



Artist Interview
By: Brianna Brass

2020 January Resident Interview: Jodi Hays

MHM: Much of your practice has been beautifully documented and catalogued throughout your career. In what ways does this creative record illuminate throughlines within your work?

JH: I have always relied heavily on daily practice, most consistently through sketchbooks. They have been a familiar container for over 25 years. The interest in artist books came for a few reasons; to honor the book form (as reading is another important part of my research), and in some cases, like Keeper (collaborators David King and writer Joe Nolan) I hoped to have a desirable, affordable component to my solo show of paintings.

Most recent books (on my site) are like recipe books, a context for my abstraction. I have divided these up into categories that have been consistent prompts: fragments, build, heaven, text. I made them as poetic (and affordable) extensions of and illuminations on my practice.

MHM: What are you reading right now? Could you describe any particular passages or themes that resonate with your current time in studio?

JH: I have been reading CD Wright's poetry this winter. She is also a native of Arkansas. Steal Away and One with Others. I feel understood. Ninth Street Women, reading with a few women artists for a book club. In the fall I picked up White Girls by Hilton Als and read the essay on Flannery O'Connor called The Lonesome Place. I am still ruminating on how this essay begins to get at the frayed edges of a southern identity or habit, and the role of the writer/observer. Others in rotation now: Spying on the South, Water Dancer, and stacks of books of poetry that are overdue but I'm glad our library no longer has fines.

MHM: Are there specific qualities that appeal to you in selecting materials? (i.e. textiles, found objects, texture and color, etc.) How do you collect or choose the fabrics you use in your paintings?

JH: Palette might be part of it, history and association with women (patterns, wallpaper, interiors, domesticity). Formally, the fabric work came from an interest in inserting a sewn mark into a canvas (2016/17). Then I began to play with more overt suggestions to the architecture of a painting. The fabric I was using for Tend (2019) was related to windows and architecture elements of painting (curtains) and/or pattern/stripes.

MHM: You quote Bell Hooks, "that we may know in fragments," in reference to your practice of collecting aesthetic and poetic moments. Can you expand on the role of this practice in your work and how you frame these moments?

JH: That quote comes from her book on Teaching to Transgress. This quote resonates the same way we find truth in poetry. Mariyln Robinson says poetry is "an imaginary garden with real toads". Sometimes I think my whole practice through seeing fragments, pieces of stories (hence the "recipe" books). It also connect with my love of painting, allowing the mark (or fragment) to be the main character

MHM: How do you choose your color palette for a particular painting or body of work?

JH: When I was taught to paint it was very traditional, with a prescriptive palette that is laid out, by value related to color. Though this education is a great tool and taught me how to see, in many ways, my color choices now are less precious. Sometimes my palette is very process-driven, dictated by needing to throw a wrench in a work that feels too decorative. Sometimes conceptual, like in 2017 for *Keeper*, using red ink as a starting point for its associative qualities to ideas of alarm and the printing process. Sometimes I wonder if I am synesthiac.

MHM: You note that the works in your latest show "Outskirts," at Browsing Room Gallery, are decidedly smaller than those exhibited in "Tend" at Red Arrow Gallery. How do you find your process and aesthetics change between these two dynamic scales?

JH: Many of the works for *Outskirts* were in the studio, in the same process of "Tend" and even before. I consider work done once I have titled it, so the work in *Outskirts* is mostly 2019. After making large-scale works I found a smaller scale, and specifically, an 8x6 panel was a challenge and through it, I was able to develop a conversation between works (painted and otherwise) that was not happening before that scale choice. That and the large paintings are wonderfully exhausting.

MHM: You list highly physical influences like "weathered board" and "rural awnings" in reference to your compositions and mark-making. Do you think that the language of digital sketching apparatuses, like the iPhone markup feature, has also made its way into your aesthetic vocabulary?

JH: YES! I actually use mark-up a lot for editing and making moves in the work in a low-stakes way. I talk a bit about the use of digital sketching and how it has played into my daily works on paper and began to inform my use of the grid (and the grid in the actual landscape, like buildings). I think about ways around the feathered trademark of the exhausted Ab Ex mark and how, in digital (free apps or iPad drawing situations that I have used) your mark or line is very rounded, thumblike, scalloped "end." This thinking informed *Tend*, how a mark can be inexhaustible (and thinking about a female presence in these marks and institutions).

MHM: You mentioned a few of your inspirations. For example: "Guston is a consistent (though distant) voice in my head for his negotiation of a "camp" (abstraction versus figuration). Can you talk more about the abstraction versus figuration theories and what this means to you?

JH: Guston was interested in being part of his contemporary moment and it led him into a kind of figuration. This, at a time when his peers (in NY) felt he was not advancing the project of "pure" formal abstract painting. I found abstraction accidentally after I had followed the "pace car" of painting for almost 10 years, through graduate school when I made mostly representational work. I went to art school in the 1990s, which means my professors were mostly men who came up in the 60s/70s. I had one female painting professor and she was "in" the Drawing department. That was my way around "the system" then, find a woman. Though I appreciate my education, I am skeptical of those division lines, and learn a lot from my younger painter friends who have less baggage about it. I am interested, too, in following the project of painting but not on anyone else's terms, though history and relevance are important. I spent all of 2019 reading female, non-binary, intersectional, POC writers (Eileen Myles, Hilton Als, Maggie Nelson)---they have great insight into "a way around" a declarative, divisive power that dictates.

MHM: Cat Acree describes two of your large paintings as "God's lungs." Given that religion and spirituality are often deeply embedded within southern and rural culture, I wonder how themes of the divine, practices of religion, or spiritual mythologies play into your work?

JH: In a recent panel at Watkins College of Art, a discussion ensued on what Flannery O'Connor called "the Christ-haunted" place I live. I think very much about interiors/exteriors and boundaries in my work, which is probably partially about a life long negotiation of this place, this geography, this complicated space. Sometimes I will leverage this in titles (Heaven, Devotion). If anything, religion points to how complicated, beautiful, terrible we are. Painting can do that same thing.

MHM: With a wealth of experience in Southern creative communities, what are some ways in which you've seen the cultural dialogue in and about visual art adapt to contemporary needs? How do you see these needs being met?

JH: This is complicated. I was a founding member of Coop Gallery here in Nashville. One of our prompts, 10 years ago, was to counter a non-critical, often decorative and less-than-considered mass of work that we were seeing at the Arcade, where our "art crawl" started. I was a way to present to viewers "yes, and..." So much has changed, Wedgewood Houston has countered in great ways with commercial galleries and artist-run spaces. Of course, geography and real estate seem to be the "winner" often, and much of what makes the city a home for creatives (affordable studios, affordable pop-up spaces) seems to be going away. Tri-Star arts has served artists in that we are connecting outside our own cities, and that lets the pressure off our immediate spheres. They are also pushing for an army of collectors, which I love. And often I am afraid I am near-sighted, that I can't see what is actually happening anymore because I love Nashville so much and have been here for 15 years. I ask new people a lot why they are here. That helps with my perspective.

MHM: What is your perfect Sunday?

JH: Early to rise. Coffee, pressed. Studio. Sunday Times. Thrift Store. Sunshine. Water, weather permitting. Family Hike. Friends and Dinner. Reading in bed

MHM: What's next for you, in the studio and out in the world?

JH: My show ends at the Browsing Room at the end of February. I have a few larger works in the studio and no show in the books (yet). My work is included in a traveling show around Tennessee, first Martin, then Memphis, then Knoxville called Voluntarily Indirect curated by Clay Palmer. Then, hose off my garage studio floors and keep working.