On growing visions collectivel

Artist Sarita Doe on painting as a way to connect with place, the values of collaboration, and rest as a site of learning

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As told to Lora Mathis, 2475 words.

Tags: Painting, Collaboration, Mental health, Time management, Inspiration.

I want to begin by talking about your painting series "Habitat." I'm curious how your studies of intimate environments have acted as a personal archive and connected you to a broader environment.

What a beautiful question. That practice began when I was learning how to paint in Italy. I had a rare opportunity to study abroad for three months and just focus on painting. While there I was pondering how I could add to the conversation of painting in a place that's been heralded as the birthplace of a lot of different forms of oil painting. I realized that I could trace my belonging to the place through my actual belongings, and that kind of set me on a path of room portraiture. Once I got into that practice, I never stopped. And that was in 2003, I believe.

To this day it's still interesting to me to sit and paint a room. However, other threads were woven into my interests around 2010 when I was actually at UCLA in MFA department for painting. I started taking classes with Olivia Chumacero who teaches Everything is Medicine as an Indigenous philosophy and relationship building cosmology with place. I started falling in love with California ecosystems, in particular indigenous flora and fauna to Southern California at that time. The way that she would teach us was super experiential. We got to build relationships with the plants and we would just learn one at a time so that we could also really sink into that plant's being and how we relate to that plant as a relative. Her teachings have hugely influenced my work.

I still love drawing rooms and curating rooms. However, the somatic experience of going to a place with the humility of a student to learn from the beings there is so fascinating to me. They're telling so many stories in their relationships to each other, in their relationship to the soil, to the political legacies of the land historically and currently, and also in relationship to the air, the clouds, other people.

They used to be called "Room Portraits," and now "Habitat" is the title. It's because the idea of a room or home has been a bit more outside, rather than inside the dwelling.

Salmon Home: Waterways Repair and Winnemem Wintu Cosmovision of Care , natural pigment and gouache on board, 2023, 36 inches x 48 inches, created in collaboration with Chief Caleen Sisk's son, Michael 'Pom' Preston.

I’m also curious about your relationship to attention. When I look at these paintings, I think about the careful and continual observation needed to record places, especially over a long period of time. I also think about the Mary Oliver quote, “Attention is the beginning of devotion,” and how these paintings seem like letters to place and self.

When I’m going to begin a new work, I think about what places have really been sticking with me, what sites I have witnessed that created a lingering curiosity within me, and also that on a spiritual level are calling me. As my earth-based spiritual practice deepened, so did this calling to be in reverence with the land and connected to my painting practice. Visiting a place and asking permission are common Indigenous protocol, and I specifically learned them from Olivia.

The practice of shifting from oil paint to natural pigment has also been a new way to practice reverence as a painter. It felt disingenuous to bring in sort of toxic supplies to a landscape I was also trying to be in reverence to. Learning how to make these natural paints with earth pigments and gum arabic–it’s basically like a homemade gouache–has been an extension of reverence. Painting is a place where I can really practice getting out of my head and into my body’s response to the trees I’m sitting with or the soil I’m sitting on.

I am also really curious about hybridity, being a hybrid creature myself, where my maternal lineage can be traced to the Andes, to the Aymara people in Bolivia, and my paternal route can be traced to Ireland, to the County Donegal. Being a hybrid creature in a hybrid place has me wondering about the stories of the plants there and how they got here, how did I get here? What impact are we having on the landscape? What sort of harm reduction can I learn from them in terms of my presence on the land and impact on the land as a visitor, an unwelcomed visitor.

Rain Deities and the Front Yard Meadow , natural pigment and gouache on archival paper, 2022, 23 inches x 18 inches.

You have many creative containers including the DIY PhD you co-founded, as well as the School for the Ecocene, and now the Ecocene Press. They all seem to be extended outwards and encourage others to explore their curiosity. How does collaboration fuel your creative practice?

The more I learn, the more I realize how everything I am is in relation and co-created, especially in my current work. I owe so much to my teachers and to my collaborators, to my peers.

The idea of the DIY PhD was sprouted with my friend David Whitaker in 2013. We had both just finished our MFAs at UCLA and wanted to keep learning in a way that felt rigorous and dedicated. However, we didn't want to pay a lot of money to go to any other programs and we didn't want to relocate. Even more importantly, we didn't want to sacrifice pieces of ourselves, like spirituality, in the name of some sort of western academic discipline. We started it as a collaborative practice to come together each week to share prompts and to co-work, and to also process what was going on in our lives.

It was so healing because if we needed to get together and do a deep dive on emotional tenderness that would come up, we could. We could spend two hours going into the forest and lying down. We could spend as much time as we needed to tap into what would come up for us emotionally, so that way we could bring all of ourselves to the work.

If we were really going to do something long-term, then we needed to make sure we were centering joy. If we found ourselves doing rote work towards a goal that no longer felt relevant, we probably wouldn't be able to stick with it. If something wasn't resonating, we wouldn't follow that. We would turn.

The most important thing was to share how we were finding somatic and creative mapping practices to locate what did resonate for us. That looked different for each of us, but the practice of coming together is where we found our program. That also informed the move to create School for the Ecocene as a cooperative school where we could co-create and grow a vision collectively.

How do you feel like the dailies of life come into your own art practice?

When I was first creating my DIY PhD dissertation, I was in a residency at what was at the time the Women's Center for Creative Work, which is now the Feminist Center for Creative Work. "Living Cosmologies" ended up being the working title.

I would do this practice of cosmology mapping, which was very much inspired by ancient cosmologies around the world where folks would sort of map out their origin stories or map out the deities in their lexicon of the world. I still map cosmology for myself as a compass to understand.

The mapping is so fun because we don't have to exclude anything, and we can also find specificity within it. When I map–and there's infinite ways to do a map–oftentimes I'll start with four quadrants of what feels most primary in terms of importance to me at that time. Some things have really shifted through the years. Other things have been pretty constant. A constant one has always been habitat stewardship: learning how to steward the ecosystem that I'm in, whether that's compost systems, rainwater catchment, propagation of native habitat, plants for habitat, and other aspects of that.

Another one would be more outward, and around what impact and effect I want to have in the world with my actions, energy, and art. Then there's usually one around painting practice. Who's calling me for a portrait right now? What spirits and deities?

The other quadrant is usually more around spiritual practice and how I am tending to my relationship with my ancestor guides. And since becoming a parent, the other big piece–now it's more of a pentagon than a quadrant–is

how to be a parent to my child, our child. How am I learning as she’s learning and growing, and how do I want to give care to our relationship and her relationship with the world?

*Grow Native Habitat**, *natural pigment and gouache on paper and board, 2024, 36 inches x 48 inches.

I’m curious about your relationship to output, and your thoughts on creative blocks.

I’ve been in sort of a more hermit mode with my art over the past five years, since relocating to the Bay from Southern California. My practice really went through a transformation at the time. I couldn’t necessarily see what was going to happen and people would be very concerned saying, “You’re not painting. What’s going on?” I was painting, but the output was very slow. I was sometimes making one painting a year. Before, in grad school especially, I was making five a month.

The other piece of that was that my body didn’t let me output like that anymore. I had an injury from painting, since I’m often out in landscapes and I really like sitting on the ground while I paint. I learned about how my painting muscle was so overworked that the other muscles became weak. That’s how the injury happened. I had to strengthen the other muscles, but I also had to cut back on my time spent painting.

The other part is that since we are completely interconnected with the earth, we have seasons, like the earth has seasons, and we can’t always be in summer or springtime mode of output. What I learned for myself is that I have to really honor when I go into more of the underworld, and the winter and fall time of my practice. There’s an undoing that happens for me in the fall. I can’t be productive at that time because it’s just not lining up with the energy. Being indoctrinated into capitalism, I was very much overworking myself. I was hyper productive. I was addicted to working to fill a void where I felt so much despair at the political scene and society at large in Turtle Island, in America. I also was parenting full-time. I was working so much that I wasn’t able to care for my body.

It does feel like a balancing act to be a human being that wants to create art in an economy that’s so inherently extractive. It’s a continual learning process for me, and I by no means have it figured out. But at this point last year, one of my quadrants or focus areas was learning how to rest. My level of resting compared to other people is probably still not a lot of rest, but it was way more than I’d gotten in the previous eight years of becoming a parent.

That was my art practice last year. It was really learning how to do less. Even the rest itself can become a site of learning, and will end up feeding into the work, as it is part of the work too.

Earth Doula Medicine Pouch, illustration by Sarita Doe, concept by Queen Hollins, natural pigment and gouache on paper, 2022, 12 inches x 12 inches.

I relate to so many of the things you're bringing up. To me, your ideas are so much like seeds, and I'm curious how they've grown in ways that you haven't necessarily expected.

I love that analogy of the seed. Being a person who practices an earth-based spiritual path means that the seeds are like prayers. The prayers are sown collectively, oftentimes in ceremony, and with the land, the spirits of the land, and our ancestors.

That means that things beyond my wildest dreams can happen because it's a collective dreaming. The seeds are collectively sown. For me, this has created a lot less stress of needing to know what to do or how to figure it out. Instead, I can notice what comes up as fear, and try to look at the fear with compassion. This has an infinite ripple effect in the universe, in my life, and collectively as that mycelia that we're part of.

We just had a confluence with School for the Ecocene. Hearing folks' research and the ways that their work is coming alive in the world was beyond any kind of seed I could ever hope to plant because it was really co-created. That's coming back to collaboration and the beauty of that. We don't really know where a lot of our collaborations will go since we can't control them in the same way we could an idea that we have in a solo realm.

That's really beautiful. I hope it's inspiring to others to explore their creativity, and to find community with other humans or with places.

Totally. I would say there've been times, even recent times, where I feel really lonely. And I know a lot of people feel so lonely right now. Even that can begin as a prayer, where you ask your ancestor guides or the universe to help you find community and your collaborators. Even that doesn't have to be a solo task.Once you identify that's what you want, the universe will conspire to help bring that. And that's not to spiritual bypass all the blocks that really do exist. But sometimes that practice of naming what we do want can create ripples that we ourselves wouldn't have been able to think of. Even that seeking community or seeking a land, a place, a habitat to connect with, even that can begin as a seed prayer.

Sarita Doe recommends:

Walking up the closest hill or mountain

Steaming bay leaves for respiratory support

The Land in Our Bones by Layla Feghali

Listening to Upstream Podcast

The Gentle Tarot by Mari in the Sky

Name
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Vocation
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Taken on Ohlone Lands, 2023, by Ali Wells