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Mary Weatherford's  
*the mountain*, 2014

PHOTO BY FREDRIK NILSEN, COURTESY OF DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

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# THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT MARY

Next month, Mary Weatherford takes over David Kordansky's booth at Frieze London, giving contemporary painting a jolt. Maxwell Williams gets illuminated.

**PORTRAITS BY ELENA DORFMAN**



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Mary Weatherford with  
*Station Fire*, 2015, a  
work in progress

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Do you want to stand in a bucket?" painter Mary Weatherford asks as she greets me in her new studio in the quiet northeast corner of Los Angeles. It's a sweltering day, and Weatherford has made micro-pools from an array of buckets, which she normally uses to create her soak-stained, rhythmical abstractions.

Cooling off with her feet in a bucket is New York-based painter Katherine Bernhardt, who has just unveiled a mural in L.A., and sitting almost completely submerged in another bucket is her 4-year-old son, Khalifa. Bernhardt and Weatherford met in 2003, when Bernhardt curated a group show called "Girls Gone Wild" at Bronwyn Keenan Gallery in New York. "I remember exactly what I was wearing," says Weatherford, who lived in New York for years before returning to Southern California, where she grew up.

If Weatherford's paintings are her pyramids, her memories are the sandstone blocks that makes them whole. Each of her paintings depicts an experience Weatherford has had—from the sunsets of Bakersfield to the waterways of Red Hook to the cool blue waves of Windansea Beach, a stretch of coastline located in La Jolla, California, where her parents have lived since the '70s. These new wave paintings are mammoths, to the point that when you stand in front of them, you are completely immersed. "I went in during a big swell and got womped," Weatherford says. "But it was fun."

Apart from the colorfully gauzy landscapes and skylines, perhaps the most striking part of Weatherford's work since moving from New York back to L.A. is her propensity to lacerate her paintings with neon slashes.

"How did you start working with neon anyway?" Bernhardt asks her. "What happened?"

She began working with neon in January 2012, while a visiting artist at California State University, Bakersfield. Interested in the oil fields, Weatherford went to photograph the area (she notes that a sheriff was worried she might be there to set the fields ablaze and detained her that evening). Struck by the color of the sky—and thinking about a kitschy painting with a neon add-on she had seen at a friend's parents' house—Weatherford carried the seeds of the paintings with her on a trip to New York. She had an epiphany: add neon "like a drawn line" to the paintings. "I was on the Crosstown Bus, thinking, 'This is a great idea... or this is a really bad idea,'" she says.

Many years had gone by since her last big solo exhibition, so in September 2012, Weatherford went all in on the "Bakersfield Project," an exhibition at Todd Madigan Gallery in Bakersfield. She created seven large paintings—79 inches wide and as big as she could fit through her studio door—inspired by the city, past and present. The show was a smashing success, and Weatherford parlayed that into fanned over shows at LA's ART, Brennan & Griffin in Brooklyn and David Kordansky Gallery in L.A. She is now a bona fide star in the eyes of critics, curators and collectors (Leonardo DiCaprio recently purchased her work).

Many of her paintings incorporate the neon. She's keenly aware of when a painting needs it. "I know if I'm going to put a light on it; I paint it to have something missing," she explains. "I know that the painting is empty and lacking enough that it's going to need another element. Sometimes I

get going, and I think, 'Wow, that is a painting, and it doesn't need anything else.'"

Weatherford's "Red Hook" exhibition this past summer at Brennan & Griffin, synthesizes many of her creative ideals—she finds a place that has meaning to her, researches it and creates paintings from a combination of historical connotations and personal experiences within the place. For instance, *The Beautiful Lake* references a letter explorer Giovanni da Verrazzano, who was the first to discover the New York Harbor in 1524, wrote to King Francis of his voyage.

"I wanted to make a show about the history of the New York Harbor," says Weatherford. "But I don't like to pin them down too much. They could just be paintings."

For her, it's a new way of working that traces to the fact that her new studio is a well-oiled machine. She paints on a wooden platform in the middle of the room, her buckets all around her, using brushes on sticks and pushing paint with wet sponges, adding and erasing colors and marks. From there she mingles with the canvas, trying to achieve total painterly focus. "I'm preparing for Frieze London in October and I'm in an experimental groove," she says. "Having this studio is my dream."

Weatherford is slowly shifting from history-based paintings to the purely experiential side of things. "It's turning into the summer 2015 highlights," she says of her newest works. "I went on a hike on Mount Baldy. We saw some yellow yuccas, and that's what got me into using yellow in my paintings. Then I went swimming at Windansea Beach. I had to work through the paintings with a backstory, and now I'm up to present day."

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The artist with  
*The Tempest*, 2015.  
in progress