

Matrons & Mistresses

By Lizzie Cheatham McNairy | November 25, 2020



Heather Day

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– HEATHER DAY

I am not exactly sure why, but each time I look at Heather Day’s work, I am reminded of the Zoom tango lessons I have grown so fond of these last few months. Perhaps it is the way her brushstrokes lead me through her canvas or how her vibrant colors (like good music) make it impossible not to be moved. Surely it has something to do with the fact that her work, full of life and balanced by a thoughtful hand, serves as a ‘mind map—an entry point for one to explore their own thoughts.’

Lizzie Cheatham McNairy: Currently you have a show up in L.A. and have just completed a four-story mural. Will you share a bit about these projects and how the process of creating each was both similar and different?

Heather Day: My solo show *Ricochet* at Diane Rosenstein Gallery has come to a close now, but that exhibition and my current work both examine the boundaries of intention, exploring the opposing forces of control and chaos in my practice, which carry a painting towards its endpoint.

Shortly after my solo was installed in Los Angeles, I went back to San Francisco to begin painting this four-story brick building located downtown. While my studio practice leaves quite a bit of room for experimentation, murals are different in that they require a higher level of planning due to the nature of the surrounding areas and scale.

I think the way I finalized the composition for the mural stemmed from my recent paintings. I’m more thoughtful about openings and ways to enter space than I was a year and a half ago when I started planning this mural. For example, partway through the process, while I was working on site, I chose to leave openings within the composition revealing the rustic brick, rather than covering it up.

I find that when I have opportunities to push scale and explore new materials, it offers a perspective that will be recycled back into the studio later on. Keeping an open mind and constantly shifting perspective is key.

LCM: You have been building a home in Joshua Tree for a while now. Can you tell us about what initially drew you there and your vision for the space, both for yourself and other artists?

HD: I started visiting Joshua Tree about six years ago after a couple of friends moved out there and immediately found myself drawn to the contrast of both the grit and calming stillness of the high desert. The active arts community and the proximity to Palm Springs and Los Angeles are a definite plus.

After months of searching for the right plot of land and writing dozens of letters to property owners with my partner, we got a phone call from a retired couple living in San Diego. They loved the idea of an artist living and working on their land and agreed to sell to us off-market. We worked with architect Ryan Leidner to design a studio and home from scratch that is loosely inspired by Georgia O’Keeffe’s New Mexican compound. It’s an open floor plan with lots of windows and a big studio space. We can’t wait for construction to be done this winter.

Eventually we’d love to open the space up to other artists. I had such a great experience last year at Macedonia Institute, an artist residency in the Hudson Valley, and love the idea of something like that. When you host a diverse group of artists and make space for creative ideas and energy to flow freely—amazing things can happen.

LCM: I was quite interested to see you are moving toward collaging different paintings of yours—stitching, combining and building off of ideas... Will you talk a bit more to this practice?

HD: Last year, I was looking through my sketchbook and became fixated on the spine. It serves a functional purpose, but also acts as a barrier, locking one idea in a singular page, or forcing you to hurdle over its barrier. But, when I rejected the idea of the canvas or sketchbook spine as a container, I found new seeds of ideas in unrehearsed markings from a test canvas. These markings felt different from those on a final canvas. It’s almost like by testing the mark in advance, I was leaving behind the integrity and grit. I’ve been finding ways to incorporate that back into my work to create sort of a key.

In stitching a test canvas to a new piece, the seeds of ideas from that canvas could propagate and form a conversation with a different species of rehearsed markings and rehearsed figures made in their image.

LCM: As you look at your practice over the last year, what do you see as your greatest challenges and lessons?

HD: I’m constantly seeking new ways to protect my creative process and find ways to continue feeding it. That can be a challenge at times. The days where I can’t quite get into a rhythm in the studio can wear on me. But, I’m slowly learning the value in patience and what it means to slowly build a studio practice. At its core, a studio practice should be a routine where you show up every day and push through. You keep feeding that fire until the next spark happens and then you run with it.

LCM: In our conversation about tech’s involvement in the arts, you made such an interesting point around looking at it as a *partnership* with artists instead of a support of the arts. Will you share a bit more around how you view the difference and your desire to move away from this idea that artists and the arts are always struggling?

HD: Absolutely. A large part of our society has an oversimplified view of what an artist is. They might think of the antiquated cliché of the starving artist, or as a more of a caricature of a real artist. It’s 2020. We need to have more nuance in the way we see artists, while accounting for an increasingly broad spectrum of artists.

There are so many different artists making a living off of their work, and so many different ways to do that. We live in a sensory-oriented world, where our tastes are shaped by what we see and hear. Artists play a massive role in that world and should get the respect they deserve for helping shape it.

It’s imperative for both galleries and brands to recognize that their relationship with an artist is not a charitable opportunity, but more of a situation where both sides benefit and should have an equal contribution to the partnership or collaboration.

LCM: We share a connection in that we are both dyslexic. I know for me that made school really difficult, and I have had to work very hard around my insecurities of not feeling smart. Even now it can be challenging at times and

rather embarrassing if I am asked to read a word I have never seen and memorized before; yet, I have come to realize that in many ways, it is a gift that my brain works a bit differently. Do you think that your art practice has been impacted at all by your dyslexia and/or that perhaps you dove into your art due to the fact that it came more easily to you than other subjects in school?

HD: Wow, I appreciate your willingness to talk about this. I struggled with school too, and I'm fortunate that I had the support of a few teachers along the way to recognize my differences and keep an open mind in adopting new approaches to learning. Because of my dyslexia, I had to work extremely hard in school and I think that determination to keep trying has carried through in my art practice. The pace and consistency of that work has helped give me endurance to maintain a steady practice.

My dyslexia shapes my art practice to a degree. I feel an almost gravitational pull towards finding new ways of communicating that aren't as concrete or limiting as the devices we commonly use to communicate with one another.

LCM: What is something about your art that is important to you but has never been asked about in an interview or covered in one of your write ups?

HD: We've covered a lot of ground, but I think it's important that my work is an entry point for viewers to explore their own thoughts. I view many of my paintings like mind maps and like to think that these intersections of line and color will relate.

LCM: What are you most excited about moving forward?

HD: Though I've been slowly bringing digital tools into my practice for years, I'm excited to finally use what I've learned over the years and establish how these new learned skills will help my practice and bring my work to another level. I don't think painting is the be-all, end-all for me. If anything, painting has been a vehicle for me to explore thoughts and to raise questions about navigating space with emotional triggers. I'm interested in exploring other mediums and methods of working that will continue pushing questions I have.

Outside of the studio, I'm looking forward to *UNTITLED Miami* which opens the first week of December and following that, *EXPO Chicago* which was delayed until the spring.