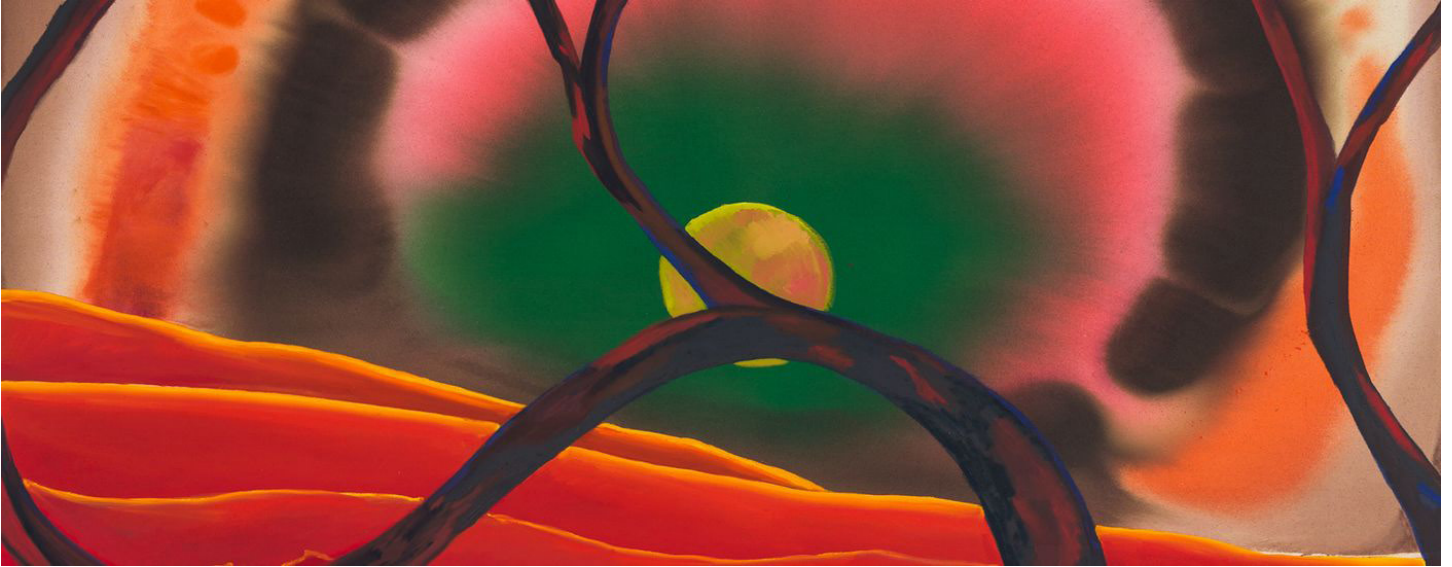


## O C U L A

# Shara Hughes: Painting a World in Flux

By Laurie Barron | May 19, 2021



Shara Hughes, *Sigh* (2020) (detail). Oil, acrylic, and dye on canvas. 172.5 x 152.5 cm. © Shara Hughes. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / New York. Photo: JSP Art Photography.

With solo exhibitions on view at Le Consortium, Dijon (*Pivot*, 19 May–20 June 2021); Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich (*Return of Light*, 29 May–22 July 2021); and Garden Museum, London (17 May–5 June 2021), Shara Hughes discusses some of the latest directions taken in her work.

**Congratulations on your show at Le Consortium, Dijon. It looks incredible! The title, *Pivot*, caught my attention. Did this choice indicate a conscious rupture in your practice?**

I've definitely gone through different pivots throughout my life of making paintings. The title arose from thinking about how 2020 was going for everybody—how every month, day, and second, we were all having to rethink things and pivot out of nowhere.

Also, I am very intuitive with mark-making, and nothing's planned. So I feel I'm at a constant pivot with the paintings themselves.

**Another recent exhibition of new, site-specific paintings just opened at The Garden Museum in London, in an exquisitely reconstructed Victorian church. Did you find the parameters of a commission in this historic space challenging?**

First, it was challenging because I couldn't visit the space—having to imagine how vast it is through pictures, FaceTime, and videos was harder than I imagined.

When we first started planning the show, we thought about using other rooms within the church, which felt too static; so instead, we decided to hang them freely in and between the arches, without walls within the nave.

It was really exciting to see the paintings displayed in a way that they've never been shown before! I've never really thought of myself as an installation artist, but I think more possibilities could come out of these kinds of installations.



Exhibition view: Shara Hughes, *Pivot*, Consortium Museum, Dijon (19 May–20 June 2021 2021). © Shara Hughes. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / New York. Photo: Rebecca Fanuele © Consortium Museum.

**The exhibition text mentions you consider the paintings to be ‘intimate self-portraits’. Could you tell me more about this?**

Yes. All of the paintings I make are self-portraits in one way or another, whether it’s very specific or very abstract. For instance, the dandelion painting, titled *Soft and Strong*, feels like a self-portrait.

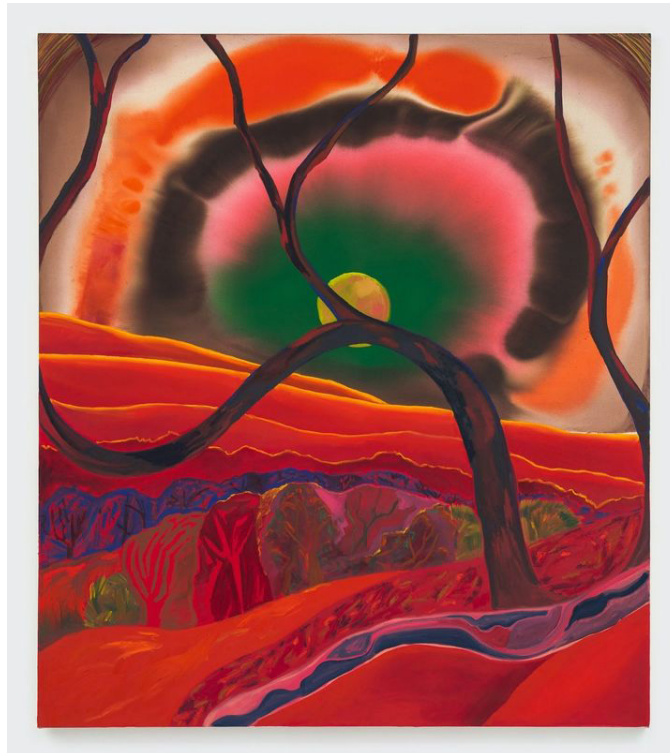
While making it, I was going through something hard and I felt very delicate, yet at the same time, forcing myself through an issue made me feel strong.

Dandelions are always thought of as weeds and something that we don’t want around, but they’re also one of the strongest flowers, because once they die, they spread their generative seeds elsewhere. It’s a symbol of something that we could look up to and find strength from.

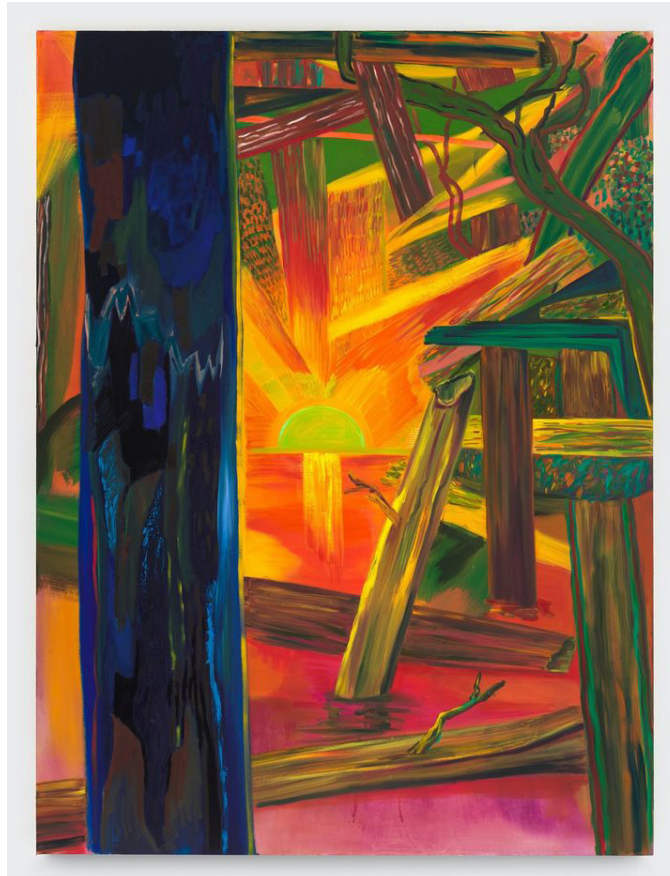
**Do you find the process of painting healing?**

Yes, definitely. I don’t always go into it thinking about solving problems. Sometimes it either reveals itself to me, or maybe it’s less specific—maybe it’s something that’s happening in the world I’m reacting to, simultaneously fluctuating between something emotionally charged and something more passive.

**I want to talk about your upcoming show with Galerie Eva Presenhuber in Zurich. But first, I wanted to ask how this relationship with the gallery began?**



Shara Hughes, *Sigh* (2020). Oil, acrylic, and dye on canvas. 172.5 x 152.5 cm. © Shara Hughes. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / New York. Photo: JSP Art Photography.



Shara Hughes, *Be Bold* (2021). Oil, acrylic, and dye on canvas. 244 x 183 cm. © Shara Hughes. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / New York. Photo: JSP Art Photography.



Exhibition view: Shara Hughes, Garden Museum, London (17 May–5 June 2021). © Shara Hughes. Courtesy the artist and Pilar Corrias, London. Photo: Mark Blower.

Around 2015–2016, my gallery in New York, American Contemporary had closed, so I was in between spaces.

I had a show with Marlborough Chelsea that was reviewed in *The New York Times* and I believe Eva went to see it while she was in town. She also works with Ugo Rondinone who had a window exhibition project in her downtown gallery, and he included my work in that space. From there, we got to know each other, did a couple of studio visits, and representation happened naturally.

**The exhibition at Galerie Eva Presenhuber focuses on a body of paintings centred around the sun. For me, these paintings recall a strong lineage of female artists fascinated with this powerful symbol: Hilma af Klint, Georgia O’Keeffe, Yayoi Kusama, and Judy Chicago. What was the starting point for these works?**

That’s a great question. I love that you mentioned some of those artists that I hadn’t even thought about.

At the time, I was thinking about how the sun plays a role in everyone’s life. More often, people tend to paint the moon, because it’s something that we can look at directly. I felt like the sun was underrepresented. It’s fascinating to me that the way that we see colour is reflected by the sun—at different times of day, colours and light constantly change.

The title, *Return of Light*, is the definition of reflection. It felt important to paint the sun, because it feels the whole world is changing.

I believe that coming out of 2020 feels like we’re all starting fresh, or at least beginning to—I think that’s scary, yet hopeful at the same time. There’s this push and pull between light and dark. That feels intimidating.



Shara Hughes, *Centering and Strengthening* (2021). Oil, acrylic and dye on canvas. 244x 183 cm. © Shara Hughes. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / New York. Photo: JSP Art Photography.



Shara Hughes, *Tuck* (2021). Oil and acrylic on canvas. 203 x 167.5 cm. © Shara Hughes. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / New York. Photo: JSP Art Photography.

**Works such as *Sigh* (2020) possess an ethereal, hazy quality—almost like an airbrush has been used. Did you try new painting techniques to achieve these magnificent effects?**

This process involves dyeing raw canvas with different kinds of paint and fabric dye. I do that first, and usually you never see what happens in the beginning.

*Sigh* was one of the only paintings I've ever made with the dyed background visible, almost half uncovered. It felt intimidating to make that decision, even though I knew it was a successful painting.

**You have really exciting museum shows and presentations coming up this year. Can you give us a preview of some of the work you will be showing?**

My solo show at the Yuz Museum in Shanghai will open in November. I've just started working on it, and I'm making a 40-foot painting. The work is inspired by my dog, who is sick. I'm really attached to her, so the painting will reference the end of a beautiful life.

Before that is an exhibition at Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, which includes a selection of works from the past seven years.

Titled *On Edge*, the show is centred on the idea of me taking you to the edge, but not all the way over—whether it's making an almost abstract painting, or an almost completely representational painting. I'm taking the viewer almost there, but then leaving them to finish the journey. —[O]