



In the studio with Brook Hsu.

Words by Sofia Hallström

In your practice you use many different materials from carpets to off-cut pieces of lumber wood. What informs your decisions to use these materials?

Every material I use I arrived at somewhat in a naive approach: out of necessity, out of desire to make art and make paintings. One of the longest standing materials I work with is oil paint on wood, but it wasn't always so consistent or intentional as it is now. When I moved to New York in 2011, and I was working at The Strand and didn't have a tonne of resources, I would get pieces of wood from my friends' wood shops, their scraps and off-cuts and use those as panels. There was something about these pieces of wood that resonated with me, I just felt a connection to them. Eventually, slowly, I worked on having a relationship with hardwood, with building lumber and its varying board widths and how this affects the painting. The desire to work on canvas was always present but it was really difficult to figure out how to work on that material. Maybe because it's so historically loaded, canvas seems to allow for the most criticism, which is what I like about it. It's strong in the way that it can take a lot of opinion. It took me a really long time to figure out how I wanted to work on canvas and eventually I developed a process with ink on an absorbent, paper-like ground. Each time I build a body of work it's been through wanting something specific. With canvas, I wanted to have a conversation with the figure-ground and I wanted there to be almost no separation between the ground and the paint. I started with different dye processes. I was working with dyeing wool and making these felted paintings because dye actually chemically bonds with the fibres. But, the felt didn't have luminosity, which is one of the things that painting on a white ground can really carry.

There's an apparent dualism with the materials that you use and some of the motifs that you depict. There's a degree of living, breathing reality to some of the materials, in particular the shellac ink which is made from the resinous secretions of lac beetles, reconciled with some motifs, for instance depictions of the skeletal structures of the human figure. Could you expand on this contrast?

Contrast is an interesting word to use. I think my personality and my beliefs align with having a reverence for every little piece of material. I'm not like The Little Red Hen. Do you know that story? Like I'm not going to grow the wheat, harvest the fields and ground the wheat to bake the bread like The Little Red Hen. One interpretation of this fable is that the little red hen is hard working and is rewarded by her labor with a delicious loaf of bread, but I find her inability to share her bread with the other animals reflects a kind of inflated sense of self. I only play a part in the whole process of art making. And if I didn't want anyone else to experience it I wouldn't make it. I think one of the wonderful things art does is it communicates experiences to us and allows us to form deeper connections and language. So much goes into making each material that I work with. The beetle eats tree sap out of its own necessity to survive and then the secretion that makes its burrow is collected and cleaned and made into shellac which has a multiplicity of uses. I'm using it as a binder for my ink paintings. Material is not the only subject of the work but I think

as a binder for my ink paintings. Material is not the only subject of the work but I think acknowledging it allows for a particular openness. It's a second layer that a person can relate to and feel, not just a contrast, but an interbeing. I sometimes find there is this expectation from people that the artist is this pure omnipotent force who just pulls from the ether and creates art out of nothing. This conversation with material in some respects proves how collaborative the whole process actually is. Material also holds restrictions for the images I am forming. Ink has specific properties which lend itself well to line. Skeletons are a wonderful subject for ink as their drawn form can be evoked using simple lines. Ink also lends itself to thin layers, has translucency and allows for every moment to be seen. It is an unforgivable material too and presents a situation where I must approach the canvas with as much intention as possible.



*Fictions, Installation View, 2021 at Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler*

When we previously spoke you mentioned the ways in which you bring in constraints or limitations to the work, in particular, the size and the format of the paintings on wood. In what ways do you explore this?

It's a continuation of material because, as I mentioned, each material has its own laws that govern it. There's only so many things one can do with canvas. There's only so many things one can do with shellac. The materials have properties that restrict my uses of them. It goes into how I paint and start to form images. The wood for example helped me to understand how restrictions can actually be freeing as it embraced my desire to have a daily painting practice. A great composition doesn't come every day but the desire to paint does. Lumber I found expands and contracts the different subjects that I arrive at in compositions. I reuse each subject within the different dimensions of lumber. Each time I paint the same subject it never feels like I'm making the same painting. Like each time I paint a tree in a landscape it feels completely new. Simultaneously I feel I arrive at a deeper connection with the subject and a deeper understanding with the subject in relation to material.

You've spoken briefly about emotions being at the core of your practice, in particular love. Could you expand on this?

Love is a very big subject that I'm working with, venturing into a philosophical or an ontological undertaking. It is a feeling, but I think the way I want to approach it is as an active political choice to perform love in one's day to day actions. Love isn't just something one has or wants. Love is something one does. And it is something one gives to oneself. To understand that one of the foundations to my practice is a contemplation on what love is, came through reading authors like bell hooks, Thich Nhat Hanh and Ann Carson. I had an awakening. I felt like I had completely misunderstood love. There's this saying "love hurts." And I took it as like, "yeah, of course I feel all this pain, this psychic pain and I'm putting it into my work because I need this catharsis because I'm experiencing all this pain". But I learnt that it actually wasn't love that was causing it and I only arrived at understanding what emotions are present in the work through approaching the subject of love from a totally new understanding. I'm not sure if there is a need for existence without struggle, without pain. But that is a much longer conversation.

The way that we live in the world and the news and information that we receive is often delivered through fear, in direct contrast to love. The desire to radically challenge or shift mindsets is really interesting...

Yeah. Anyone, but an artist definitely, has to consider what they do as a complete phenomenon. There's no answer as to why art exists, really. I do have this sense that as humans we need something to believe in. Why? I don't have answers for the big why question, but I start just after that and try to tend to our needs. I think humans took a huge risk in separating the spiritual from the secular. One thing I realise through love, through painting, is that freedom can come from within. The world outside of ourselves is full of restrictions. The material world is almost an "unfreedom." I believe I'm granted independence through being alive amongst others and I think we lose our inalienable rights when we deny that it is we the people. The destruction that has come about by the idea that freedom will be found on the horizon, for example Manifest Destiny, is irreversible. Everything becomes completely meaningless if you're constantly fed the information of fear and one might arrive at a sense of hopelessness. Painting is a passive

participant: one has to choose to activate it with themselves otherwise it's just this thing in a room. So any viewer brings themselves to it, and anything that they feel or think in part is projected onto it. I think there's a kind of care that painting can have. I don't think that all paintings do this but I want in my own practice for this to exist for the viewer.



Nishi, 2021, ink on canvas, 200 x 160 x 2.5 cm

It strikes me that you explore a spiritual passageway or moments of transition in the work, for instance, death is a moment where we don't know what happens afterwards and I think that's where the need for myths and stories have been created. You borrow from many historical symbols and mythological signs. How much of your personal experience do you bring into the work or do you intertwine with these historical motifs?

It's a big mess [laughs]. The materials have their own story, there's the restrictions of them, there's me, there's all these stories that have been passed down here and there. I make choices but some of it can feel completely random - chaotic. It's just about making attempts to be specific and to be intentional. Myth is this fascinating thing because the definition of it is so arguable. I don't know if there can be one definition of myth that everyone is going to agree on. To me, not all myths are sacred and not all myths are worth keeping or protecting. For instance, I'm recently revisiting Simone de Beauvoir's 'The Second Sex', especially because women's rights are still under attack. It's as though people feel there's something to be lost in allowing us to see the human being in women. I think myth can be a really powerful way to understand our relationship to the feminine, masculine, and brutal nature within ourselves. It's completely out of balance. I see the treatment of women as a reflection of this. Humanity is not only devalued, it's under threat of complete annihilation. It's contrary to what people think they're doing: to deny women's right to abortion, for instance, one could argue that it is for the protection of humanity, of life, but in reality, we completely dehumanise every woman. It is a complete misuse of reason. I only can approach this through my experience, I've had two abortions, I've made paintings about them, I've never advertised it to the public but I know it's present in the work. There have been specific paintings that I was like, "this is a painting that I made as a catharsis to understand what I just went through". It was an immense loss, it was horrible and I felt very intense grief, but simultaneously I felt relief. These are really complicated feelings and each one requires validation. I'm upset. I'm angry. This is where art becomes a necessary way of processing experience.

I know that you write a lot alongside your practice. In the past, you've included reference materials and writing in the form of zines that feature alongside your presentations of work. How important is writing and reading in your practice?

It's crucial. To me, it's a necessity. I see painting as a sister to poetry and it's very related to sound. I see painting as one of the processes for how we form language. It's mostly because I truly believe that the inexplicable exists. Those things that are inexplicable are sacred and are worth protecting. We only arrive at really understanding through

communicating and attempting to articulate everything we possibly can around those things that are inexplicable. All organisms communicate, all organisms have to communicate to survive. But humans have language and it really makes us what we are and who we are. Words carry a lot of weight and power, which is why I think it's so crucial and such a necessity to pay close attention to words.



*Fictions, Installation View, 2021 at Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler*

How much reading do you do in the studio?

I read a lot. Reading is one of my favorite things to do. I don't always feel like I have to finish a book. Or I also don't feel like I have to finish the book right away. I spend a long time reading some and some I never finish. Books are my friends and confidants and like I think a lot of people who might be more introspective or introverted; myself, having grown up the way I did, books were really such a comfort. Before I understood how painting or visual art can empathise, books did. I don't even have the internet at home. I do like to watch TV, although I haven't in over a year. I watch movies sometimes and I go through phases of taking in pop culture, like music and fashion. But I have such a passion for reading. And I'm a really slow reader. So I form my life and make certain sacrifices for this need. I get so much inspiration for my paintings from reading and I would say a good number of my drawings come to me while reading.

The way that you share what you're reading and your insights particularly on Instagram feels really generous.

I've never thought of myself as a writer. Out of everything I'm very insecure about my writing, like I'm not trying at all to be a bestseller. I just see it as part of my process and I view words similarly as how I view all material: having rules, laws, restrictions. I grew up online journaling on platforms like Xanga and MySpace and I think I view Instagram the same way. I try to not overthink it; it's social media and I just try to use it to socialize and share. I love sharing my thoughts, feelings and pictures and I love to see what my friends are up to, chat and make connections and acquaintances online.

What do you have coming up this year, are you working towards anything at the moment?

I'm working on my first solo show in Asia. I am going to do a show in Hong Kong in September with Kiang Malingue Gallery. That's very special for me. Being Asian American, I've always felt a lack and a desire to connect with this part of the world. I have my own fears of sharing my work in that context, but I'm very excited. I am co-curating a group show with Alex Adler at Adler Beatty in New York that will open in September. The show will be centered around the translation paintings made by the Bay Area artist Jess. The artist's personal narrative is quite incredible. He was a chemist who, while working to produce plutonium for the atomic bomb, left his job with the Manhattan Project to pursue art. I'm also working on another solo project which will be in Rome and will be presented in a church. I never really thought too much about the white cube until I was really offered such a not white cube space. Now I can't believe that we've developed the white cube, I'm very fascinated by it. It's not that I'm trying to delete it, but that the white cube presents itself as neutral is actually completely false. It's not at all. It really does shape the work. Just as churches shape the artworks they house. It's already having an effect, I'm so used to showing in white rooms that to be presented with this one is very difficult for me to wrap my head around but again a very exciting challenge.

A version of this interview was originally published in Issue 08, however, the final text in print is incorrect. The interview is so heartfelt and honest we needed to make sure that the finalised version of this text is published, so we have republished the entire interview along with images online.