



INSIDE THE STUDIO

Visit the Studio with Jodi Hays

Exposing the inherent beauty of the previously rejected.

BY: Melanie Reese, 14 January 2021

This week we take a break from the cold and head to the warmth of Jodi Hays' Nashville-based studio. A practice that involves dyeing recycled materials to expose and emphasize the inherent beauty of the previously rejected, Jodi teaches us a new way of looking, a new way of seeing the beauty that lies within.

What materials do you use? And why?

My abstraction is a shot-gun wedding between rural/fringe aesthetics and a rumination on Painting — my materials and language (through titles) play an important role in this union. I use both conventional materials such as oil, gouache, brushes, canvas, stretchers as well as, what might be considered less typical materials such as found fabric, dye and cardboard.

When I work with collage I use fabrics often found, given and/or thrifted — they can include items like linen napkins, tablecloths, clothing, paper, drawings and cardboard. In many cases I paint over these collaged materials often press the materials under a dye bath, letting the color sink into the crevices to expose inherent structure.

What is your artwork about? What does it speak to?

My work is rooted in abstraction and informed by land and landscape. My family of origin and ancestors were gardeners, teachers, believers, hat makers, moon-lighting loggers, makers, healers, lumber-yard owners, as well as pharmacists and grocers — back when the kitchen and pharmacy were the same room; the kitchen nourished and the pharmacy healed — both relating back to the land. I see my work as that “same room” — a melding of seemingly differing aesthetics, explored in a way that can present an inherent connection.

When I was growing up in rural Arkansas, I was a runner (cue Glory Days). Running track and cross country gave me a solid foundation for being a painter. It gave me connections to land, to discipline and to others.

When I got to art school I understood the impulse to create a flat “window” into a different world/space through a perspectival grid. This is perhaps why I like to use wood and stretchers, as they can serve as grid markers, like a fence line or the stripes of a worn-out awning.

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Robin Coste Lewis says she tells her students that perhaps the main talent employed in being a writer is the ability to be alone. The long-term training necessary for success in running relays and races instilled in me this comfort with independence. There is nothing I love more than following a line of personal inquiry in the studio. I love it like a dog gnaws a bone.

However, the reliance on others throughout the relay race taught me a foundational truth; I am not alone. And that, yet again correlates with my existence within the art world. A healthy art ecosystem depends on gallerists, dealers, professors, students, interns, photographers and studio visitors. Some of the fabric and

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textile I use in my work is a gentle nod to our collectiveness, materials that conjure up ideas of family, home, and interiors.

"The shelves in the left image are little stations of notes, where I set small works or just poetic bits to look at or think about."

Where do you get your inspiration?

To quote Mary Weatherford on Eva Hesse, "content is infinite". I like to think about painting being a considerate selection of everything. I like to push back against the pure Modernist notion that an abstract artwork is best when it points, singularly and inwardly, back to itself. I prefer a broader definition of inspiration (inputs), which comes from drawings, gardening, poetry (CD Wright), walks, and conversations. All of these "inputs" create little rivulets feeding into a practice with landscape as the creek bed.

Johnny Cash said this about his own inspirations and loves:

"I love songs about horses, railroads, land, Judgment Day, family, hard times, whiskey, courtship, marriage, adultery, separation, murder, war, prison, rambling, damnation, home, salvation, death, pride, humor, piety, rebellion, patriotism, larceny, determination, tragedy, rowdiness, heartbreak and love. And Mother. And God."

What is your typical routine when you get to the studio? Walk us through a typical studio day.

Typical days are hard to come by (particularly in quarantine with all the family home), but I can always depend on my ability to work. I also know how to make myself scarce [\[1\]](#) when I need to do so. My studio is in my backyard, so I can take advantage of the very early hours of the day, when my mind and body are fresh. Proximity to outside is key, as I do my dye work on the grass and leave them on the brick patio to dry.

I have a good sketchbook/daily practice, drawing and collage. Sometimes I make notes by moving wood slices around in stacks. My studio habit also includes reading, most recently essays (loved the recent Steve Locke work in Artforum on Philip Guston), Zadie Smith's *Intimations*, *The Overstory* and a few I keep coming back to like *Cooling Time* by CD Wright. Reading reminds me I am not alone, that so many have come before and are here, right now, committing to a life of making. A reading habit punctuates my immersive studio habits, adding a long, low-heat pressing of the wrinkles in my brain. I am not a writer, but I appreciate the work.[\[2\]](#)

Sometimes I make work that begins to funnel around a show deadline, but I generally just make work and don't need a lot of outside motivation. I do the work. Always have.

"I keep my flat collage works on the floor, 10-15 deep, imbedded in between long rolls of canvas. It works!" Proximity to outside is key, as I do my dye work on the grass and leave them on the brick patio to dry.

"I built my patio in early Covid Quarantine, made from bricks that tore through my neighborhood during the March 3, 2020 tornado. It also serves as a space to dye and lay out large works. I am working on an archway and stepping stones early Spring this year."

Do you work at a particular size or scale? Why?

My allegiances to size and scale are vagrant. I tend to keep a few burners going at once. I make small, hand-held works across the room from larger collage-based paintings. I keep a rude, yet not untidy studio and I don't tend to follow recipes. In this way, I am a process-based painter.

What are you currently working on? Share with us what is exciting to you about this most recent work.

My mature work has always been tracking a collage aesthetic, but mostly in content. The past few years I have seen this aesthetic grow to more formal considerations of collage. Perhaps seeing that Matisse cut-outs show proved to be as important as I thought it would be. Or maybe the Louise Bourgeois textiles exhibition at Cheim and Read; modestly scaled fabric ruminations on star formations.

Which artists most inspire you and your work?

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The influences/admiration/inspirations question always leaves me wanting to make a bullet point list at least a mile long. As CD Wright says, there are so many oddly shaped ears in the field. There are so many varied voices that one might not directly connect to one's work, but have great weight (may they never sing in unison[3]). But here goes nothin'; Louise Bourgeois, Anni Albers, The Black Mountain School (which, technically, is not one artist, but I can get away with it because Rauchenberg), and Beverly Buchanan.

I am also really grateful to have observed hundreds of living artists when I worked at a gallery in Boston after I graduated with my BFA. While there I was able to see the myriad of ways in which one can be an artist in the world — young and old, parents and teachers, wealthy and scrappy. Where I grew up there was not the large art ecosystem like that, though I am grateful to carry with me models and messiness of small town community. I also love so many contemporary voices like that of Joanne Greenbaum, Michelle Grabner, Amy Sillman, Virginia Overton, Krista Clark, Desmond Lewis, Jess Ingram, Jane South, Tomashi Jackson, Lonnie Holly, curators Jordan Amirkhani and Helen Molesworth, and all those anonymous ladies who made quilted bible covers growing up. I could go on, as I feel as though we are in an exciting moment for more expansive representation.

Do you balance another job in addition to being an artist?

Being the mother of three children between the ages of 5-10 years old is certainly a fulltime job, but I also seem to manage my "other job" serving as a grumpy and reluctant Virtual School Manager during the pandemic.

Footnotes

[1] "The modern idea that our art must always come first and never be interrupted is complete BS. I can't live that way with my land. When you have a mule and it needs something, you can't tell it to wait. I can't help but be interrupted by my neighbor. Now, I have some ways of being unfindable when I have to be, but I'm going to be interrupted." - Wendell Berry

[2] From Hilton Als (and maybe also Fran Lebowitz) "Think before you speak. Read before you think. Do the work. Do not react. Shut up. Don't react. Read. Do the work. Think. Do the work."

[3] CD Wright.