

SURFACE

Lily Stockman in Full Bloom

By Ryan Waddoups, August 28, 2020



Lily Stockman's studio in Joshua Tree, California.
© Courtesy of the artist. Photo by Laure Joliet

Leading up to her second solo show with Charles Moffett, we drop by the abstract painter's airy studio—a lush oasis in Joshua Tree, California, where the desert's poetic grandeur has broadened her perspective and fine-tuned her focus.

How have you been keeping busy during the pandemic? Has quarantining impacted your creativity at all?

We rolled into lockdown with a two year old and an infant, so suddenly without daycare my studio practice went out the window. I drew after I got the babies down at night. I made a whole series of quarantine flower drawings in those early months when I was still waking up every three hours with the baby. It felt like survival mode, but in retrospect it was just a very specific, tiny orbit without much room for anything outside these two tiny humans.

When we finally figured out a system so I could get back to the studio to make work for my show, I felt like a demented border collie let loose on a field of sheep. I went nuts, churned out an enormous amount of work, and worked on five paintings at a time. I have so much empathy for working parents of small children during this whole deal.

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“Seed, Stone, Mirror, Match,” your upcoming solo show at Charles Moffett, is derived from your physical world suddenly being very small. I think it’s safe to say we’ve all been having similar feelings.

My experience is, for the most part, completely unremarkable, which is what probably makes our individual experiences feel collective, and which is why I keep coming back to the opening of “Late Echo,” a great John Ashbery poem from 1979:

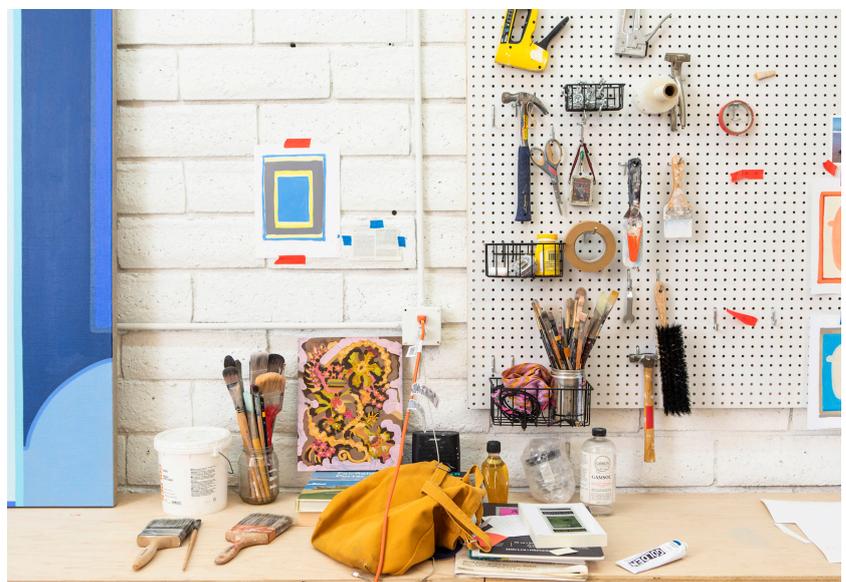
Alone with our madness and favorite flower
We see that there really is nothing left to write about.
Or rather, it is necessary to write about the same old things
In the same way, repeating the same things over and over
For love to continue and be gradually different.

How true is that? I felt like I had to paint the same thing over and over to get my bearings.

I have a small garden behind our house in northeast L.A. It was a dirt dog run when we moved in, and over the course of the pandemic I’ve put all my home-bound energy into scratching out a pollinator garden. Now it’s filled with five-foot-tall dahlias, black tomatoes, native milkweeds, and monarch butterflies. Watching the garden come to life and tracking time through the germination of plants has been the one bright spot of my very small world. Keeping time with honeybees instead of the fair schedule.

The paintings draw inspiration from details spotted in your surroundings: a praying mantis, a cell phone number jotted down, and so on. Have you always paid attention to the little things?

I imagine most painters are close-lookers, right? A love of the natural world makes a person a noticer.



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And a keeper of time. I recently learned that the way you can tell when your melons have the highest sugar content and are ready to be picked is when the tendril nearest the stem starts to brown. That's a nice way to think about when a painting is done, too. You learn the signs to look out for, and when it's ripe, you stop. Brushes down, don't overpaint.

How do these details manifest in your paintings?

My paintings look flat and graphic on a screen, which is realistically how most people are seeing them these days, and people are always surprised by how painterly they are in the flesh. There's a muscular, fast quality to the thicker lines, and delicate, slower quality to the thin trompe l'oeil edges. Lots of little jokes and quotes and riffs from painting to painting. The better paintings have those little details you can't get in a photograph that are total surprises in person, like a present as reward for your attention.

I'm always grateful that anyone would pause to look at my paintings, so now that this show will be open by appointment and some people will actually see them in person—that's such a privilege! Covid-era gallery-goers should get goodie bags. It seems absurd to take on any added risk to go see art, but masking up and going to a private appointment to be alone with art keeps our spirits alive. It allows the "love to continue," going back to Ashbery.

What evolution does this new body of work signify for your practice?

The palette got darker. I let the edges wobble more and didn't tidy up the way I usually do. I drank too much coffee and let my hands get a little unsteady. I painted over passages that didn't work and let that underpainting show. I'd been painting arches—riffing on Fra Angelico's Annunciation masterpiece—for three years, and I started to move away from an architectural space in the paintings, and started making these little floating orbs, little vessels or bodies, which feel solid, real, and more like a subject than a space.

I was looking at Forrest Bess, Agnes Pelton, Cedric Morris flower paintings, Ron Gorchoff drawings from the '80s, listening to interviews where Stanley Whitney talks about looking out a window over the rooftops of Rome and understanding what early Renaissance painters were seeing as they mastered orthogonal, linear perspective, and then Stanley wanting to flatten it. Stanley taking in the whole western art history canon and in one quick grid squashing it, reinventing painting—that's so great.

In Mongolia, you apprenticed in Buddhist thangka painting, which explains your exploration of floating figures in delineated space. How else have Buddhist principles shaped your creative sensibilities?

I'm interested in the formal qualities of religious paintings in general. Look at early Christian frescoes, Islamic geometric ornament, how Hindu idols are displayed inside temples across the subcontinent, or even the way a flower arrangement is staged on a mantle in a Virginia Woolf novel. I'm always trying

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to locate a subject in a space in my paintings. It's a very simple exercise but it has limitless possibilities.

You spent a year in Jaipur, where Block Shop now operates a textile studio.

I moved to India in 2010, spent some time studying Hindi in a little hill station up in the Himalaya in Uttarakhand, had a residency down in lush green Kerala, where I lived in a spice warehouse with some other artists, and then settled up north in Jaipur, in the heart of dusty, dazzling Rajasthan. I blew off my painting residency one morning to accompany a friend who was studying block printing and natural dye traditions on a Fulbright, and ended up spending all my time block printing with a few artists there. My sister, Hopie, came and visited. Ten years later, she runs Block Shop Textiles, a textile studio in L.A. and Jaipur.

I paint like a printmaker; all that time block printing and breaking down a composition by rekh and datta, the fine lines that outline and define a shape, and the interior filler, helped me be a more patient, color-shape painter. I paint flat on sawhorses and build up layers by color, shifting opacity and transparency so you get all these very subtle shifts as you move around the painting and the light changes.



You also channeled the physical layouts of Mary Ruefle's poetry into these paintings.

Mary Ruefle is a great poet for the moment. She has an irresistible sense of humor, an uninhibited frankness, and a plain-spokenness that I find so appealing when so much chatter coming out of the White House is all bombast, rhetoric, and pageantry. She did this great thing where she simply whited-out photocopies of old books and "wrote" poems by leaving certain words visible. I love that idea of covering up all the extraneous noise and paring down to the essential words to make a single thought. I love her process of editing, reducing, fine-tuning. I admire concision and disciplined self-editing—two qualities I could work on.

How does living and working in Joshua Tree fuel you creatively?

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We're perched out on a massive sandy wash, dotted with joshua trees, spanish daggers, desert indigo, and senna. When it all blooms in the spring, the colors and scent are enough to make you tear up—there's so much beauty that worked so hard to exist. It's very moving to know a gnarled creosote survives 110-degree summers without rainfall and then erupts into yellow flowers the following spring, year after year, for hundreds of years. King Clone, a clonal colony creosote ring, is the oldest living organism on earth, carbon dated to 11,700 years old. To spend time in the Mojave is to understand geological time.

I grew up on the East Coast, so when I first came to the Mojave Desert it was unlike anything familiar to my sensibility. I had never experienced such a vast horizon line, seen so far, or experienced a place without topsoil—you're very aware of the geology when you're always walking on sand and rock. I started painting bigger out there, and got really into the desert palette of apricot, lavender, sulphur yellow, white-hot white, and every color of sunlight on sand. I learned how to use color on the linen so that it feels like an atmosphere.

Do you view your paintings as part of a broader artistic tradition within Southern California?

Oh, for sure. In an interview about the heyday of the Ferus crew, Ed Ruscha said that the L.A. scene was like a jazz catalog, with lots of different voices under the same record label. "Each had a very distinctive take on the world and on his work, and so that made it a very vital place to aspire to and to be." Los Angeles has great colors. The pink and salmon and buttercream stucco, the art deco architecture, the ever-blooming bougainvillea—it's an engaging, beautiful, rough, intoxicating visual landscape. The light is what gets everybody.



I feel very fortunate to be a painter in Los Angeles. I love how generous and supportive the community is; I cherish and admire my friends here. I have Ruby Neri on one side of my studio and Hilary Pecis on the other, both incredible women, artists at the top of their game, a lot of fun to be around. David Lynch has been

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broadcasting the daily weather report from his wood shed every morning for our local radio station, so he's become the voiceover of these end times. How great is that? God, I love L.A.

Where do you envision your practice going from here?

I have some hundred-inch linens stretched and primed and waiting for me back in the studio. I'm excited to work on a very large scale this year. I have an enormous amount of energy and feel grateful to be alive, healthy, and able to paint. I fall asleep dreaming about what I'll paint the next day. I hope to look back on 2020 and think I made the very most of it, in spite of it.

What's been your biggest takeaway from the past six months of upheaval?

That people are incredibly resilient creatures. And that you can't wait around for institutional change; you must go out on the street with your neighbors and make it happen.