

ART TALK

## DIFFERENT STROKES

Jennifer Guidi has emerged as one of the West Coast's rising art stars—and with a new solo show, she is making a case for her own distinctive idiom.

BY THOMAS GEBREMEDHIN PHOTOGRAPHY BY CARLOS CHAVARRÍA



**TRUE COLORS**  
Jennifer Guidi  
in her studio in  
Los Angeles's  
Glassell Park.

**J**ENNIFER GUIDI works slowly, echoing the controlled style of an artisan: a calligrapher pressing ink to paper or an embroiderer threading silk. Her meticulous, repetitive technique, which she periodically broadcasts to over 50,000 followers on Instagram, involves the steady layering of sand mixed with pigment onto canvas. Using a long wooden dowel of her own design, she manipulates the gritty coat before it hardens, creating almond-size impressions that reveal the color base beneath. In other compositions, Guidi fills an entire canvas with tiny painted dots, dabbing them on one by one. "The work is super tedious, it's

arduous," says the 45-year-old Los Angeles-based artist. "But I find it so freeing." Upon initial survey, her finished works, each riddled with hundreds of markings that twist out from a central point to form a weblike pattern, seem like simple, ornamental designs. Longer viewing reveals each to be a sophisticated study in perception, demonstrating the shifts in visual understanding that can result from measured changes in color, light and texture. All of these elements are more apparent than ever in her new series, on view at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles beginning September 9—her first solo gallery show in her hometown in a decade and the debut

presentation of her large-scale paintings.

Guidi's current mode of abstraction was inspired by a collection of Moroccan rugs she purchased while visiting Marrakech in 2012. Until then, she had been working firmly in figurative art (landscapes, plants and insects), experimenting with shape and color while growing increasingly frustrated by the limitations of that style of painting. In Marrakech, she discovered the rugs and began obsessing over the intricate stitching on the reverse side of each. She started imitating these stitches on paper, entranced by the repetitive nature of the work. "It was something about



"I DON'T WANT TO PUT THINGS OUT IN THE WORLD THAT I DON'T LOVE."

—JENNIFER GUIDI

techniques and the figure. She spent her time there doing portraits of herself and friends. "I was constantly looking for colors within a face," she recalls. "For me that was the most interesting thing. It's not just what we first see—everyone is made up of so many different colors."

After graduation, she made ends meet by painting sets and backdrops—there was a job at the North Shore Music Theatre in Beverly, Massachusetts, and another in Salem painting a haunted house for the local wax museum. She returned to school in 1996 to continue her training, enrolling in the Art Institute of Chicago. By then her attitude toward portraiture had started to shift. "I didn't want to paint from life anymore," she says. "I wanted some sort of change, but I didn't know what that was or how to go about it." At the Art Institute, she found herself surrounded by classmates as interested in contemporary art as she was and began studying under artists like the Chicago Imagist Jim Nutt, known for his irreverent, unpredictable works that draw heavily from cartoons. Guidi also spent afternoons browsing the institute's storied surrealist collection. "It was hugely influential. I realized [my art] could still be figurative but it didn't have to be realistic. When I was making representational work I was very self-conscious, like, 'How does this fit in the art world?'" Influenced by Nutt and other teachers, she experimented with form, "flattening" the images depicted in each painting so that they appeared almost cartoonish.

In 2001, she moved to Los Angeles and continued her exploration in pattern and form. One of the final representational paintings she did before her crucial trip to Morocco was of a plant. She wanted to free herself up from the limitations of a smooth canvas, so she had mixed sand with oil paint in order to "make a ground," she says. "I wanted a bumpy texture." She enjoyed the outcome so much that she took to rubbing another sand mixture—with acrylic polymers—over entire finished paintings. From there, through trial and error, the technique evolved into what is now her signature motif. "Sometimes they don't work, so I either continue to paint on top of it until it works or I destroy it. Not every one is this precious piece. I don't want to put things out in the world that I don't love."

The new works in her David Kordansky show—which follows on the heels of a solo museum exhibit (her first)

at the Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Villa Croce in Genoa, Italy—highlight her instinct for color and shape. The paintings almost pulsate with life, and at times figures even seem to form: In one, a sun appears to set behind a mountain. "Jen cuts a pretty contrarian and singular path among her peers," says her L.A. gallerist David Kordansky. "She's a West Coaster through and through, more connected to the traditions of space out here and its internal mental echoes than to any trend. She's building on Agnes Pelton, Georgia O'Keeffe and Agnes Martin, on a history of abstraction, mark making and landscapes."

Guidi admits to still feeling apprehensive about showing her work. "I like setting up a show, but then once I'm [at the opening] I think, Oh, shit, here we go, this is really happening. It's not just mine any-

painting the dots that I ended up really responding to," she says. "I had this aha moment where I thought, I can make paintings like this."

Although Guidi still channels elements of this Moroccan tradition, her paintings also radiate a distinct Californian cool, a medley of colors and textures drawn from her life. She was born in Redondo Beach, California, in 1972, to parents who hailed from the East Coast. They had come west to follow her father's dreams of becoming an entertainer. When that didn't pan out, he started working in management at country clubs. After Guidi's birth, the family bounced around Southern California as her father took different postings within the field. They spent periods in Manhattan Beach and Orange County before landing in the quiet town of Palm Desert. Her mother owned a few framed van Gogh prints, but neither of her parents was particularly knowledgeable about art. "My dad was really into *Vogue*," Guidi says. "I think flipping through there I saw something that sparked my interest." Recognizing their daughter's curiosity, Guidi's parents bought her art supplies, and she took classes in a little desert storefront. By her freshman year of high school she had decided that she wanted to go to art school.

She studied painting and printmaking at Boston University, graduating in 1994. Her education was formal, geared toward traditional



**TOOLS OF THE TRADE**

"My hope for the future is that I will be able to continue to experiment... that one idea will feed the other," says Guidi. This page: Scenes from her studio.

more. Some will like it, some will hate it." To ease her nerves, she meditates and spends time with her husband, the artist Mark Grotjahn, and their two kids, 9-year-old twins Maddie and Morgan. Eventually, though, she always returns to her spacious studio to get back to work, often with a hip-hop album playing in the background—most recently she's been listening to Kendrick Lamar. "It's like being an athlete. You train and work and practice every day. With that you see progress. My happy place is here, in the studio, making work." ●