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Interview with Aubrey Levinthal

Questions by Andreana Donahue
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Hi Aubrey. What are the most unique aspects of living and working as an artist in Philadelphia? From an outside perspective, it appears to be a particularly supportive art community.

I think Philly is great for the most part. I don't have much to contrast it against but from what I have found it is a good scale – there is always something to see but usually there are about 3 degrees of separation between artists at most. I also think visually it's a rich place, there is a lot of room for independent styles to mash together – and it seems to have escaped some of the corporate formal blandness of other cities.

In my experience our art community has a pretty casual, collaborative feel. And a ton of painters – I always feel like the best colorists are here. There are a lot of art schools so a lot of new spaces, co-ops and experimentation. And then it has a lot of big institutions and shows that come through, and a trip to NY can be done in a day bus trip. Although that proximity seems to create the drawback of a lack of serious collectors, there are very few galleries for mid-career artists. But the studios are pretty affordable and the general goodwill between artists is reassuring, especially in the face of so many problematic structures in the older art institutions here.



Aubrey Levinthal's studio.

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You've mentioned that you prefer to work in the daylight and often surround yourself with flowers. Can you tell us more about your current studio?

Yes, I have always kept pretty traditional daylight hours. I've been in the same space for about 5 years. My studio is in a small building with about 8 other studio spaces. It's shared with two of the best studio mates and artists Samantha Mitchell and Jon Redmond, and we have a big space with old beautiful windows on both sides. My space has some still life objects and plants and fabrics and a bunch of books. I have a huge glass table that I use as my palette and work on an easel. It was actually Thomas Chimes' easel, his son gifted it to me and it's got that sturdiness of old things, and hopefully some leftover good painting vibes of his. We just built storage racks which is a huge upgrade especially because I build my own wood frames so floor space is important when I'm doing that.

How important is research or planning in the preliminary stages of your work, or are you more drawn to experimentation? What sort of parameters do you establish for your process?

I make lists of ideas for paintings and quick drawings in my sketchbook. I like to start with a kernel of excitement of something to work towards but no real idea how I'm going to get there.. Parameters are important. I often look at a previous body of work and think about what I seemed to lean on-- whether it's a certain color relationship, scale of painting, spatial depth, anything-- and then say okay can I do the opposite of that or eliminate that as a possibility. I always like to feel as though I'm not sure how to make the next painting, like it's something I haven't quite done before.

When looking at your paintings, they seem to articulate specific, intimate moments while also aspiring to capture intangible feelings. How intertwined are memory, personal experience, and fictional narrative for you?

Thank you for saying that. I really try to hold both the specificity of a singular intense gaze and what I think of as a sort of accumulated memory. Having sat at the same table hundreds of times and the way that built up familiarity feels. So memory and personal experience are essential, but then ultimately I'm making a painting. So to work out visually what I am after everything has to be movable and invention and as a result the work is highly fictionalized, and deliberately so. I like them to seem like a casual capturing at first but then a careful construction of composition to negate that a bit.



Alex and I (Sink), 2020. Oil on panel.

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Certain imagery recurs throughout your work, including banana peels, fruit rinds, remote controls, mirror reflections, and wilting flowers. Can you share some insight into the way symbolism informs your work and how this element is becoming more pronounced in recent paintings? Are you hesitant to fully define the significance of these motifs?

I've always found it so curious how in art history classes you learn about the cat in Manet's Olympia or the items in the Arnolfini portrait without fail. I'm also really partial to the early Renaissance and while I know very little about biblical stories I'm drawn to the strange visuals like St. Lucy holding eyeballs and Mary Magdalen under the table.

Recently I started thinking more directly about symbolism in my own work. Initially I was thinking of these shorthand symbols like sunbursts, haloes, hand gestures, scrolls, doves etc how they have sort of eclipsed themselves and the visual prevalence is more enduring than the stories themselves. What used to stand for these supernatural experiences, can they be used to represent a sort of ecstatic mundane? The uncanny in our everyday lives. So I made paintings of sunbeams in beach paintings and eyeballs reflected in cereal bowls and things like that. Then I started thinking about what are the symbols that hold the stories of contemporary life? I think earbuds and remotes place us squarely in our time. I like how including a single object like that alone can orient a viewer in an otherwise nebulous space.

And then what I have been doing the longest and probably feel the most in possession of are those things like banana peels, wilting flowers, rinds, leftovers. I have always painted these objects and been drawn to them in the world. But recently the artist Alexis Granwell observed and pushed me to consider them as a sort of symbol for time passing. And I think that is so right and why I gravitate towards them. They are concrete objects which symbolize time has passed in a still frame.

Passages of your paintings feel reminiscent of Matisse's interiors or Gertrude Abercrombie's still lifes; you describe the latter as "charged and haunting." Can you talk about your ongoing interest in reimagining domesticity and the everyday? Who (or what) are some of your other influences?

I think to be a woman painting the domestic is radical. Men who are making tender paintings are getting a lot of attention right now. And I am happy for that, I love that kind of painting. But I think its noticed because the tension is built in, it's surprising for the typical hero painter to be tender, but it's expected for our idea of a woman, a mother. To be a woman in 2020 is to wrestle so much with historical definitions of identity and a relationship to the domestic.

And in art history this is true too, the painters of domesticity are Bonnard, Porter, Katz, all the intimists are men. We know their wives intimately. And that's how I want to paint. I so respect the raw power of women like Joan Mitchell, but I don't want to rebuke or subvert femininity, I want to nudge it open for the anxious, difficult, lonely way it can feel. To be a complex person inside your own head surrounded by the world spinning around you, all these titles, expectations. I often wonder whether I need to be aware of my identity when I work. All work needs tension to be seen anew. I take solace in the worlds of Alice Neel, Gertrude Abercrombie, Florine Stettheimer, Joan Brown, they painted their lives as they experienced them.

So I am occasionally hesitant, motherhood and domesticity at first, as defined by our culture, feel so pastiche, so unworthy of serious discussion, almost embarrassing to bring up as a woman painter. But the experience itself is so raw, transcendent, awful, and it changed my conception of myself and world. I keep coming back to form as the vehicle to create that tension-- delayed observations, play with the surreal in a mundane scene. To surprise. And I think those formal choices are essential in being understood for the point I am trying to make about being simplified or overlooked because they bring the discussion to a painting discussion as well as a discussion of identity or content.

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Bed Couple, 2019. Oil on Panel

How do you usually approach the editing process, whether it is within one painting or across your entire body of work?

I work on a lot of paintings at once. That helps take the pressure off any one painting not working. But I don't distinguish times that I am editing the work or just painting. The whole thing constantly feels on the brink of disaster until it's not and then I stop painting. I usually then put it away and look again a few days later and then a few weeks later and see whether my hand is itchy, if not and I can leave it alone, then it's done.

You have a solo exhibition opening on September 10th at Monya Rowe in New York. Can you tell us about *Vacancy* and the heightened emphasis on relationships in this new work?

My last show was about my relationship to myself in response to giving birth and those early days. While it's hard to say since the work is so new, I

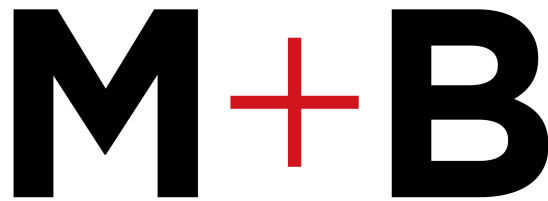
think this show is more about my relationships and especially now my relationship to my husband and son in the context of this intimate life with no known end. Covid has made it so that I feel I live inside my paintings, it's actually confusing to paint right now because there is no physical distance from my subjects.

A few years ago you were a fellow at the Ballinglen Arts Foundation in County Mayo, Ireland. What was most impactful about this residency experience? What did you focus on while you were there?

My biggest takeaway is one I have had a few other times when entering a new environment. When I got there the views were incredible, the color and way light worked was so foreign to my experience of gray Philadelphia. I looked around at the Ballinglen collection of past fellows and thought wow I need to paint landscapes. After a few days of painting, I had some panels which were fine, sort of generic, but not mine. I noticed myself being drawn to the bowl of oranges in my cottage, and the wildflowers along the curb. I brought these things into the studio along with a small mirror and made paintings of myself and these objects. And in that way was much more able to tap into the way it felt to be in that new place for me than to paint the cliffs and clouds.

I know you've contributed catalog essays, as well as other art writing for Title Magazine. How has writing about other artists' work impacted your own studio practice?

I don't think the writing actually impacts my work directly. But I have found that often in order to make my work I need to do things that are about painting in a less direct way. So writing, curating, teaching all feel like more community based ways to think about painting and bring new ideas because they involve other people. I also feel it's such an unhealthy trope in the art world that the best painters sacrifice all else –



family, society, morals, health in pursuit of their work alone. I think in reality engaging with and sharing the work of others is an important and healthy way to function in this discipline.

Who are some contemporary painters you're excited about right now?

I am so thankful for the incredible, vulnerable contemporary figurative painters working right now. Polina Barskaya, Ginny Casey, Jennifer Packer, Jonathan Lyndon-Chase, Doron Langberg, Kenny Rivero-- all their work floors me. I'm also such a sucker for still life, Natalie du Pasquier's large scale still lifes, Genesis Belanger's sculpture, photographer Laura Letinsky are so masterful and innovative with composition and color.

What are some non-visual works of art - from literature, music, or film - that are important to you?

In the last year I've read some really incredible women authors including Sheila Heti, Rachel Cusk's trilogy, Lucia Berlin's collected stories and Jenny Offill. They all balance a sort of philosophical stream of consciousness with observations and events very much grounded in contemporary life. It's like a stream of *interrupted* consciousness and it feels so on the mark to the duality of interior/exterior life that I am interested in with my paintings.

Do you maintain any collections or live with other artists' artwork?

Yes, I have been lucky enough to be gifted and trade with other artists, as well as purchasing a few works. I just said to a friend I've never felt it more important to have someone else's hand and aesthetic in my home than during this quarantine situation. Favorite works I own are by Nell Blaine, Bill Scott, John Bokor, Anne Tabachnick, Alice Mumford, Matt Colaizzo, Evan Fugazzi, Aaron Lubrick, Ying Li and a lithograph by Alice Neel.

What else is next for you? Do you have other upcoming exhibitions, projects, or news you'd like to share?

Yes, the upcoming show at Monya Rowe has been my main concentration this year but I am thankful to also be showing new paintings in some great group shows, including one opening September 18th at Heaven Gallery in Chicago curated by Gwendolyn Zabicki and a group show in London with Taymour Grahne opening in January of 2021.