

IN THE MAKE

Studio visits with West Coast artists

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Rebecca Morris

LOS ANGELES, PAINTER // FEBRUARY 2012



"In general I've found that people respond to my work over time, so the highest compliment would be if someone wanted to spend lengthy and repeated time with my work."



We drove to Rebecca's studio on a Sunday morning, with a yellowish-grey almost dusty looking sky overhead and both Klea and I wondered how this visit, the first in our LA adventure, would go. Being in a new city had us feeling less sure about what to anticipate and we just hoped to get off to a good start. As soon as Rebecca greeted us and took us up to her studio, I knew our morning was going to turn out just fine. She instantly felt familiar and easy to talk to, and she had fresh croissants waiting for us! Rebecca paints large, open paintings in vibrant hues and utilizes a series of shapes, lines, and gestures to create a singular visual vocabulary within abstract compositions. We talked about how she finds the lack of specificity and the openness in abstraction appealing, and she likes that a viewer can come to her work with their own set of associations and leave with a very personal interpretation. Rebecca's generosity regarding how her work is decoded and interpreted is a testament to her hard-won confidence. She's put in enough years working at her art to figure out what's right for her, and she doesn't seem all that concerned with proving anything to anyone but herself. I was struck by Rebecca's sense of self and her total commitment to her own beliefs and aesthetic choices despite what others might think. She calls it "a stubbornness." I call it true grit. In her 2004 manifesto, Rebecca's gutsy, no-nonsense attitude comes through in lines like: *Don't pretend you don't work hard... Be out for blood...and, Abstraction never left, motherfuckers.* She's self-possessed, but there's no chip on her shoulder. I guess because when confidence is real, it's not complicated or loud — it's just a simple, quiet thing. It's inspiring to encounter a woman who has unapologetically taken a hold of her life, and is making choices based solely on what she truly believes in, artistically and otherwise. Visiting with Rebecca reminded me to recognize the weaknesses in the rules that were written for me, and to do something about it.



When people ask you what you "do", how do you answer?
I say that I am an artist, that I make paintings.

Do you have a day job? What is it? What does it mean to you?
I am a tenured Professor at [Pasadena City College](#) where I teach painting and drawing. I've been teaching there since 2000, and the job gives me financial infrastructure, which has been invaluable to my practice. I'll also be teaching a graduate seminar class at [UCLA](#) this coming spring quarter.



What mediums do you work with? How would you describe your subject matter? What themes seem to occur/reoccur in your work?

I make oil paintings on canvas, sometimes using spray paint when I want metallic colors or a certain effect or sheen. I also make works on paper and collages. Over the last two years my work has gone through a more minimal phase. But that has started to revert on itself. The paintings are now filling back up with marks and shapes, but in different ways.

The issue of subject matter is tricky for me to address because I don't want to dictate or imply what the viewer's experience of my work should be, or should include. But I can say a few general things.

There is always a mix of intentional/ articulated moves, along side more accidental and spontaneous areas. Also, I'm obsessed with composition and think about the edges of the picture plane a lot. I use a range of pictorial strategies in effort to visually contain the elements within the painting. I like the idea of defining a world within the painting. Sometimes it's a large shape, which then houses and organizes other smaller shapes inside of it, or it's a more literal frame-like edge of crusty paint applied around the perimeter of the canvas. Color of course, plays a big part in subject matter. I get ideas for paintings after seeing certain colors or color combinations and I think the experience one has with color is very loaded and interesting. Color triggers emotional responses in people that are often very personal, and I include myself here. I go through different color periods— there was a time when I used darker colors, lots of blacks, browns and grays, because I wanted the work to be devoid of any possible coded identifiers of gender and these colors seemed to escape that, to be more neutral and abstract. These days though, I've moved away from working exclusively in that palette and I'm really into a full range of color, especially a certain washy aqua-turquoise and this great peachy hue.



What are you currently reading, listening to or looking at to fuel your work?

I am very slowly reading the Joan Mitchell biography, *Lady Painter*. And even more slowly, I'm reading *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the 1960s* by James Meyer. In the studio I listen to all kinds of music, lately a lot of Atlas Sound. But I also love Terry Riley's "in C" for hardcore painting days and I can listen to Fleetwood Mac's "Tusk" for weeks on end without break.

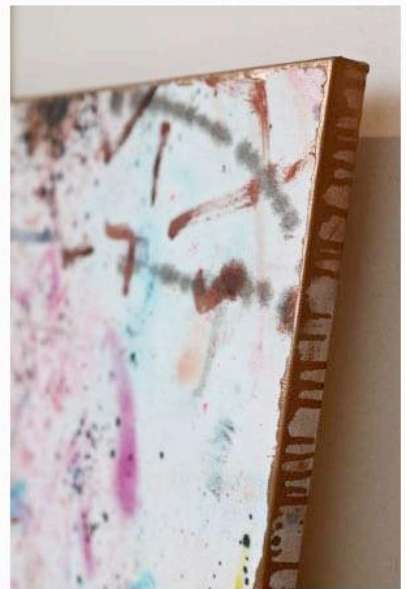


What are your biggest challenges to creating art and how do you deal with them? How do you navigate the art world?

It is always an issue of time. I want to do so many things, I have so many ideas, stuff I want to do in a day, in a lifetime! And I just feel like there isn't enough time. I started waking up early on a regular basis a few years back, to get the most out of my day, and now I feel incredibly guilty if I sleep in past 8 a.m.! But I have also found that morning light is really my favorite light to paint in, be in, and think in, so I hate to miss it.

For the most part I try to engage in the art world, see shows, go to lectures, readings, and openings, exchange studio visits with other artists when I can. I do these things because I really enjoy them. Which is not to say that I am out all the time at every opening, because I am certainly not. But I am seriously interested in being a part of a dialogue, feeling an energy larger than myself. Last summer, two artist friends, [Mari Eastman](#) and [Jill Newman](#), and I organized a series of panel discussions called "Talks on Painting". (We are transcribing the recordings of them now.) I was very heartened by how many people came out for them. Panels are a tricky format but it helped that this series was driven by artists for artists. My hope is that this discussion series will be an ongoing thing, in a fluid and seamless way. It's hard to balance everything — my own work, professional responsibilities and community engagement, but all of it is important to me, so I try my best to stay involved on many fronts.

But in answering this question about the art world, I think it is also important to say here, in total honesty, that there have been times (long times) when I have felt things have been hopeless and pointless, when it felt like very few people understood my work or were interested in what I was doing. And I guess in those periods, I just tried to reverse that energy by redoubling my commitment to my work and soldiering on. It's probably a strength of mine that I can do this because I'm independent and stubborn. I try not to concern myself with what other people think, and just to stay focused and believe in my work. Ultimately- and I'm not saying this in a dejected way- you only have yourself. In a very literal way we can only depend on ourselves, and that's empowering. Luckily right now I feel like I have a strong support system around my work, and that's great, but I recognize that can change again, that it's not fixed.



What does having a physical space to make art in mean for your process, and how do you make your space work for you?

Having my living space and studio space separate is a great combination for me, especially as an oil painter. Plus I appreciate the mental transition that happens on the drive here. At the studio I am removed from everything except my painting—I am faced with it. It is a place where I can freely experiment and enjoy the act of discovery in total privacy. You can file this answer under Virginia Woolf's credo of having a room of one's own!!



Has there been a shift or change in your life or work that has led to what you're making now? Do you see your work as autobiographical at all?

I may have just gone through some sort of change, but it is still too close for me to fully make sense of it yet. One effect is that I made less work in 2011 than I have in previous years. I just did not want to make decisions in paintings; I didn't want to commit to anything abrupt. I just wanted to think, mull over what could be done. I was content just being in my head. It was as if for a majority of 2011 I went into slow motion or something. I didn't force myself to make work, and I didn't panic, but I did question why this phase was happening. Weirder still, is that this was not a bad thing at all. The work I did make is very strong. I'm totally into it. It feels important. You know, painting is just one of the hardest things. I have joked about it in artist lectures, how difficult it is to make a good painting. Because that's really it, isn't it? Not to just make a painting, but a GOOD one—a *really, really* good one.

Is my work autobiographical? I believe in the power of the unconscious, so I will err on the side of yes here. But my work is not about "me" in a self-referential sense.



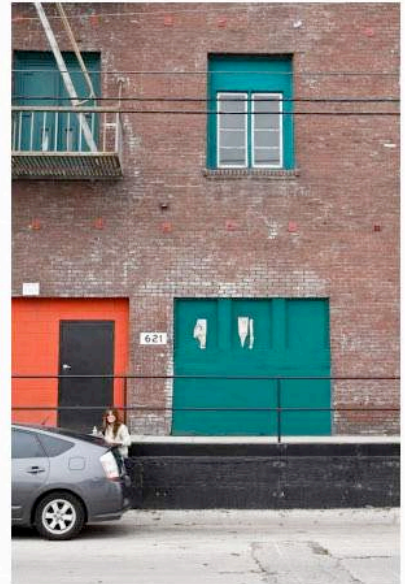
Is there something you are currently working on, or are excited about starting that you can tell us about?
This fall I was interviewed for series called Maker's, "in-depth interviews with women who are inspirational and impacting America and the world". It will come out this spring 2012, on Makers.com. I am really excited and proud to have been a part of it.





What are you most proud of?
My independence.

What do you want your work to do?
I want my work to be a dynamic presence, to create visual and physical impact in a space. In general I've found that people respond to my work over time, so the highest compliment would be if someone wanted to spend lengthy and repeated time with my work.



What advice has influenced you?
Be generous.

Are you involved in any upcoming shows or events? Where and when?

I am giving a lecture on my work on February 8th at the [California College of the Arts](#) in San Francisco. In March I will have a solo show of works on paper at [Harris Lieberman Gallery](#) in NYC and I will be in a group show at [Galerie Barbara Weiss](#) in Berlin called, "Text Textile Texture." An interview I did as part of the series [Makers.com](#) should come out soon and I will have work in [The Frieze Art Fair](#) in New York in May. Next year in early 2013 I will have my third solo show with [Galerie Barbara Weiss](#). Currently, I have work in a group show curated by artist James Hayward called, "[California Abstract Painting 1951-2011](#)" here in Los Angeles.

To see more of Rebecca's work:

www.harrislieberman.com
www.galeriebarbaraweiss.de
www.rebeccamorris.net
www.renaissancesociety.org

