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Interview with Rachel Eulena Williams

Questions by Emily Burns



Hi Rachel! Can you tell us a bit about your background and what first piqued your interest in art? Do you have any memories of early creative moments?

I live and work in Brooklyn and was born and raised in Miami. I'm sure growing up in Miami has had an enormous effect on my creativity, there is an appreciation for art that is very much a part of the landscape and culture. I was lucky to have been introduced to art in a time where the city was beginning to love contemporary art with the buildup of Art Basel Miami. I can remember trips to museums and seeing work

from radical and exciting contemporary artists from all over the world. Work that was thought provoking and interesting, which for me was a very unique experience. Thinking back, I was so confused at how everything got there, it really felt like magic.

Have you always worked in a vein that is similar to the way you work now? What interests have remained throughout your career so far?

For the most part yes, my work has always been searching for this texture/ground relationship that quite literally gives you something you can feel with your eyes. Painting found objects, collaging painting to sculpture and forms, it has all led me to the work I make now. I was and still am constantly searching for materials and how they could interact with my drawings.

Is drawing part of your process? Can you walk us through your current process?

Drawing for me is so important! I draw regularly and use it to really explore as much as possible. I focus on really letting myself draw whatever comes to my mind, or trying to finish a whole sketchbook and see what comes from prolonged focus. It's usually in my drawing that I am able to really see my ideas, even subconscious ones that I wish I could understand. The drawing is almost a muse, with layers of imagery coming from multiple drawings.

My process feeds from drawing, most days I take a look at my drawings before I start anything. I create all of the elements of my work separately, giving each element some individuality. From shaping and dyeing the ropes, I secure them with wire and use that to make line work. Those become the armature for the cut, canvas shapes that I then sew and paint.



Text and various letterforms frequently appear on the surfaces of your work. When did text first become part of the visual landscape? Where does the text come from?

I began working with text when I took an interest in design, which ended pretty quickly but the thing that did stick around was an interest in text and communication design. I became pretty obsessed with how different scripts and fonts told their own different story. I worked in calligraphy and I began to focus on the letter form. I developed this understanding that text functioned like color and that it too had its own personality. I began adding it to my work when I began looking into symbols and their meanings. With texting, character limits

and abbreviations, two letters in the right context can represent a whole thought. I wanted to incorporate text abstractly, seeing what sounds I could evoke, or words I could communicate. Thinking of language and communication as color I incorporate hand painted signage, and find ways to mold letters or fill the negative space of letter forms.

In addition to rope and canvas, you use other materials as well. Where do you source these items from? Does their provenance have any significance? In particular, I am thinking of the piece, Hanging Shield, 2019 from your recent exhibition, Go Away Road, at Loyal Gallery in Stockholm, or the hammock work from NADA this year!

I am usually sourcing materials based on their relationship to painting techniques, looking for textures that will convey the marks and lines from my drawings. The hammock is a new addition to my materials and I couldn't be more excited. I currently have a hammock work on display at the nada house on Governors Island with Cooper Cole Gallery. I was initially drawn to its ability to blend with the rope. I enjoy how adding common materials to art can really question our perception in many ways. With the rope, there is the transformation of it to line, mark and shape. The object begins to defy your understanding of its uses and common environment, taking you on a journey through the material history.

Your work seems to be becoming larger in scale as of late. Can you talk about how you approach scale?

I think it has been a natural progression, at one time I made really huge drawings. I think that scale is quite tricky but I really think that scale finds you, depending on the subject matter or materials. For me the hammocks have introduced a sense of openness, along with new interests leading me towards bigger works. I am very engaged with the negative space that my work creates, searching for more has led me to larger works.

Your work casts unique, colorful shadows on the wall, adding an exciting visual element not present in typical works on canvas or 3D sculptures not exhibited on a flat surface. Have you ever created purely sculptural work shown in a 3D context? If so, how do these relate to your wall works?

I've studied and presented sculpture that has primarily been centered around the image. Thinking of the surface and how I can manipulate the way images were presented. It has definitely influenced my approach to presentation, now I use that small space between the wall and the works by painting the backs with saturated colors and extending the painting into the shadow.

How do you typically adhere or attach surfaces together?

I use a combination of techniques, it typically begins with archival glue, followed by sewing or staples (for works attached to wood panel). I learned most of these techniques doing chine-collé and bookbinding. I reference those techniques for my approach to my painted canvases. Cutting and collaging unstretched paintings allow it to become part of the image and not just the process.

Using the materials of rope and canvas (among others) which are by nature pliable, and saturating them with paint, the materials become self-reliant, and self-stable and firmly able to hold their shape in space. Can you talk more about the transformation of the raw materials into the final works, and the significance of this process?

Yes all of the marks and layers of my work come together like a web, holding form. It can be described as

self-reliant, relying mostly on gravity to allow the image to come into place. The countless layers of paint add firmness to the works, creating curves and valleys that are the fun and unpredictable part of the work. The process is inspired by painting, and that search to find beauty in the mistakes. With the amount of change the works go through, its extremely significant, a replication of a drawing really lacks that transformative journey.

Valerie Kamen wrote of your work “Driven by the desire to challenge the often limited depictions of outer space as a dead place outside of nature, in these paintings Williams’s use of metallics and earth tones present an environment that while foreign, is not cold or vacant.” Can you elaborate on this use of color to create a new environment?

Color is a huge tool for me and a way that I bring an environment to the works. I make my work with the experience in mind. Being that I want my work to be open and abstract, I allow the colors to be a tool in the story or theme I am working in.

What are the themes you are currently most interested in exploring?

Currently I have been thinking about relational perception—similar to how it functions in Titchener circles. How surrounding elements can affect our understanding. I’ve interpreted that by looking at and finding ways to incorporate the lines of charts, graphs, maps and venn diagrams. Specifically I have been interested in the versatility of the circle, looking at how artists like John Baldessari uses the circle to represent the human or Atsuka Tanaka can transform that same shape to poetic code.

What is one of the best exhibitions you have seen recently?

I am still moved by the experience of the Hilma Af Klint show at the Guggenheim and the Robert Rauschenberg show at LACMA. I love how immersive the two shows were and I found both very inspiring. If I had to choose the best, for a while will be the Soul of A Nation show that I got a chance to see it at the Brooklyn Museum. So much amazing work and such an important experience, rooms curated to highlight a large range of interests and approaches to art.

Who are some of the artists you look at most often?

Betye Saar, Senga Negundi, Terry Adkins, Howardena Pindell, David Hammons, Atsuko Tanaka, El Anstul, kind of stay at the forefront of my mind visually and conceptually as they all transform materials. While I aspire to many achievements that happen in the work of artists like Phylida Barlow, Eva Hesse and Elizabeth Murray that have done so much to push the place between painting and sculpture.

Is there any advice you have received that you remember often?

I always hold onto advice from older artists. I remember once being told that “being an artist was not about what you make, but how much you wanted to make it.” Thinking about that often definitely keeps away any expectations. It reminds me not to expect anything from myself or any artwork and instead enjoy every part of making, looking and thinking about it.

What are you reading?

I’m usually reading a few books at once. I’m currently reading White Teeth by Zadie Smith and I flip through and keep on hand poetry like Hugh Prather. I’m slowly reading Mule Bone, a play that was written but never

finished by Zora Neal Hurston and Langston Hughes. I stumbled upon the book and was in love with how the writing and text looked so much like text messages from today. I wanted to see if I could read a script and it is very interesting.

Whats up next for you?

Right now I am preparing for solo shows and I am really excited for a fellowship that I will be participating in this summer at the Robert Blackburn printmaking studio in the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts. Printmaking was a big part of my education and I'm excited to see what text elements I can bring into my work with screen printing.