Rachel Hecker on working with whatever is around you

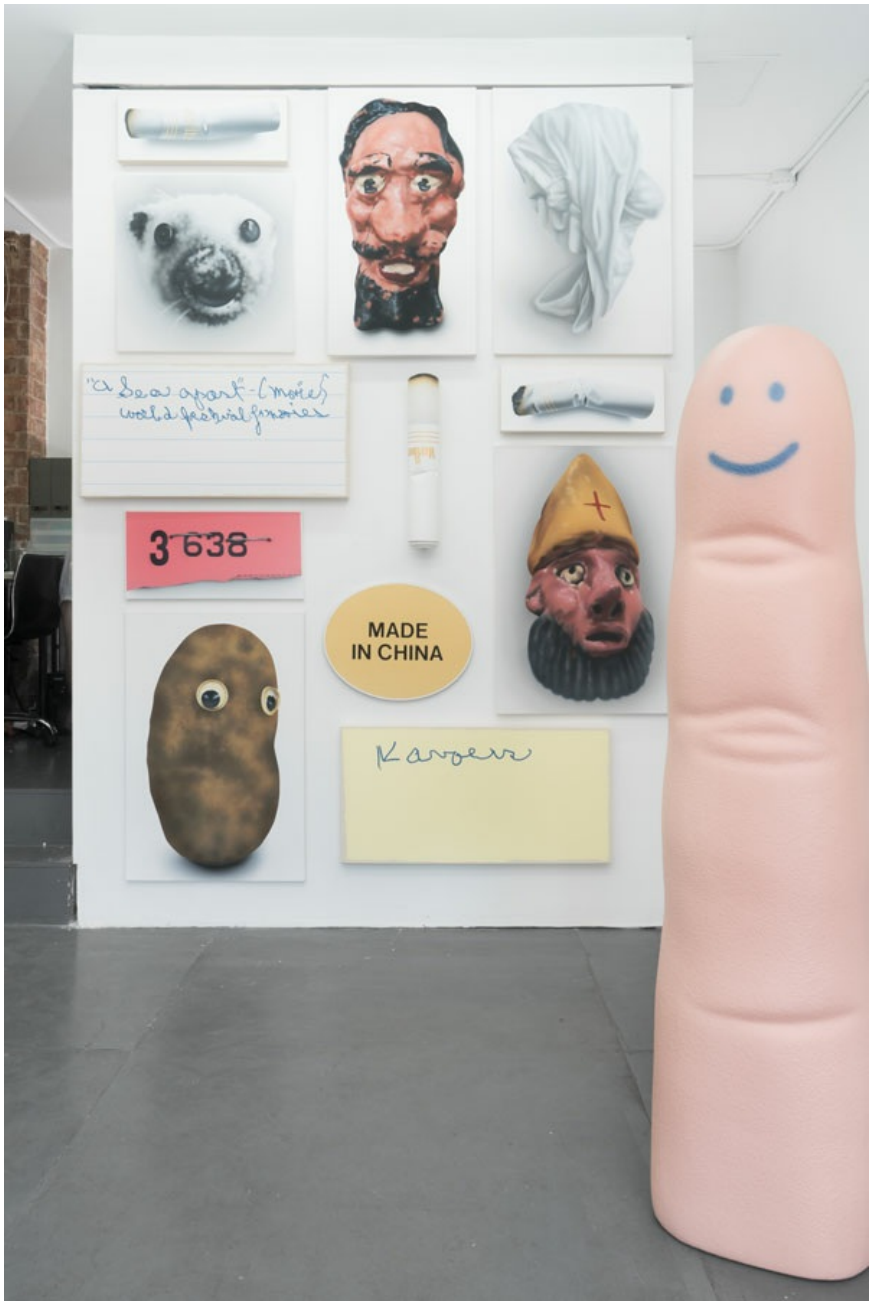
October 5, 2017 - Rachel Hecker is a visual artist who lives and works in Houston, Texas. She received her BFA in sculpture from Moore College of Art in Philadelphia, and her MFA in painting from the Rhode Island School of Design. She has shown extensively at institutions such as the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, the Dallas Museum of Art, the Menil Collection, and ArtPace, and in commercial and university galleries and alternative spaces throughout the United States. A show of her work, *Exhibition Title Goes Here*, recently opened at NYC's yours mine & ours gallery. When asked about her frequent use of lists in her work, Hecker explains: "I recognized that these kinds of lists contain an un-self-consciousness that I was pretty much incapable of at any other place in my life, just in terms of content and form. I wasn't self-conscious about the writing, or how it looked on the page, or what was in there. It was purely utilitarian."

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2537 words.

Tags: Art, Process, Focus, Success, Education.

You often use an airbrush to make your paintings, which seems like a maligned technique in the fine art world. How did that become your tool of choice?

When I got out of graduate school I was making large scale drawings, and to make the work easier to manage I knew that I'd have to learn how to paint, but I was also having a reaction against painting. It was the early 80s and it seemed like a particularly male-dominated field, like Julian Schnabel, all those big guys. It felt important for me not to have my "hand" in the work. I realized that if I was going to transition into painting I needed a tool that would keep my hand out of it, because I was always interested in neutrality and lack of touch, so the images had to be kind of seamless. The airbrush is perfect for that. I always had an interest in photography, and so the work in some weird way aligns itself closer to photography than painting. In that way, I'm also poking fun at painting as I'm making paintings. I'm really not interested in photorealism—or even realism on any particular level. I make the paintings to the extent that I need to. I get them to a place where I think they're legible and okay, and then I let them go.



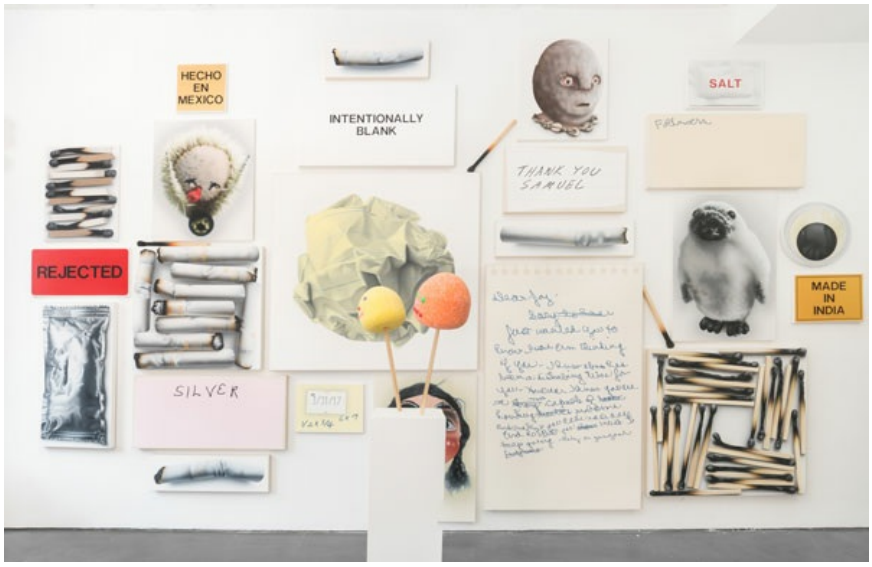
Exhibition Title Goes Here, Rachel Hecker, Installation view

Your work is very much about the re-contextualization of objects. It often asks the viewer to consider objects that they might look at every day in a different way. Your recent show's a mix of utilitarian objects with more personal things, like notes and shoppings lists. How did you land on this subject matter?

I recently did about 45 paintings of my own notes and lists. I arrived at that subject matter when I came in from the studio one day and saw my grocery shopping list on the counter. I recognized that these kinds of lists contain a kind of un-self-consciousness that I was incapable of at any other place in my life, just in terms of content and form. I wasn't self-conscious about the writing, or how it looked on the page, or what was in there. It was purely utilitarian. I was never interested in autobiography or biography in any kind of way, but I thought that these little notes and shopping lists carried a pointed kind of meaning with them and revealed things about my life that I couldn't deal with narratively otherwise. I started making them into paintings for that reason.

I typically work in a pretty linear way, so I made about 50 or something of those paintings. While I was working on those, as I

think happens for most artists, you start to have ideas pop into your head that seem aberrant or left field that, in the moment, you usually have to discard and push away because it's not part of the program. At some point I thought, "What if I make *that* the program, the stuff that's not part of the program?" So any idea or thing that occurs to me is fair game, and I'll trust that it'll be connected somehow—or not. I spent a summer doing that, and it felt kind of right. In my new show there are generally three categories of works: there's note/list paintings, there's "object" paintings, and then there are the strange little fucked up sculptural heads. I think that this mode of indexing of things around me creates another kind of taxonomy, and when you put all of these pieces together there's a sort of poetry that starts to be revealed, but it's somewhat non-linear and open ended.



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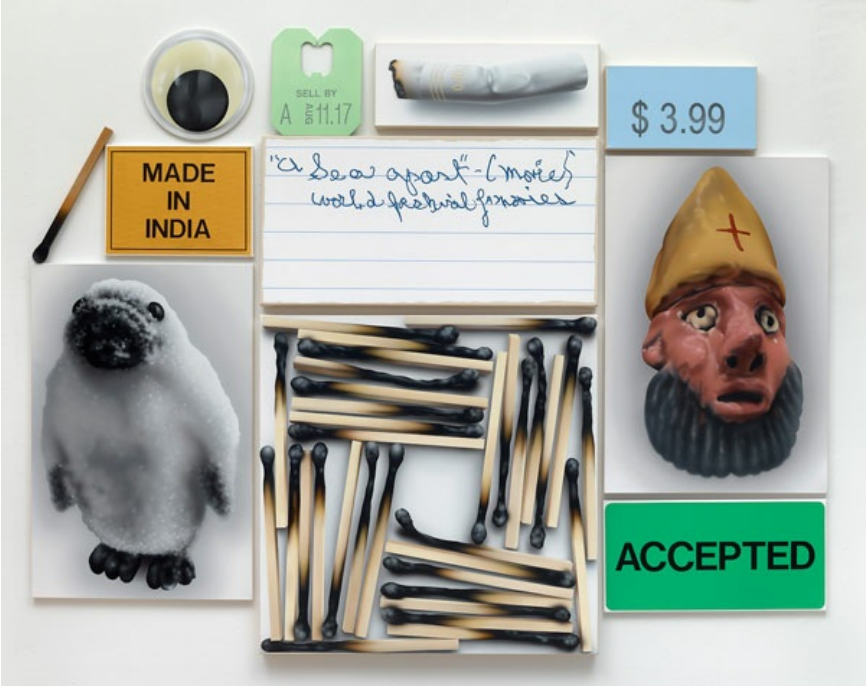
Do you find that the way that you think about making work has changed radically over the years?

I think my relationship to the studio has deepened. I call it my best relationship, and it has been over the years—it's steady and always there. Younger artists are interested in defining themselves in terms of their specialness and their difference in the world—it's always about a sort of discordant elbowing your way in and figuring out what's different about you. The older I get the more I've become interested in consonance and what we share, so I've always tried to locate the work in this more democratic field for that reason. How are we alike? Early in my career I obfuscated meaning. I think I was afraid of being stupid, so I made work that appeared complex in certain ways so no one would know that, which is something a lot of young artists do. It was also more political.

How does the experience of teaching balance with your own creative work?

It's a lovely way for an artist to make a living. I like trying to help people figure out how to make their work better, which I think is basically what my job as a teacher is. You are trying to extract from them what it is exactly that they're trying to do and then point them in directions that are helpful. Sometimes your job is to put up a stumbling block in front of them so they have something to trip over, that can be equally useful. I ask them a lot of questions, and I'm taking them to task a lot. So when I'm in my studio I have to remind myself to be equally vigilant in certain ways. If I tell my students that they have to stop asking themselves questions that they already know the answers to, then I also feel like I have to do that as well… or at least try to. I have to hold myself accountable in the same ways they do.



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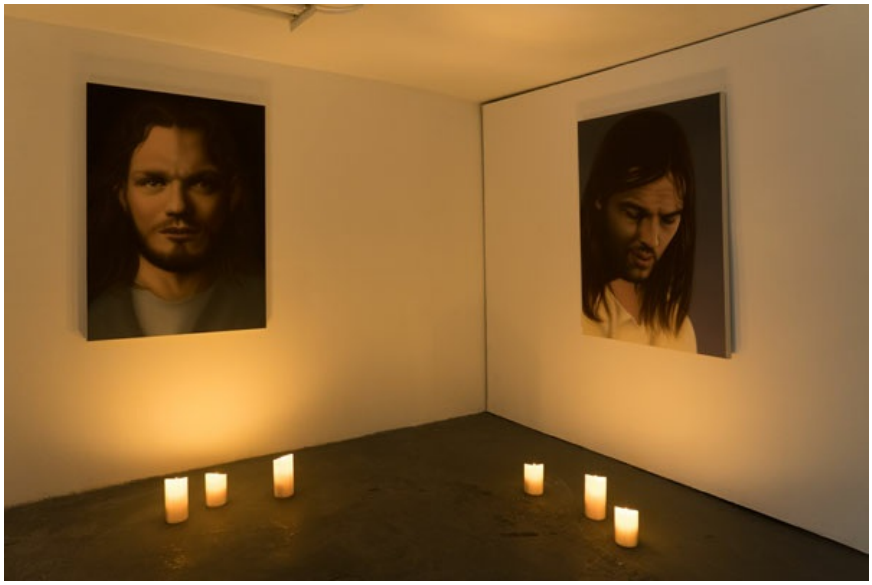
Are you one of those people who needs to push at something until it works? When is it okay to abandon something?

I will know something needs to be abandoned and then I push it as hard as I can for as long as I can to try to correct the train—and it will still be a train wreck. Once I literally spent three or four months trying to paint a portrait of my brother. It was based on an old photo where he looked like John Travolta. It was sort of faded and he had very 70s hair. It was just a giant, horrible painting. I looked at it and looked at it and I couldn't give it up, even though it was lacking any of the wildness that I was interested in. It was just dreadful. I kept flashing on this tableau at Madame Tussaud's museum where there was a Victorian woman who had consumption who's laying on her bed, and you could get up and lean over the bed and when you did you could see her chest raise and fall and it was startling. Somehow I thought, "Okay, I know how to fix this portrait. I will implant eyelashes—real human eyelashes in it—and it will work, it will be like that piece at Madame Tussaud." So I spent another week figuring it out and doing that, and then it was *really* a disaster. And then somehow it didn't bother me. It was somehow about pushing that to the corners and then having to let it go. I'd given it my best shot. Sometimes I will pour countless hours into things that are horrible, but I don't regret it. I believe that whatever we do there's a kind of logic and reason to it, and something's gained along the way. I also just like the work of making things, so that's okay. It's still a good time.

How do you know when a piece is successful? Is it successful because you made it and you feel like, "I like this and it does what I want it to do," or is it successful when you see that someone else gets what it's trying to do?

I guess I don't put anything out there that I don't think is successful according to whatever the criteria is that I've set for myself. At the same time, I'm never—with maybe two or three exceptions—really satisfied with anything that I've made. There's a couple of paintings that I like that I've made over the past 35 years. A painting of David Gilmour as Jesus is one of them. Another was a painting I made after one of my cats died, it's called "Crying Sun," and I used an image that I drew when I was five years old. So success? I don't know. For me, it has to have a certain competency in terms of how it's made. It is important that it is legible in certain ways. And that I'm not embarrassed by it.



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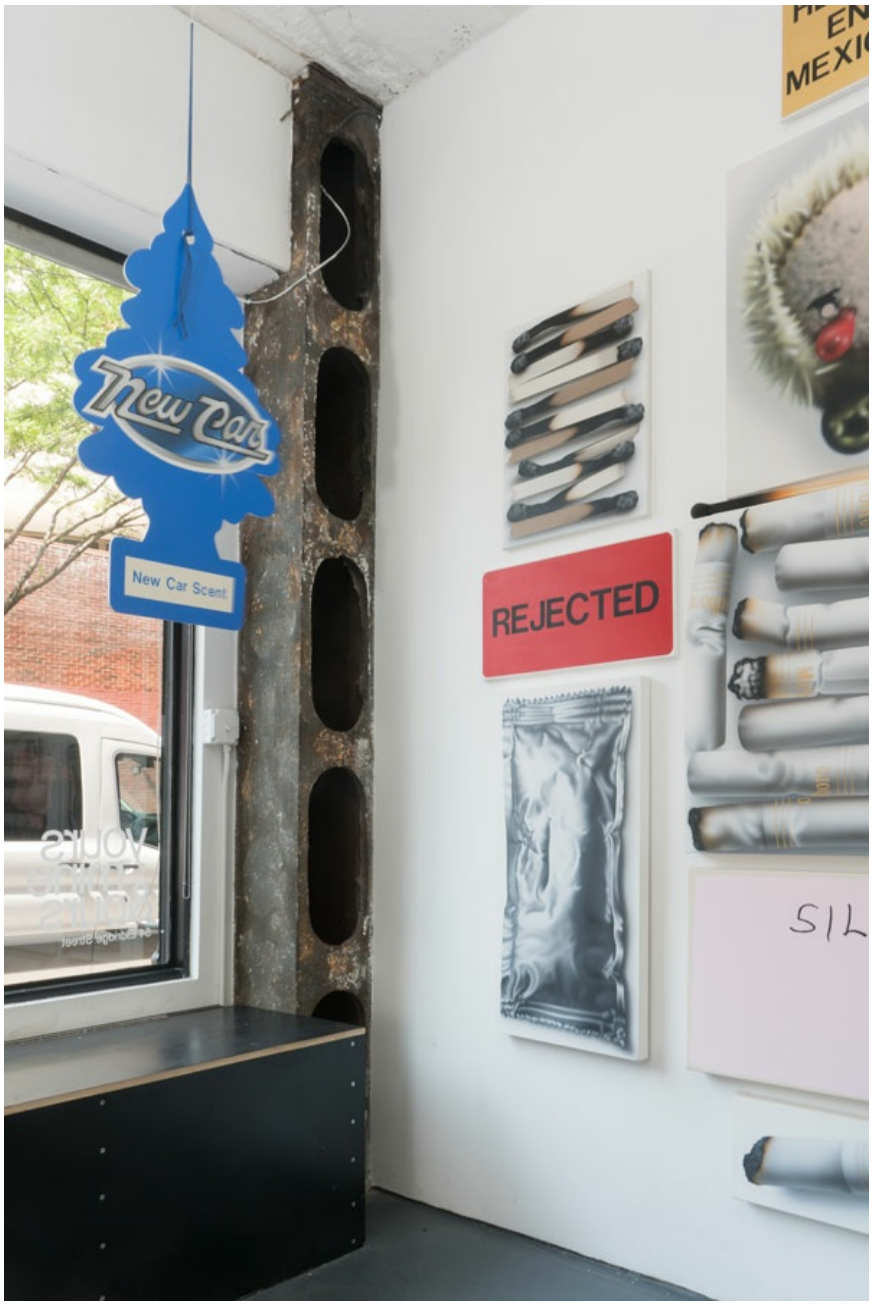
A lot of artists seem as though they're always working towards a show, or preparing work with a deadline of a show in mind. How do you feel about that?

Well, I show pretty infrequently and that is mostly by choice. Not to say that people are banging down my doors screaming for work, but I don't like deadlines and I don't like what that does to my thinking. It creates this awful pressure. For this show of mine that just opened, I think there are about 60 works in it. The timing was fantastic because they came to the studio and it was basically full. I could just say, "Yeah, I'm ready for a show. Here's the work." And that's how I've been working, it's sort of like I wait until the studio's full and I think the work needs to go out in some form, and then I do it. Then I have a show. Shows are uncomfortable for me. They've always felt like weird grammar school dance recitals. You're on stage and being looked at in a way that feels unnatural. And I'm very aware of time, of getting older. I guard my time in the studio and that's what I've given attention to, not so much to my career. So when the career stuff happens, it's kind of nice because it can, for the most part, happen on my own terms.

Also, I don't mean to fault people who feel or work differently. There are many artists who like that deadline, who are more goal-oriented in certain ways and find that motivating. I just don't. I'm too anxious a person for that. I don't need that. That's why I'm also really super grateful for my teaching job. I realized early on that it would be bad to have the expectation that the studio was gonna pay my rent. For me it's not a fair expectation and it's not a productive one. I'm grateful that I've had this job that provides health insurance and covers me in many ways. I know artists who make a living from their work and whose lives can seem enviable, but even for them there can be this desperation every now and then. Things often come in cycles. They might have a good five years and then nothing. You never know.



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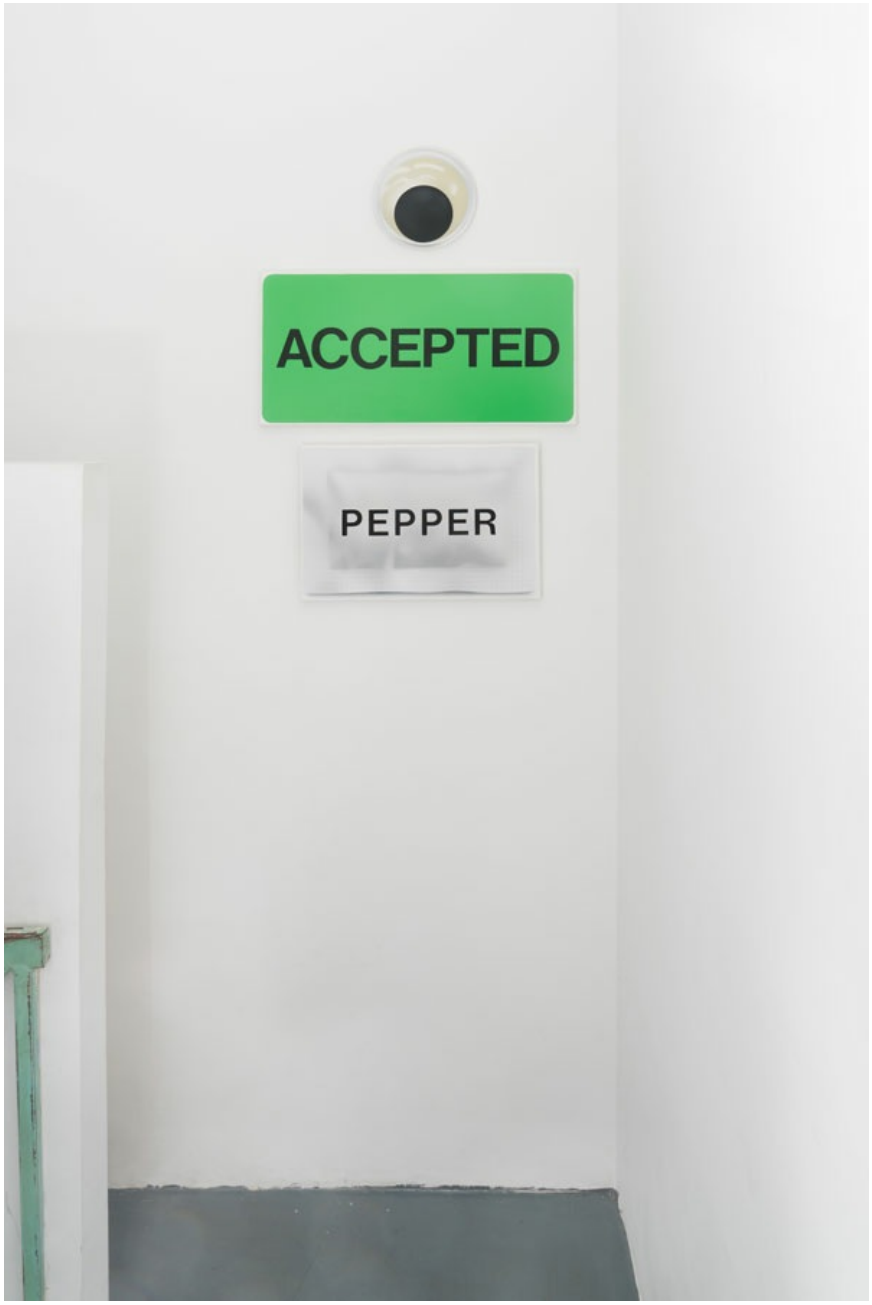
Do you have a pretty routine studio practice?

I go into the studio every day. I like having that relationship, a kind of discipline, a kind of rigor of a schedule, but it doesn't feel like a chore. I pour my cup of coffee, I'm in my pajamas, and suddenly I'm in the studio. It's 20 steps from my back door. There's something lovely about that. It is my favorite place because I recognize that by just taking those 20 steps, I go into a different headspace. When I'm in there I think differently. It's almost like whatever problems exist in the house in terms of life, or work, or relationships, I can leave them at the door when I go into the studio. I start thinking in a way that has more to do with problem solving than anything else. Studio problems are mostly delightful ones on some level. I like the engineering of creative work and figuring out how to make things work. I don't really need a lot of external stuff in order to do it.

My thinking about what I actually need in order to make work shifted when I moved my mother here about 15 years ago. I thought I would be able to continue working the same way I had before, but as her health continued to fail I just couldn't do that. It ended up being like I was under house arrest for about five years. I couldn't wander very far from her, so I started to devise

projects that I could do on my dining room table. One of them involved making something like a portrait of a peanut out of Sculpey. I made hundreds of them, and then I got brave and went into the backyard and started picking up bits of gravel from the driveway and little bits of oyster shell and twigs and making things.

It's a very myopic way of being in the world, but I feel like the work is self-contained in terms of what I need for it. It's just the stuff around me. I can barely throw stuff out. Like the other day I opened this thing that came in a plastic bag, and the plastic bag itself had this ridiculous warning in five languages about babies suffocating in the plastic bag. It was funny to be because the bag wasn't that big—a baby couldn't fit its head in this tiny plastic bag—but still all these warnings. My first thought was, "Man, maybe I need to paint this."



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Recommended by Rachel Hecker:

Upstream by Mary Oliver. Ravishing, heart stabbing economy. In reference to a wounded seagull: "He was, of course, a piece of

the sky.”

The Ramayana, (or any of the Indian epics). “Time passed and Kesini gave birth to a son who was named Asamanja. And Sumati gave birth to a pumpkin. Sixty thousand sons emerged from it when it was split open. The wet nurses placed them in a pot of butter and cared for them there.” And so it goes…

Cats (the animals)

That you not take the same route to and fro every day… I don’t know if this is advice or a recommendation.

Shahs of Sunset, or practically anything on Bravo TV. This is for when you are not reading Mary Oliver or *The Ramayana*.

Name
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Vocation
Visual Artist

Fact

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