

SIM SMITH GALLERY



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How do you typically start a painting? Are preparatory sketches made?

Absolutely, this is a big part of my process. Most mornings I pull out my journal and make didactic thumbnail drawings of ideas and compositions of the painting I want to make, each of which is usually inspired by many different references. That's when the dreaming begins for me. Later, in the studio, I translate the sketches to true-to-size black and white compositions using gesso on un-stretched canvas pinned to the wall. It acts as my beginning sketch and underpainting. This gets me quicker to where I want to be. It's all about lights and darks, not about drawings. From there I can tell if I want to make the painting or not.

How quickly do you paint? Would you say you were a prolific painter?

I do paint quickly. Anxiety and creativity collide, but I love the immediacy of painting, how the piece changes with every stroke, watching it all unfold. It's pleasure, great pleasure. My eyes roll back in my head many times during the day while I'm working. I try to make as many paintings as I can, often even having as many as five or six up on the wall in some stage or another. This allows me to move between them and bring a fresh eye every time I revisit a piece. For me, prolificacy is simply the best way to find my best work.

A move out of metropolitan NY at the beginning of your career saw your interest in your surroundings increase. A curiosity about your neighbours and their lives behind their mansion walls ensued. What is it about their world that appeals to you?

I went from living in a fairly gritty artist community to a modest house in the suburbs that was surrounded by these enormous homes. It was definitely a completely different world that felt quite foreign. I was an outsider, but it was inspiring and really allowed me to fantasize. The narratives are endless, and I really love playing with the imagined dynamics between people, or just hinting at something more going on behind a pair of eyes. The lusciousness of the oil paint I use really helps convey that sense of opulence of my subject matter.

We see almost filmic or theatrical imagery in your work, domestic fictions that play out on the canvas. Do you draw any inspiration from film?

Cinema is incredibly inspiring to me, both from a narrative lens as well as aesthetically. Directors like David Lynch and Lars von Trier are masters at creating a quiet sort of tension that can also be very beautiful. In my work, it's almost as if I'm creating a still in my own film that tries to capture these same qualities.

In your paintings the viewer sees what you choose to show them but there is a sense of the unknown in your work, the uncertainty of what else is happening or about to happen in the room. Is it your intention to create this ambiguity?

Absolutely, the ambiguity in my work is intentional. It allows us all to be voyeurs and draw our own conclusions. I'm telling a story and while I have my own ideas about what is going on, I prefer not to tell the person looking at the painting what to think or feel.

Much has been written about the influence Pierre Bonnard and Chaim Soutine have had on your paintings. Depictions of domestic settings and female protagonists are central to their work, are you interested in conveying the personality of your subjects and do you ever paint friends or family as they did?

One of my teachers at RISD called me a "slacker Vuillard." I thought that was funny. Their approach is really a tradition of figurative interior painting. My work follows in this tradition, and I'm just adding my own perspective. That's as much as I can offer. The characters in my work tend to be fictitious. But I have also done many paintings of friends and family in interior settings. I try not to get overly focused on their exact representation. Instead I find it more interesting to bring to life their mannerisms and let that define the forms. Friends could look at a painting with a fairly abstracted face and they could point out every person in the piece. Someone might say, "That must be Dianne because she moves her hands a lot like that when she talks," or "That's Marianne's stance." There's an essence that comes through.

Portraits and people are central to your work; however, there is also a celebration of pattern and ornament that can be likened to the work of the Nabis in your paintings. Would you say the interior depictions within your work are as important and the portrayal of the protagonists?

My paintings are really a balance of the two. The interiors aren't just backdrops, they're an essential part of the narrative, helping to define the people that live within them. Immediately we get a drastically different sense of the person sitting there under a giant painting of a black panther than we do from someone surrounded by family portraits and a fleur-de-lis.

Loose brushstrokes and an abandonment of linear perspective seem to merge figures and their surroundings within your paintings. Is this intentional?

It is sort of an intentional freedom, allowing my hand to move loosely but with purpose. I really enjoy the fluidity of the paint and the slippery friction between the people and the interiors they are in. One brush stroke can define the person while another defines the room, and when they merge together; they become more connected, sharing the same formal lighting and colour qualities, etc. And an unseen energy between the two is revealed.

How does painting make you feel?

Well, I'll put it this way, not painting makes me unbearable to be around.