

“Mary Weatherford in Conversation with Alex Israel,” *2008 California Biennial*, texts by Joshua Decter, Lauri Firstenberg, Rene Peralta, Newport Beach: Orange County Museum of Art, 2008, pp. 204-207

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Mary Weatherford

Mary Weatherford Born 1963, Ojai, California; lives and works in Los Angeles. Weatherford attended Princeton University (BA, 1984), the Whitney Independent Study Program (1985), and Bard College (MFA, 2006). Her work is regularly exhibited at Sister, Los Angeles, and has been the subject of exhibitions at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, New York, and Ralph Wernicke, Cologne. Weatherford has also participated in exhibitions at the Orange County Museum of Art; ACME, Los Angeles; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tucson; and the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego.

In conversation with Alex Israel

Alex Israel: I remember when we met at the Hammer Museum. Joan Didion was speaking to a full house about her recent book *The Year of Magical Thinking*. All three of us are native Californians. I'm curious to know a bit about your California roots, where you are from, so to speak.

Mary Weatherford: I was born in Ojai in the sixties. My father was vicar of the church there. The potter Beatrice Wood lived in Ojai then, and there were lots of Theosophists. Krishnamurti lectured to his followers. He founded the Happy Valley School with Aldous Huxley. And then there was Fireshaker.

AI: Who was Fireshaker?

MW: He was an artist friend of my parents. He traveled in his lifetime from reservation to roadside-Indian-art-emporium to Ojai. He made these great swirling paintings that illustrated legends of the Ponca tribe. They are my first memories of seeing art and feeling good.

AI: Your childhood sounds so romantic, the perfect cliché: Ojai in the sixties! Come on! Next you're going to tell me that your mother was tight with Joni Mitchell.

MW: I know! It does seem like that. Ojai was a mix of conservatives and progressives at the time. My parents were both. Mom was always busy making something, like needlepoint kneelers for the church. Dad made the stained-glass windows for the church himself.

AI: Your paintings since the nineties have incorporated references to California seaside craft and souvenir art: you've put seashells and starfish on your canvases, and most recently you've been drawn to the beaches in San Luis Obispo County to make paintings of caves and cliffs.

MW: I actually make all the drawings on-site at the beach and then take them back to my studio and use the drawings as references for the paintings. I read that Ferdinand Hodler made all his great paintings of Lake Geneva using the same process.

AI: Any influences closer to home?

MW: The American symbolist movement is deeply rooted in landscape, which is very important to me. I'm interested in Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, Charles Burchfield, Agnes Pelton, Georgia O'Keeffe. In all this work there is a compelling centrifugal force distinctive to images that point to the transcendental.

AI: O'Keeffe definitely comes to mind, especially in your paintings of caves for the biennial. I'm curious about using O'Keeffe as a reference. History, the Met Store, and the U.S. Postal Service have made her work anthemic of American sentimentality. Are you singing a Whitney Houston song on *American Idol*, aware that the judges will likely criticize your performance?

MW: I think that's part of the tension in my work. These kinds of references—O'Keeffe, Hodler, Fireshaker, the Eucalyptus School—may be too close for comfort for some people.

AI: But not for you.

MW: The biennial paintings and the more densely packed cave paintings were made side by side in the studio, and their references are very different. I never thought I needed to acquire a signature style.

AI: When I first saw your work, I wondered whether the joke was on you or me. I wasn't sure if you were consciously borrowing from the O'Keeffe calendar and the Laguna Beach Festival of Arts. But over time I realized that the paintings are quite dark.

MW: They're all about mortality.

AI: It's not just the reference to time, tides, and erosion that's dark. There's another kind of heaviness to the image. The biennial paintings are deceptively thin. There's darkness, a kind of anxiety, to your thin veils of paint.

MW: Morris Louis's veil paintings are my all-time favorites. Some look like an American Airlines ad, and some are the saddest paintings I've ever seen.

AI: And they're sublime in the Burkean sense. There's an element of terror in Louis's paintings and in your biennial paintings. They're so elemental, I can see exactly how you made them, and I know exactly how to pull them apart. And that's the scary part: I can imagine peeling back one veil of color at a time, and ultimately I'm left with nothing.

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green cave, 2008
Cat. no. 71

white cave, 2008
Cat. no. 73