

VOGUE

Meet the Women of Frogtown, An Artist Community Like No Other

By Dodie Kazanjian, March 12, 2022.



From left: Artists Ruby Neri, Lily Stockman, Megan Reed, Hilary Pecis, and Austyn Weiner (with their dogs, Dolly, Jake, Mango, and Pablo).

© Courtesy of the artists, photo by Laure Joliet

What are the chances that five women artists, with studios in the same Los Angeles complex, would all be rooting for one another? Just such an unlikely arrangement exists right now in Frogtown, a sleepy, mostly residential neighborhood on the Los Angeles River, minutes from downtown.

Ruby Neri, a sculptor of bright, bumptious, large-scale female clay nudes, had her eye on the magic warehouse for some time before she officially obtained it in 2020. “It was a little bit beyond my price range, but I signed the lease two months before COVID shut things down.” Lily Stockman, an abstract painter, heard about it from a friend, and got in touch with Neri. “It was truly right in my backyard,” she says. Neri then called Hilary Pecis, a realist painter of interiors and landscapes, and Megan Reed, a sculptor who had once been Neri’s student. Within the first year, the adjoining mirror-image warehouse, where camper vans were outfitted with all their trappings, became available; a gestural abstract painter named Austyn Weiner moved in.

This accidental community of women artists—ranging in age from 32 (Weiner) to 51 (Neri)—almost immediately became a family of friends. “I don’t think any of us expected that,” Weiner says. “We all, without trying, really do like each other.” They are at different stages in their careers, doing very different work, but if there’s one thing that connects them, it’s their belief in no-holds-barred, vibrant, all-out color (“I’m almost a hundred

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percent positive that each of our palettes will make their way into one another's work at some point," says Weiner) and a commitment to the idea that participating in the contemporary art world does not have to mean adopting a cutthroat attitude.

The vibe, in fact, couldn't be further from the intensely competitive climate in Bushwick cubicles or Jersey City's vast Mana Contemporary, or any number of L.A. warehouses where artists have taken root and fierce rivalries abound. There are no handles on the nine-foot-tall doors to their Frogtown studios because they're rarely shut. "Deep conversations happen, where we're pinging off of each other," Reed says. "That's the joy of being in a space like this. I feel that electric energy."

"We definitely influence each other," says Neri, who has started painting again, inspired by the seeming ease of her studio neighbors' processes. "I'm always laboring over clay," she says, laughing. Two or three of the artists often have lunch together at a big picnic table in the fenced-in parking lot out front, where Neri's sculptures hold court and clumps of tall native grasses grow wild in the cracks. On occasion, they'll drink tequilas there, too, at the end of the day. "There's so much ego in creativity," Reed says, "but I don't feel any of that here." On the weekends, the studios are full of the artists' children and pets—five dogs and one cat. Michelle Obama paid a visit last fall. "She was in such high spirits," Stockman remembers. "So warm and knowledgeable and full of questions."

Frogtown, which got its name decades ago when there was an invasion of small toads, has become one of the hot spots for artists. A number of artists—including Urs Fischer and Thomas Houseago—have studios there, and real estate prices are rising fast. But the five artists, who have weathered a lot of ups and downs during the pandemic, aren't worried. "The warmth of the studio has been the one constant," Stockman says. "It's really been the buoy in the storm these past two years."



Austyn Weiner, *Thank You For Sharing*, 2021. Oil paint, oil stick, and crayon on canvas, 83 x 1.5 x 103 in.
© Courtesy of the artist and Konig Gallery. Photo by Ahram Park



Hilary Pecis, *Clementine's Bookshelf*, 2021. Acrylic on linen, 74 x 64 in.
© Courtesy of the artist and Rachel Uffner Gallery, New York. Photo by Ed Mumford

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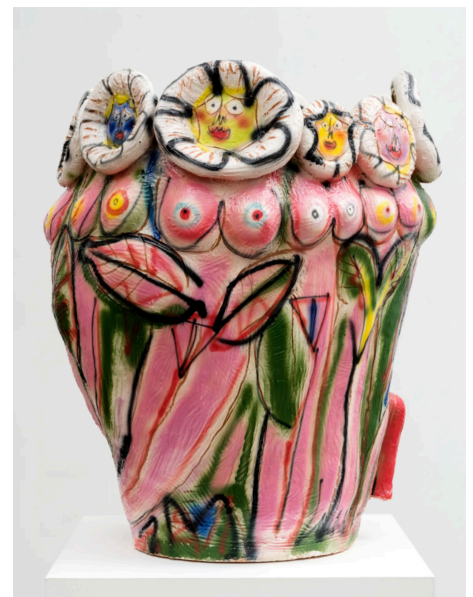
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I'm definitely a California girl," Neri says. She grew up in the Bay Area, the daughter of Manuel Neri, a Mexican American artist whose figurative sculptures were part of the funk art movement in the 1960s and '70s. Manuel, who taught for years at the University of California, Davis, was such a big presence that Ruby "didn't want to deal with sculpture at all." She started out as a graffiti artist in what became the Mission School group, spray-painting horses on walls around town and using the tag reminisce. She didn't work with clay until she was 35, "and then it just snowballed," she says. "Clay was an immediate fit for me. It's so warm and tactile." At least one of Neri's bronze castings will be in her show this fall at David Kordansky Gallery in L.A. She is married to a Swedish woodworker and sculptor named Torbjörn Vejvi, whom she met at grad school, and with whom she has a daughter, Sigrid, 13. "As an artist, you spend so much time alone. Work is great, but you go long periods without talking." The community has been an antidote to that. "We're all really secure with our own selves. There's a lot of confidence, and I appreciate that."

"It feels very much like Seinfeld here," Hilary Pecis, 42, says, "a real open-door kind of situation.... Everyone here has a good work ethic, but we all love a little break for a conversation." When visitors come to Pecis's studio, she takes them to every other studio as well, and she has a lot of visitors these days: One of her canvases went for \$870,000 at Christie's last year, and all of the new work at her current show at Rachel Uffner in New York was sold before the opening. "Hilary is very much the mother of the studio," Reed says. "In the past few years, she's really been on the big stage in the art world, and she's constantly trying to bring people with her." Most of Pecis's paintings come from her own photographs of friends' interiors, but she recently worked from photos that Stockman and Reed took. "This is a pandemic thing, because I'm not visiting as many friends or doing the things I did before." The cat in Clementine's Bookshelf is a portrait of Reed's gray tabby, made from the photo.



Megan Reed, *Untitled, (blue stand)*, 2021. Insulation foam, expanding foam, wood, fiberglass, hydrocal, aqua resin, acrylic and polyurethane 58 x 43 x 20 in.
 © Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Jeff McLane.



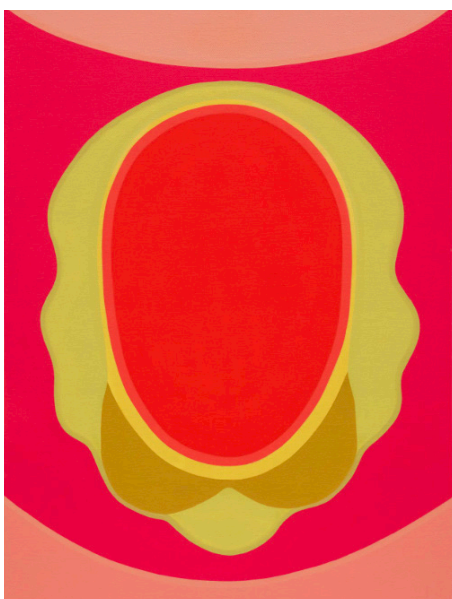
Ruby Neri, *Flowers*, 2021. Ceramic with glaze, 45 x 36 x 45 in.
 © Courtesy of the artist and David Kordansky Gallery

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Pecis is married to Andrew Schoultz, a painter and muralist, and they have a nine-year-old son, Apollo. She was born in Orange County, but her parents moved almost immediately to Northern California. For Pecis, there wasn't a lot going on culturally besides the rodeo, and as an adult she settled in San Francisco, where she asserted her individuality by getting covered with tattoos. "None of them have any meaning to me," she explains. "They all felt decorative." The all-over-ness of her tattoos connects with her chock-full paintings. "There's something comforting to me in a scene that's just packed with information." Lily Stockman, 39, is an abstract painter whose work has the cerebral mysticism of the Tibetan thangka paintings that she discovered in Mongolia and also perhaps the simplicity of the Shaker embroidery samplers that her artist grandmother passed down—"someone's ecstatic experience translated into something that's given to someone." Stockman, who is having a solo show in June at Almine Rech in London, is the house intellectual, bringing books and articles to the others' attention. She describes the communal space as "the closest I've ever come to utopia." Her mother worked with the Children's Television Workshop, the group that developed Sesame Street, and her father was a classics major who later became a hay farmer in rural New Jersey. She's the oldest of four girls, and she and her husband, an environmentalist, have three young children. Before her youngest, Freddy, was born last summer, Stockman rode her bike to work every morning along the L.A. River bike path. "L.A. was so eerily quiet at the beginning of COVID, and the river wildlife really exploded. I got to know this great blue heron.... It's a very L.A. situation to have nature quietly taking over an urban landscape," she says.

"I've been in studios by myself and in studios with others," says Megan Reed, 47, "and there are good things about both. But this community took on a certain urgency because we all moved in at the beginning of the pandemic.... That may be part of our bonding. We're sort of all in this lifeboat."



Lily Stockman, *Scarlet Gilia*, 2021. Oil on linen, 48 x 36 in.
 © Courtesy of the artist and Almine Rech and Charles
 Moffett Gallery, New York. Photo by Ed Mumford



Hilary Pecis, *Ranunculuses*, 2021.
 Acrylic on linen, 42 x 32
 © Courtesy of the artist.

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Born in Carmel, and raised in the Bay Area, Reed went to New York University, and then to California College of the Arts, where she studied with Neri. “Ruby was a very important person in the Bay Area art scene, a pioneer in many ways.” Reed’s large, multicolored, often hilarious sculptures are made out of what she calls “materials at hand”—Styrofoam, cardboard, plywood, plaster, Hydrocal, Aqua-Resin. “I feel overwhelmed by consumer culture, so I started making sculptures out of Styrofoam packaging. It’s almost like, out of the landfill, these creatures are born; these absurdist little characters are monuments to contemporary times.”

When Austyn Weiner found out about the Frogtown women, she cold-called Pecis, and signed the lease soon after. She spent three months renovating and moved in last May. “Everything about it is a dream,” she says. “The physical space has entirely changed my practice.” She works on more than 20 canvases at a time, moving like a “whirling dervish” between them. (Many of these paintings are in her show this month at König Galerie in Seoul.) This is full-arm painting, not wrist painting. Her riotously colorful forms swell and droop and merge in unpredictable and often joyous abandon, with occasional nods to Philip Guston, Francis Bacon, and a host of others.

Weiner was born and raised in Miami. Her father was a child actor who grew up to work in real estate, and her mother had a career in fashion and painted as well. Growing up, she fell in love with photography and wanted to be a photojournalist “like Annie Leibovitz.” She ended up going to Parsons in New York, but ultimately decided she wanted to paint. “If I wanted to paint, I should follow the light,” she says, “so I moved to California.”