

Eckardt, Stephanie, "In the Studio With Lucy Bull, the Painter Bringing Back Abstraction," *W Magazine.com*, April 2, 2021

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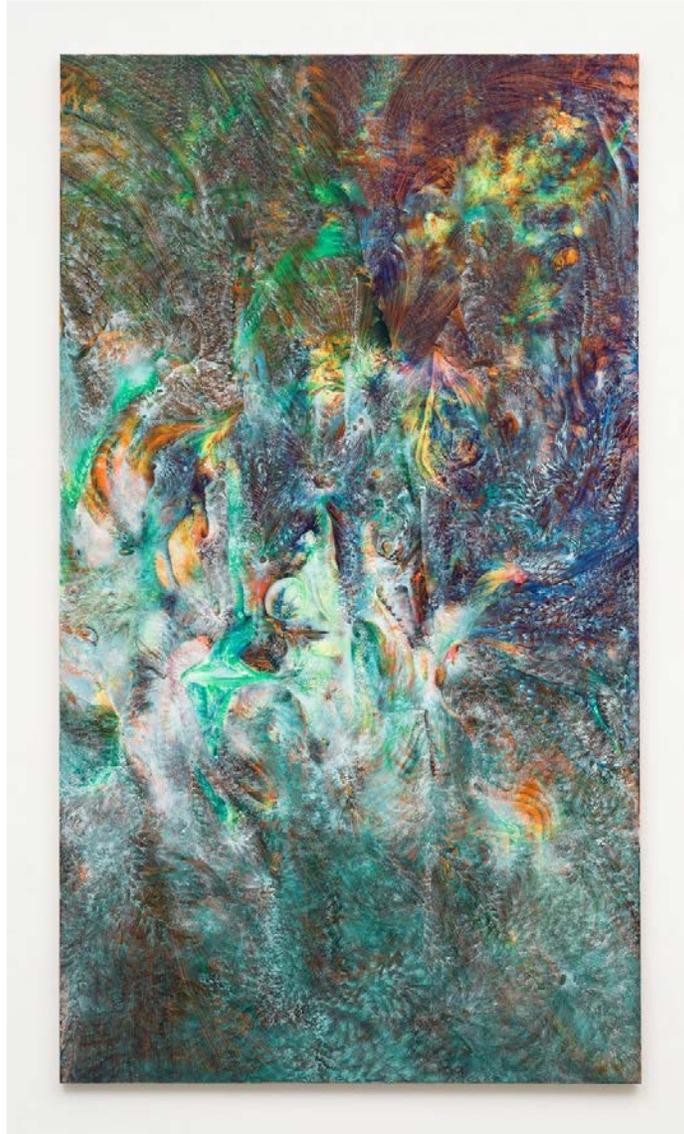
In the Studio With Lucy Bull, the Painter Bringing Back Abstraction

Stephanie Eckardt | April 2, 2021



Photograph by Jacob Ace for *W* magazine.

Lucy Bull is FaceTiming me from her studio in L.A.'s Arts District, and the first thing I notice is her sweatshirt: a relic from a TikTok staff party, stamped with the app's logo. (Her friend used to do its graphic design.) "Whenever I wear it, all my friends are like, *Can I buy that off you?*," the artist says, showing off the emoticons running down the sleeves. "It's getting kind of gross from paint and all that jazz, so I feel like when it's really too gross, I'll be like, *Remember that offer you made me?*"



Lucy Bull, *Permission*, 2021. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

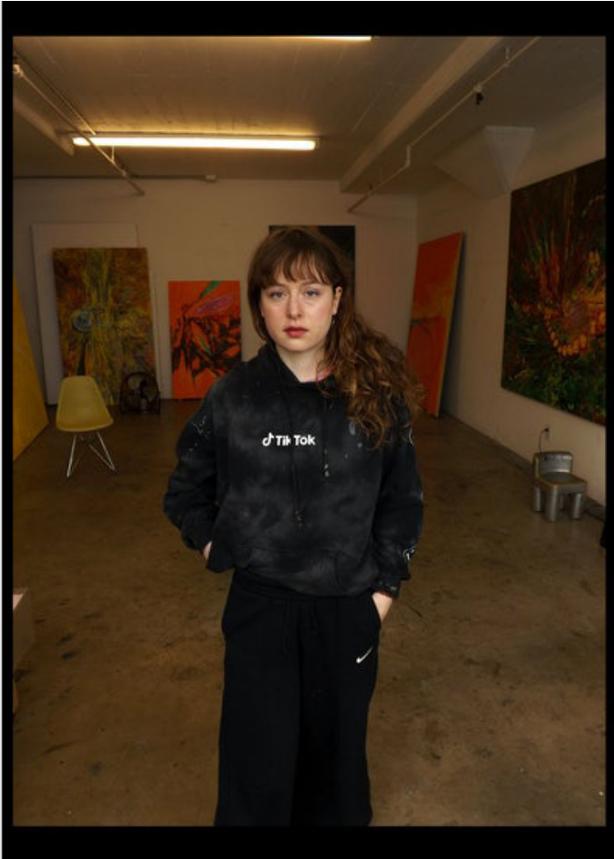
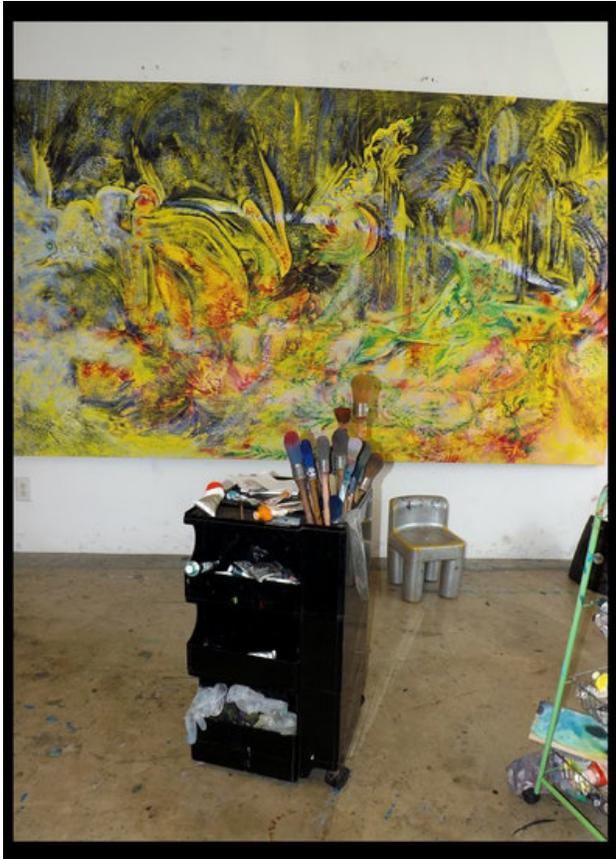
The call is a rare break for Bull, who's no doubt set for another 12-hour-plus workday. She makes long phone calls, but is otherwise entirely isolated. "It's like you blink and it's suddenly 3:00 a.m.," Bull says, likening painting to meditating. She gets "intense guilt" if she doesn't paint, and lately, it's served her well. She's essentially been on deadline mode since her first "real show," at the L.A. gallery Smart Objects, in May of 2018. From there, things kicked into high gear, and established a pattern of works immediately selling out. Bull started the year with a beautiful show in Arles with the star-making Parisian gallery High Art; that left her with just three months to make the 11 enormous works that comprise her first exhibition at David Kordansky Gallery, in L.A., which is on view through May.

Bull, 30, has lived in L.A. for the past six years, but she grew up in New York, and initially considered studying fashion at the Rhode Island School of Design. (She ran in the same circles as Mike Eckhaus, of Eckhaus Latta.) "Then I realized: *Oh no, those aren't my people,*" she said with a laugh. I'm a painter." She appreciated RISD's Bauhaus-style emphasis on foundation, but ended up transferring to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. The freedom she found there led to her singular style, which she acknowledges is somewhat "psychedelic."

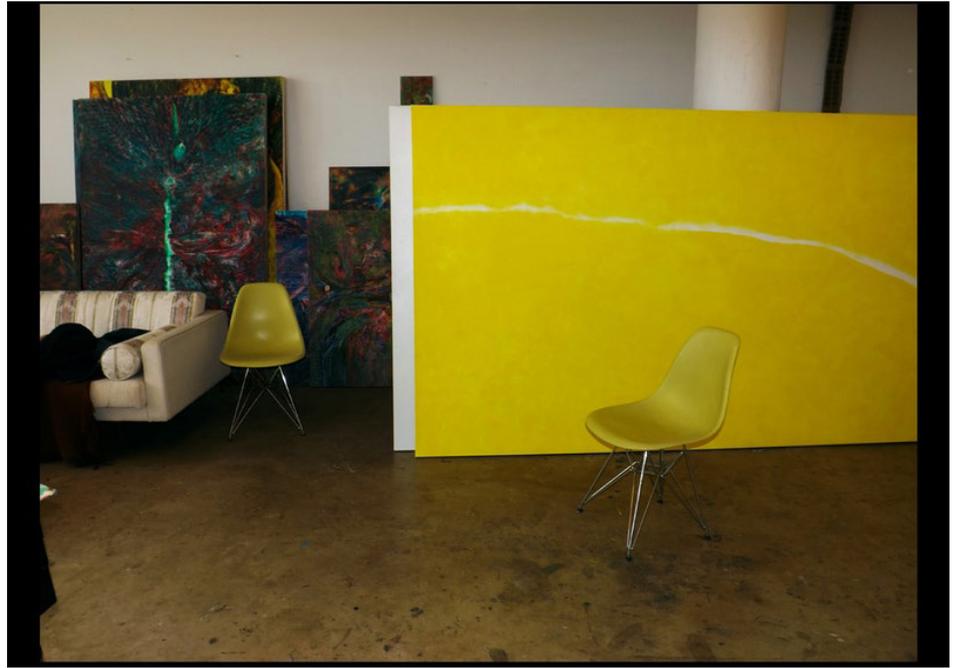
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Lucy Bull, *Pussy Willow*, 2021. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.



Photograph by Jacob Ace for W magazine.



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Taking in a work by Bull is a bit like trying to solve a puzzle without the picture on the box. Lockdown has heightened the paintings' sense of chaos, but their phantasmagorical plumes and swirls are strangely soothing; they almost transport you to an alternate universe. "From afar, her visionary paintings concretize into images; mirage-like, they're vastly evocative—biomorphic, architectural, and galactic," Kordansky told me via email. "Your eye unwinds these layers of visceral material effects, while your mind keeps cycling through associations."

Bull hesitates to characterize her work as purely abstract, preferring to reference the late Howard Hodgkin: "I am a representational painter, but not a painter of appearances. I paint representational pictures of emotional situations." Indeed, the longer you stare at Bull's works, the more figuration emerges—sort of. Bull prefers not to share what she sees, encouraging viewers to come to their own conclusions. "Every interpretation is valid," she says. "The paintings kind of function like Rorschachs. If someone were to tell me they see a certain thing in them, it's telling me more about their psychology than about the work itself." (My second look at *Pussy Willow*, which is among those on display at Kordansky, seemed to reveal a flamingo.)

It takes somewhere between four to 20 layers of paint to create a work's final surface. "It's this combination of playing with the mark-making, and stamping it with the imprint of my brush and twisting it in weird ways," Bull says. "It's all about the speed and wrist gestures, the amount of paint on the brush. There's this build-up of the layers and then sort of reductive techniques like scratching away or making marks." She starts with a base layer of paint, such as the yellow in the canvas below, then breaks it down with some of the "weird stuff [she's found] at the hardware store" until it's time to paint another. "Basically, the tools just kind of let the work make itself," she says, "activating the older layers."

Bull is often compared to the Surrealists (particularly Max Ernst), and she relates to their pursuit of channeling the unconscious. "It's more about psychic energy than anything," she says of her intuitive process. "I allow myself to get lost in the making of the paintings, which allows me time to enter this sort of fugue state and get lost in the sauce. It can be so tempting to take it further, because you can always just keep going, opening up new avenues of exploration." Ironically, Bull's punishing pace—she has two more projects immediately lined up with Kordansky—has also helped move her work forward. "It's sort of masochistic, but this deadline mode really pushes me to be even more experimental."