KEEP MOTIVATED?

The most straightforward answer is that I work every day. I don't think that lack of motivation is always a bad thing. If reframed as "boredom," it's quite useful. Whenever I find myself completely bored, I will force myself to draw my way out of boredom. I will generate tons of ideas [many of them very stupid] to entertain myself. It's a way to access something like the feeling of drawing as a child. It's a way to illuminate a path forward. It's something I probably picked up from my professor Frank Owen at the University of Vermont, who is exceedingly good at entertaining himself [and others] through pure inventiveness. I remember once doodling on a cardboard box in his office while chatting, and Frank standing up to exclaim, "Behold! The graphic impulse!"

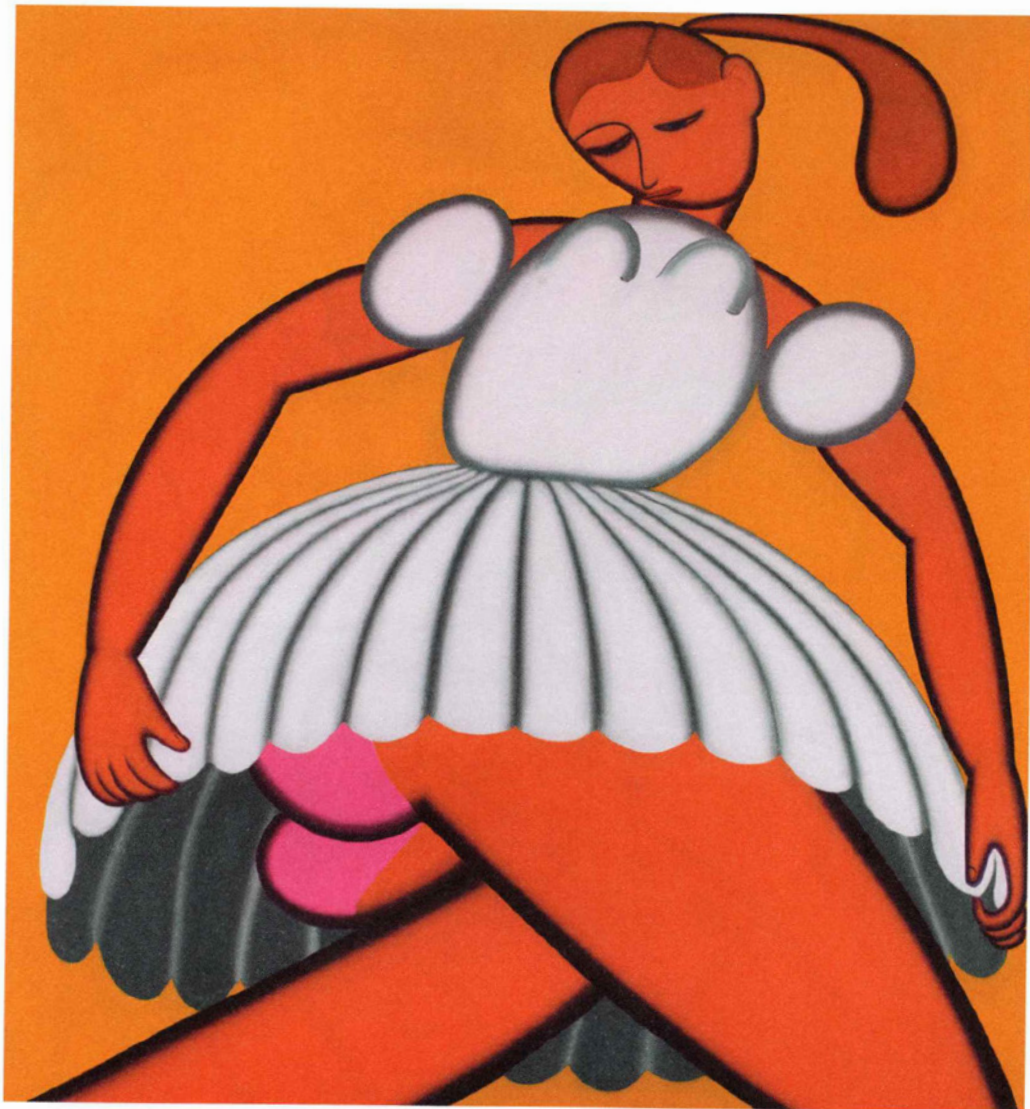
SO FAR - WHAT HAVE BEEN THE HIGHS AND
LOWS OF YOUR CAREER AS AN ARTIST?

Highs? Well, the past few months of painting with fewer [self-imposed] limitations have been wonderful. Lows? I always get quite sad when paintings leave the studio.

HOW HAS YOUR WORK EVOLVED OVER THE LAST
FEW YEARS? WHERE DO YOU SEE IT GOING IN
THE FUTURE?

Over the past few years and across a few bodies of work, I have been inching closer to a way of working that feels thoroughly natural for me. I spoke to a writer named Susan Thompson last year for my show STEPS at James Cohan Gallery, who described what she saw as "the subtext becoming the text" in my paintings. I am trying to surface the deeper motivations of my work that were buried in the past, both on a content level [foregrounding negative emotions like social discomfort, imposter syndrome, anxiety] and on a painterly level [allowing the gesture to exist on the surface of the painting]. I want to keep pushing in this direction—pursuing directness, intuition, and honesty—as I go forward.

SHAME, 2020
Oil on canvas
71x65"



WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO A YOUNG ARTIST AT THE START OF THEIR CAREER?

Make a lot of bad work when you start out, that's what art school is for. Later on, be wary of contentedness.

WHAT'S THE BEST PIECE OF ADVICE YOU'VE BEEN GIVEN?

When I had my first tiny opening at the Colburn Gallery at the University of Vermont, I remember being consumed by embarrassment as the paintings went up on the walls.

I'll always remember my professor Steve Budington's advice which was: "You should be at least a little bit embarrassed to show new work, it means that you've put something on the line." Steve was an incredible professor and mentor, who introduced me to the idea that an art practice ought to be rigorous, ought to be caught up with one's obsessions and "fundamental problems with the world", and that it could be a container for the full gamut of challenging emotions and ideas. His advice continues to help me push toward tougher ground.

All images are courtesy of the artist, James Cohan Gallery and Soy Capitán. © Grace Heaver.