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Hilary Pecis's Still Lives Are Anything But Still

BY JEN WANG
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FLOWER POWER

Abundant color characterizes Pecis's work, like *Spring Vases*, 2022. Ed Mumford, courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

On an uncharacteristically overcast afternoon in August, I meet Los Angeles–based painter Hilary Pecis at her Eastside studio. The large-scale works for her new solo show, “Warm Rhythm,” line the oblong warehouse walls and are getting touched up in preparation to ship out, bound for the opening of her show at the David Kordansky Gallery in New York.

“Not my favorite,” the 45-year-old California native says of the gloomy skies, where the steadfast midsummer sun has all but disappeared. “I used to live in San Francisco, and I’m over that.” Given the exuberance of Pecis’s paintings, which bear the influence of Fauvism, the Pattern and Decoration movement, and the contradictory charms of the city she’s called home for the last decade, Pecis’s distaste for today’s meteorological humdrum comes as no surprise.

Pecis (pronounced “peh-chis”) likens her studio, where I am greeted by two Chihuahua rescues, Tina and Mango, and where assistants also bring



Pecis's *Red Fish*, 2022. Ed Mumford, courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

in their pets, to a “doggy day care party.” Today, her blond curls are blow-dried straight, and she’s wearing a striped Celine button-down, which she keeps on a hanger in the studio for when she has official visitors. (Normally you’d find Pecis in her running clothes and Saucony trainers.) There is an appealing lack of pretense about the artist, both in her self-presentation and in her process. On a table in the center of the room, there are ball dahlias and tulips in mismatched vases, arranged in the manner of a quintessential Hilary Pecis still life. “I love it when people send me arrangements,” she says. “But Trader Joe’s flowers last just as long.”

Flowers are a motif in each work, whether assembled in vases or adorning a textile or both. She might take iPhone photos of “vignettes” from daily life—a friend’s bookshelf or the house down the street that leaves its holiday decorations up year-round—and later render those photos in acrylic. Her favorite painters, Alex Katz and Belgian artist Luc Tuymans, “have this confident way of using one stroke, making these big, beautiful movements,” she says. But that’s not her: “I’m always like, Ugh, maybe this is right, maybe it’s not.”

Raised in the former mining-and-lumber town of Redding, California, Pecis grew up the oldest of three in a middle-class household where both of her parents, divorced but amicable, worked for the government. Named by her mountaineering father after Kiwi climber and Everest pioneer Sir

Edmund Hillary, she fondly conjures memories of an idyllic, unsupervised childhood. "We had very few boundaries. It was like, Ride your bike as far as you want, but be home when you're hungry," she says. "I remember being allowed to ride the city bus around 9 or 10 years old. And, really, my parents had no idea where we went. We would just get on the bus, go somewhere, and then come home."



Hilary Pecis, *Doorstep*, 2024, acrylic on linen. Ed Mumford / Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery

While Pecis's and her siblings' creative pursuits were encouraged, their arts education was limited by Redding's modest cultural landscape. "There was a TV show on PBS called *The Secret City*, with Commander Mark," she recalls. (Commander Mark is Mark Kistler, a.k.a. "the Bob Ross of drawing," whose motto could neatly stand in for Pecis's career trajectory: "Dream it. Draw it. Do it.") "My mom always had that on for us, and we would just sit at the coffee table and draw."

A high school field trip to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, four hours south, broadened her perspective. "There was art made with immediacy and with whatever materials were around," she says. "It completely blew my mind." After graduating, she received her BA from the California College of the Arts and then enrolled in the school's MFA program, where, ironically, she found the atmosphere stifling. "I was trying to fit into this grad-school idea that 'painting is dead.'" Instead of painting, Pecis found herself making cerebral, collage-based work.



Hilary Pecis, *Lockhaven House*, 2024, acrylic on linen. Ed Mumford / Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery

It took the birth of her son, Apollo, in 2012, whom she shares with her husband and fellow painter, Andrew Schoultz, to steer Pecis back to her own instincts. The young family also moved to Los Angeles around that time, having been priced out of tech-moneyed San Francisco, where life had become untenable: “We lived in a commercial space, we had a baby, and there were mice everywhere.”

“With that new mom-brain, the way I had been working felt inauthentic. I was like, I can’t do this,” she says. “It was so liberating just to make paintings and say, I’ve made this painting because I like the composition. I like the colors and the subject matter. And those are fine reasons to make a painting.” The same fine reasons are on full display in her new paintings for her upcoming show.

Unlike Pecis’s last solo show, “Paths Crossed,” which was largely devoted to landscapes, this one focuses on interiors and still lifes. Although the word *still* hardly befits the joyous riot of pattern, color, and objects—precious and quotidian—that vie for the viewer’s attention. “There’s a lot of moving of your eye,” she says, drawing a circle in the air with her pointer finger. One standout is the painting of Cowboy, a black and white cat, which beckons the eye to dance across the foreground with all of its rich texture—from the cat’s fur to the purple grain of the wood dresser on which Cowboy sits to what looks like a tangle of yarn in a knitting basket—before revealing another room in the background with its own set of tactile curiosities.



Hilary Pecis, *Sharon Flowers*, 2024, acrylic on linen. Ed Mumford / Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery

Rhythm is something of a theme in Pecis's life. A competitive long-distance runner, she wakes up at 4:30 or 5 a.m. six days out of seven to run for an hour. Typically she logs 50 miles a week, tracing routes around Eagle Rock, where she lives, and nearby Pasadena. Immediately after she completes work for a big show, she participates in a race. (She may also mark the occasion by buying herself jewelry from Tiffany, which line her heavily tattooed arms and neck in stacks.) Before the New York City show, she will travel to Seattle to run her seventh marathon.

"In an individual painting, there's this cadence of mark-making, and there's the slog of actually building it," Pecis says, once our studio tour concludes. The two of us settle on a daybed in the corner where Tina, the more extroverted Chihuahua, promptly jumps into her lap. "On a daily run, there is that one-foot-in-front-of-the-other pace of moving towards your end goal."

"There's the building of this exhibition and the building towards a race," she says, stroking her dog's tiny, velvety ears. "If you don't do the work, you're not going to get to the finish line."

Hilary Pecis: Warm Rhythm is open from September 4 – October 12, 2024 at David Kordansky.