

Press Reviews

Dan Duray, 'In the Studio With an Actress-Turned-Painter', The New York Times Style Magazine, January 26, 2018

In the Studio With an Actress-Turned-Painter

By Dan Duray

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“I love crosshatching,” said the painter Leelee Kimmel, walking around her Upper East Side studio on a recent morning. The space is a converted prewar apartment, and her large, spattery abstract paintings provide a sharp contrast to the clean moldings. “We’re the generation of crosshatching, when you think about it,” she added. “Because we’re always hashtagging everything.”

Kimmel used to act under her maiden name, Sobieski, and is best known for her roles in “Deep Impact,” “Joy Ride,” and “Eyes Wide Shut.” She’s also always painted, stealing moments in her trailer, on sets and — since she became a mother more recently — late at night in her studio. She paints, while listening to NPR or podcasts, on large canvases or in her HTC Vive Virtual Reality headset. “My paintings are only good when I’m not aware of what I’m doing,” she said, “which is actually the same as acting.”



Kimmel’s work on view in “Channels.”

Courtesy of The Journal Gallery and the artist; photographed by Thomas Müller

Last week marked the debut of her first solo show, called “Channels,” at The Journal Gallery in Williamsburg, a collection of bright abstractions on nine, large-scale black or white canvases. “I’m just really happy now that it’s out there because I feel like I’ve been having this conversation with myself for so many years,” Kimmel said. The day after the show opened, a Page Six headline read: “It Girl From the 90s Has Her First Solo Art Show.” Though it may sound like Kimmel has just become an artist, she says she has been painting privately for years. Her father Jean is also an artist and they used to paint together when she was growing up. A portrait he painted of a female bodybuilder currently hangs in the back room of her

studio, and they still frequently speak over WhatsApp video chat. But the days when they ask her mother to guess who was responsible for which have long passed.



Kimmel frequently speaks with her father, another actor-painter, on WhatsApp.
Nicholas Calcott

The paintings at Journal first call to mind childhood scribbles. This might sound derogatory, but many artists, like Jean-Michel Basquiat and Cy Twombly, have done great work with scribbles. These shapes form the basis of all her works, and they appear to have a kind of internal logic or architecture. Viewers have a chance to explore the paintings further in the form of a virtual reality film, which Kimmel has set up in the gallery's back offices. The experience offers flyby tours of skyscraper-size versions of her shapes; you can soar above and through them. On the night of the opening, lines for these headsets were 15-people deep. (Klaus Biesenbach, the director of MoMA PS1, emerged from his session nodding vigorously, and maybe a little nervously.)

Kimmel found that the medium of virtual reality allowed her to explore themes of creation and destruction. "That was crazy for me. Because normally I've only brought someone I'm close with into the VR," she said of the experience. "Because it feels like someone's jumping into my stomach or into my heart." She says she has loved VR as a medium from the moment she discovered it, in part because it was so personal, so "one-to-one," with no learning curve. She found herself spending hours in the headset, spinning shapes in the darkness.

Michael Nevin, who runs Journal with Julia Dippelhofer, said that Kimmel's facility with VR and painting comes as no surprise. "The art world loves to hate on anybody becoming an artist coming from someplace else, especially if they've had success in that other place," he said, "but, the fact is, if someone is an amazing artist they might be able to do that across many fields."



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“Which is actually the same as acting.” Nicholas Calcott

Asked if current events have affected her paintings, she shrugged. “There’s no real bubble anymore,” she said. “It just doesn’t exist and that’s what I try and show in my work.” If you go from looking at life under a microscope to looking at it from a satellite, she said, the micro largely resembles the macro. Inside our bodies there are atoms and organs, and above us spaceships, “Wi-Fi vibes, radiation, atomic bombs pointed in your direction, drones.”

At times, her work displays this sinister sense of paranoia. Last summer she participated in a group show where her work consisted of a “POST NO BILLS” sign that she’d left out so that it would grow mold on it. The idea was to put it in the show and have it spread to other artworks. As she put it: “I just wanted to infect everybody.”

“Channels” is on view through Feb. 18 at The Journal Gallery, 106 N. 1st Street, Brooklyn, thejournalinc.com.

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