

# VOGUE

Culture

## Shara Hughes Is Painting Her Post-Election Rage

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Shara Hughes, *Don't Be Ugly*, 2024. Photo: JSP Art Photography

Artists have a unique way of tapping into the zeitgeist and getting right to the heart of the matter. Ever since the 270th electoral vote on election night declared Donald Trump the winner, people have found their own ways of dealing with the results. One friend, a nov-

elist, told me her first instinct was to go back to smoking. "And I haven't had a cigarette since 1968." Another, a professor, has installed a dart board in her office and imagines Donald Trump at the center. "I hit the target every time," she gloats. And a pioneering female gallerist who had stopped watching MSNBC during the election season, went back to it right after the election, "Because it's like being with old friends—they're so biased in the right way!"

Recently, I asked the artist Shara Hughes what she was working on in her studio. Without hesitation, she shot back, "Rage!" Three large paintings were already finished and she had just started a fourth that morning. Phrases like "don't be ugly," "be the bigger person," and "don't rock the boat" accompanied by wordless rage keep going through her head, over and over, as she paints them fast and furiously. "It's the words and the rage that are motivating me this week," she says.



Shara Hughes, *Be a Good Girl*, 2024. Photo: JSP Art Photography

The first one Hughes made was *Be a Good Girl*. That's what her parents used to tell her when she felt "very bad and full of anger." After the election, Shara told me she decided to put her "unfamiliar feelings of rage somewhere that felt safe and familiar. I came back to my roots of making as a pure way to process something that my brain couldn't hold or understand. This was rage." Luckily, a large order of stretched canvases had just arrived, and was waiting for her. "I was working in a deeper, inside out sort of way. Working in an unthinking haste feels good and safe. I'm not sure I need to understand everything about it. I just need to pull it out of me instead of trying to bury it somewhere."



Shara Hughes, *Bigger Person*, 2024. Photo: JSP Art Photography

Her fourth rage painting is called *Bigger Person*. "I'm really having a hard time doing that right now," she says. "I know it's important to get there, which I will, but right now I feel like being really bad. LOL." The painting is a picture of a statuesque tree holding colorful balloon-like foliage. "I wanted it to feel too big for me to handle on my own," she says. "What does being the bigger person mean? When is the time to be the 'bigger

person?' I used the painting to investigate. The tree is tired, the balloons are heavy and worn. Being 'bigger' is exhausting and not always fun. Standing outside of the gray storm, above all the small trees—is this the right stance to take? I'm not so sure."



Shara Hughes, *She's Mad*, 2024. Photo: JSP Art Photography

When Shara started *She's Mad*, her fifth and most recent painting, she didn't need to imagine it. "An exploding volcano is pretty clear," she tells me. "I put my rage music on in my headphones, started thinking about all the things I'm mad about, and let it rip. I can laugh at the dramatics of the painting, but I can also connect so deeply to it that it does feel over the top—literally, spilling and spewing fire. There's a collective anger I feel, but this is a personal reaction—raw, bold, vulnerable, sad, brave, and delicate. This is painting right now to me. I'm using my anger and rage to find clarity in myself, the world, and to connect. I don't need to be the bigger person. Being able to catch the moment and not think, just do, is what I'm focusing on."



Shara Hughes, *Don't Rock the Boat*, 2024. Photo: JSP Art Photography