

On quieting your mind to focus on the work



Visual artist Lauren Quin discusses working outside of your definitions and knowing what you want to be doing for life.

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As told to Lauren Spear, 1546 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Painting](#), [Success](#), [Focus](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#).

When I first saw your paintings in your LA studio, I was struck by the unique half-indoor, half-outdoor space surrounded by beautiful trees. Since then, your work has traveled to Tokyo, and I recently saw your show in NYC. Do your paintings change based on the location where they are displayed?

Of course. The way you saw it initially is probably the best way to see them. It can be surprising to see them out of the studio, it has a sterilizing effect that feels outside of their nature. I keep them stacked against each other so they can speak to each other, let the ideas spill over. They will never be as alive as when I am making them.

Because of the scale of your paintings, when you go up close to them, they fill your entire line of vision, and you can enter them, in a sense. They are massive yet full of endlessly dense detail, and they feel like an ecosystem of their own. Can you talk about the play between microscopic and macroscopic in your work?

It's nice to hear you say that and see it in the work because that's where I feel rooted. I've always enjoyed being intimate with the surface. Sometimes I find myself painting so close to it that I'm almost huffing the paint. The thing is I have terrible vision. When I wake up I can't see past my nose, but I can see the ridges of my skin, the dust on the pillow, these kinds of things. I'm very fond of it, and I've always had a feeling that there was another plane of minutia I could turn to. There was a time when I felt like no one was willing to get up there and breathe it in. Literally, we were wearing masks. So I decided to take certain moments, pull them into my level, and enlarge them, to be as clear as possible. It gave me a small breakthrough to consider a painting that way. Now, all of these details are a way of drawing the next painting inside of the current one.

I feel like I can see the evidence of your hand through the scraping on the canvas. You feel very present to me.

There's no other option. You can span time inside a painting because when you look at it, you don't read it left to right; you start to enter, circle, and travel. It takes a long time for a painting to unfold. I want a viewer to be able to see every layer at once. Each layer is a chance for me to erase it. If I start with something that's a mistake, I already have something to fix. I never have a plan for how they will end; it's more about an understanding of what they will need.



Lauren Quin, *Hilt*, 2023, oil on canvas, 72x120 inches

From what I've read, you start with a color, shape, drawing or pattern and cover it entirely with another painting. Can you talk about this technique?

I try to start with something that feels unsatisfying, something that really gets under my skin. I found this technique because I had a painting I didn't like, and I just decided to cover it completely, carving out what I covered. What happens in this process is the discovery of a third painting, caught in a state of becoming. Instead of pitting layers against each other, there's a certain synchronicity to finding a way out of the tangle. So, I think there's a bit of sacrifice. I keep stepping back into that position where I decide I'm back at square one. It creates this problem to contend with.

I'm intrigued by your use of the word 'problem'. Could you elaborate on what you mean by this in the context of your artistic process?

I think I describe it as a problem because there is so much frustration invested in a successful composition. I don't often give up on a painting, even if it takes years to finish. It's helpful to think of it like a math problem, the only thing I can't solve is the frame.

That's a beautiful way of looking at it. You studied at multiple art schools and mentioned Fernand Leger and Joan Miro as influences. Did you aim to integrate cubist or surrealist techniques into your own work during your studies?

Sure, surrealism gave me a door into abstraction and a way of understanding that everything I have around me is useful. It helped me free associate, which I really needed because I don't know if I have a root of what made me start down this path - I just can't help it; I can't stop. It's the only place that's really my own. It's about understanding what grabs onto me.

It's fascinating to see how your work has evolved over time. Do you feel like your body of work in a continuous conversation?

When I look at my earlier work, I can see myself groping around for what I have now. I do feel like it's a continuous conversation, because paint is so heartbreaking. It never performs the same way for you again. Sometimes I will fall into a trap trying to recreate a painting. What I've realized is that I can only recreate the feeling of loving a painting, the thrill of it.

Are there any you'll never give away?

Yes, but it's better to travel light. I am more superstitious about certain scraps of things. The drawings I've made are the most valuable to me. I have so many boxes of sketchbooks I can't let go of. There are a few paintings I keep for good luck too.

Where in the world have they ended up?

Farther than I've traveled, which is cool. I've been able to travel for shows and work, and that's how I've seen the world. All of this has made me feel really lucky, but managing the speculative pressures of that has been a weight on me. I have to quiet my mind and set it aside, my problems are solved in the studio. I am grateful that I know what I want. I want to be doing this when I'm 80, that's my plan. It gives me a lot of relief.

Do you have any sense of when that started or what it's rooted in?

I process things visually. I can remember something if I can draw a map of it. Maybe it's just the gear my head is in. As a little kid, I was pretty quiet, and drawing was what I had that I never questioned. The more I've invested in it, the easier I can relate to other people.



Lauren Quin, *Cub Cross*, 2024, oil on canvas, 78 x 156 inches

Where do you find support for your practice?

I feel like time just evaporates in the studio, and it's so easy to become isolated. It's really important to have critical touch points around me. I need more disinterested voices, people I admire so much I can barely talk to them.

You have one painting named "Lynda" which is dedicated to fellow artist Lynda Benglis. You said that your painting was a "gift to my idea of her work" which I thought was such a beautiful concept. Do you have any other paintings that are dedications?

There are so many artists and people that I want to talk to, and painting is the only way I can do that. You can never hide your influences when they're played out in a visual way, every decision is front and center. If you keep try to hide it, it's the first thing people will see. And so, I think to see it as a gift is a way of taking myself out of the work-it doesn't need to be my painting, it can be ours. If you're only working inside of your definition of what you make, that's very limiting.

You once said you will "repeat a symbol until it travels into something else." Can you talk about this process?

I like to find ways to spread a symbol out too thin. I think "how far can you stretch that symbol until it's gone?" It has to do with the word. All these things start to unfurl themselves until it leads to something universal. I've been thinking about how words lose meaning and get spread so thin that they become like a gel to see through.

What is something you frequently remind yourself?

I always try to tell myself I have everything I need, not to rush. But also, I have to remind myself to ask for help. I want to be doing this when I'm old, so I try to remind myself not to hurt my back.

Lauren Quin recommends

House of the 3 Rabbits by Randolph S. See Albright

The Cook, The Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover

Cheremoyas in season

Scheveningen Yellow Light

Packing a sandwich for the plane

Name

Lauren Quin

Vocation

visual artist

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