

JUXTAPOZ

Hilary Pecis: The Humble is Whole

Interview by Gwynned Vitello | June 2021



Hilary Pecis makes magic, buoyantly reviving the vivid dream you'd like to revisit. Her scenes become wonderland dioramas that expand, deepen and sprout detail. She paints picture postcards, some bursting with sunshine, others shaded in deeper thought. Possessing a skill with color that is immensely attractive in the most literal sense, she creates the vibrancy or velvet glow each vignette requires. Precise use of pattern and subtle grids coalesce each scene. Pecis sends an invitation to absorb the mood, sit down for a spell, and perhaps, swap one's own favorite flower or book title. Nothing is ordinary and the humble is whole. If Matisse or Hockney seem to be lingering about, it's not your imagination.

Gwynned Vitello: You've said that you have no memory of a time when you did not consider yourself an artist. I know your brother is also a professional creative, so what do you think forms a person's comfort in aesthetics, or even the inclination to be a maker?

Hilary Pecis: My parents were not creatives, but they encouraged a lot of imaginary play. They did a lot with their own hands, so we watched them build and make and take care of things all of the time. Although the kids definitely didn't go without, we were far from spoiled and ended up making a lot of our toys, and later on, our clothes and the things we wanted but couldn't buy. There was a sense that we had infinite possibilities as long as we could make them. In high school, my brother and my other sibling and I were involved in the punk scene in Redding, California where we grew up. That culture really fostered a level of creativity and style without the need for traditional consumption.

It's always interesting to know the expectation or motivation someone has entering art school. Did you have a particular genre in mind? Was there a teacher who saw a particular spark or did you discover a new movement or medium that set you on a path?

In high school, I had been involved in the AP art program led by Ed Howland. He really encouraged me to pursue art—and I would say he was the most influential teacher that I had. I attended a junior college and California College of the Arts, where I received both my BFA and MFA. During the years I was working on my MFA, I had a great teacher, Linda Geary, who suggested that I keep a side practice separate from my primary art practice. That side practice was the painting that I am still making today.

Can you take me back to when you were starting out and working other jobs? Did you juggle a day job with your professional art schedule? Did you take mental notes during your various gigs, drawing from your surroundings in your art? Any self imposed time frame, or did you commit to a lifetime as a creative?

Before I had a child, I preferred to work evenings in restaurants, which kept my days open for the studio. I liked the disconnect between my art practice and work, as it gave me a bit of a mental break. I continued this into my son's first year, but eventually I took a part-time position as a registrar in a gallery. It was hard work, but it also was a great opportunity to be around amazing artworks and meet many great people.

For me, black and white makes a bold statement, it's so dramatic—literally "black and white!" Have you ever worked with those (non) shades? Do you have an inherent feeling about them, as opposed to color?

Yes! As a student I made black-and-white ink and acrylic paintings of landscapes. I enjoyed making them, but ultimately my practice evolved and became a lot more colorful. In recent years, I have attempted a few times to work monochromatically with shades of white, as in the piece titled *Museum*, 2020. I was inspired by Morandi's many shades of white that make for such drama. I love the implied simplicity of the image, which is incredibly tough for me.



Flea Market, 2021, 42x32 acrylic on canvas

Your landscapes have immense, immediate appeal. What were your first themes and subjects, and how have the subjects and style evolved?

Thank you so much for saying that! I really enjoy making the landscape paintings the most. I move between landscape and still life pretty fluidly and tend to work on them simultaneously. There are many things I enjoy about both, such as their relationship within the history of painting. Additionally, both landscape and still life provide different technical challenges and offer various opportunities for unexpected surprises.

Portraiture is definitely having a moment. What's been your experience with it?

I enjoy portraiture, but the closest I can get to a portrait is by painting someone's surroundings. I think it can be as personal as a painting of their face. Additionally, my rendering skills can be a bit wonky, and I feel like there would be a lot of pressure to render someone decently enough, while staying as true to my own vocabulary of mark making.

Tell me about your method. Do you keep sketchbooks, take mental notes of people you meet, search Google, take photos? After that, is there a burst of energy or a slow, unfolding process? Do you have a final product in mind, or prefer to surprise yourself?

I work directly from photos that I take. On a rare occasion

I have seen an image taken by someone else and asked them for permission to use it. From there, I make a loose sketch of the composition directly on the canvas and then noodle away until the painting feels finished. Oftentimes the outcome is far from the foresight that I had in the beginning of the painting, which is part of the magic in making a painting.

The paintings are glorious in detail, but never feel frenetic. You touched on this, but how do you go about editing all the components, or do you like to surprise yourself? I guess I'm also wondering how long a piece takes, and if you work on several at once.

I work on several paintings at once, and I actually can't really address the process of editing. Let's call it a very "call and response" approach?

What type of paint best suits your style?

I use a local brand of acrylic paint called Nova Color. They are based in Culver City, and I think the paint is

only sold out of their store. My husband, Andrew Schoultz, who is also an artist and muralist has been using it for close to 20 years and turned me on to Nova Color. The paint is great quality and very reasonably priced.

So many painters have chosen to go big. Have you felt that urge, and do you feel there's a different intention or reaction when envisioning the size of a piece?

Big is subjective—my big is 74" x 100", which is taller than me. Painting big is fun, and as a viewer, it is easier to step into that space or experience it in relation to my body. That said, I like small paintings too. I don't feel any pressure to paint bigger... it is just a lot easier when I want to add more information to the picture.

Since you're known for intentionally identifying brand names or book titles in your paintings, I wonder how intentional that is. Do you strive to be accurate, down to typeface? Have you ever chosen a subject just so you could include a favorite item?

I take plenty of liberties from what is edited out of the original image, as well as the colors used and amplified. I try to stay accurate with imagery to the best of my ability, but I don't labor too much over anything. I love painting the written alphabet and other symbols because there is an immediate recognition on the most basic level. I think that is most often seen in the paintings I make of streetscapes. And yes, I always choose a subject because I like something or everything in the original image.

Explain more about how you utilize photography in your work. Does it also function as a pure outlet, and are there other activities that inspire your process—or are pure fun or relaxation? Is there such a thing as relaxation for you?

I use photographs as a reference point in my paintings and as a jumping off place. We are all taking so many photos these days, and I have a cache of images that I add to my favorites folder to work from. As for relaxation, I like to run on both road and trail. I take a lot of photos on runs, which make their way into my landscape and streetscape paintings.

How do you set up the mood, look and schedule of your studio time?

I have set hours in my studio and when I'm there, I am typically painting. My studio is a little on the small side, so by the time I have finished working on a show, it is pretty maxed out in regards to wall space. And to be honest, that is when I'm most comfortable. After work leaves for a show and we are back to white walls, I am a little saddened. I love the feeling of being in a nest surrounded by bright colors. There are typically flowers on my tables and fruit in the bowl, which make for a



Gabriellino, 2021, acrylic on linen, 64x74



Pink Room, 2021, 74x100, acrylic on linen

Late spring/early summer I will be opening a solo show in London at Timothy Taylor Gallery. Additionally, I will have work in group shows at David Kordansky Gallery and Jack Shainman's Kinderhook Gallery. I also have a public art project with Art Production Fund that will also be opening this summer at 30 Rock in New York, and later in the summer, I will have a solo show at Halsey McKay in East Hampton.

We can't avoid talking about the pandemic, but where to begin? Beyond not being able to show in galleries, has it affected your sources of inspiration, relationship with your actual workspace, your actual mood and outlook?

My paintings are pretty central to my experience of looking and interpreting. I have spent less time in friends' homes and more time in my own, which results in more paintings in my own space. I have made more and shown more in this last year than ever before, partly because there are less distractions. Although I had not had the luxury to travel to a solo show I had in Beijing at Spurs Gallery, or another show at Halsey McKay out in East Hampton, the shows went on and were open by appointment. In a year where so many people have suffered, I have no room to complain.

Do you find that the experience of a world pandemic, coupled with a more borderless world, as well the concept of museums without borders, affects your outlook as an artist? Is it something you discuss with other artists?

The pandemic has moved so much of our art viewing onto our phones and laptops. Although it's not an ideal way to view art, I am grateful that we had it—especially in the bleak first few months. I also think that Instagram was an amazing platform that everyone was using, giving voice to some relatively unknown artists. I think there were plenty of people crippled by the pandemic and not working, or working at a slower pace and spending more time scrolling and discovering art and artists. I also think that having a less than ideal way to view art has only intensified the urge to get out and see art in the flesh.

It could be just a changing schedule or maybe a project to illustrate a children's book, but how, if at all, has motherhood changed your art practice?

Ha ha. No children's books. I have always been punctual, but being a mother has really helped me work within a timeline. I also feel like I have cut out all the nonsense that I don't need to bother with, in order to fit in the things that I find important. During the year of covid my pared down life looks like being a mother and wife, a studio artist, and a runner. I can't think of anything better.

But, just for fun, for artistic inspiration, is there a dream destination you've thought about now that we can entertain thoughts of "trains, planes, and automobiles"?

I like to travel but I don't think I need a destination for inspiration. This last year has provided plenty of inspiration and I've traveled very few miles in total. Referring back to the last question, I really just can't wait to go to museums.

quick reference should I need inspiration for a painting. Most importantly, my dog and the other animals in the building are often running around and getting in trouble. The building I am in is shared with Lily Stockman, Megan Reed, and Ruby Neri—which makes for a combined three dogs and a cat. It is a very friendly environment.

I know that San Francisco, where you started, and Los Angeles, where you now live, have influenced you. Can you go into a little detail? And if you could have an imaginary sabbatical, where would be your fantasy base of operations?

I miss and love San Francisco, but I don't know if I could make the paintings that I do now if I were still living there. Life in LA seems a little slower and brighter, and I feel infinite inspiration, and I can't imagine a place I would rather be.

Tell us what you have coming up in terms of shows and projects?