

Watch: Artist Mary Finlayson's Vibrant San Francisco Home Celebrates Color in a Big Way

Painter and printmaker Mary Finlayson invites us to her new Potrero Hill home and studio, which is awash with vivacious tones, textiles, and travel mementos.

[Mike Chino](#)

If your favorite interiors are filled with stacks of books, scores of plants, eclectic textiles, and *big* color, you'll love the work of San Francisco-based artist Mary Finlayson. Her vivid paintings shake the dust off the still life genre with bold hues and dazzling textures, and they've been popping up all around the Bay Area—including in [Dwell's San Francisco office](#).

The rising artist launched her first solo show earlier this year, and she recently moved into a brand new home/studio, where she resides with her husband Matt Luckhurst, their daughter Frances, and their dog Japhy. Read on for a peek into the exuberant, technicolor world of Painted Mary.



Finlayson in her home studio.

You recently moved to a new house—congrats! What inspired your move, and what's your favorite thing about your new home?

Thank you! My husband and I are both from British Columbia, and while we've always intended on returning, after Frances was born we realized how good San Francisco had been to us both. We've both started businesses here, we had our first child here, and after six years of living here it felt like home—so maybe it was time to start looking for one. Somewhat ironically, we fell in love with the first house we saw.



The Potrero Hill home has a lush front yard with a huge, locally famous avocado tree.



The living room pairs neutrals with pops of color—and plenty of pillows and plants.

We kept looking at other places and trying to talk ourselves out of it because we weren't sure if we were ready to make the leap into home ownership. But we kept going back to it. Eventually we just had to face the fact that we loved the house and weren't likely to find another one like it. So, we bit the bullet, made an offer, and crossed our fingers! Three months later we were moved in and calling it home. It was a bit of a whirlwind experience, but we couldn't be happier.

I think my favorite thing about the house would have to be the front yard. There is a huge, beautiful avocado tree in the middle of it that seems wildly exotic to me coming from Canada.

Where do you draw inspiration for your home's decor and style?

I don't have a specific style or look I am trying to achieve in the space. Our house is decorated with an amalgamation of objects, textiles, and books found while traveling or purchased at different times in our lives.



A sunny room at the back of the residence serves as Finlayson's home office.



Frances's room is filled with color, plush textures, and lots of books.

I like that the objects are full of memories and reflect different moments that we can share with our daughter. I look out for vintage textiles, sculptures, and books, and try to bring home only what most stood out to me. Over the years this has come to form a collection of objects that are near and dear to me.



Mementos and tomes scattered throughout the home often make it into Finlayson's paintings.

While I love collecting things, I think it's easy to drown in memorabilia and knickknacks. I try to be selective about what we display and balance the color with a backdrop of neutrals to ground it all. I also love plants and making sure to give objects room to breathe, so these were all factors I thought about while decorating the space.

What is your favorite room of the house?

I'd have to say my studio. Its a space completely dedicated to my work and the things that inspire me, so I am calmest in that space.



Finlayson's studio is filled with daylight and past work, which she refers to while painting.

Do you have a favorite object/artwork in your home with an interesting backstory?

There is a blue wooden hand I found at a market in San Miguel de Allende years ago. I can't explain why, but I just fell in love with it and have cherished

it for years. I've probably lived in eight or nine places since I first found it, and I've brought it with me to me each spot. When I moved to New York with only a suitcase in 2012, it was probably the only item I brought with me that I wouldn't have considered a necessity. It's been featured in a number of my paintings, and it continues to inspire me, but I still can't explain why I'm so drawn to it.



A blue hand Finlayson found in San Miguel de Allende has popped up in several of her paintings—and her logo.

Are there any artists/designers you're obsessed with lately?

There are so many artists that I love that it's hard to narrow it down to a short selection, but the ones I always come back to are Matisse and Hockney. I'm drawn to their use of color and mark making and have learned more studying their works than anything I studied in school.



A screen print by Corita Kent hangs in the bedroom.

I also love Stuart Davis, Kerry James Marshall, Corita Kent, Egon Schiele, and more currently Andy Dixon, Leif Low-Beer, Paul Wackers, Muzae Sesay, and Chelsea Wong.



The master bathroom is filled with colorful textiles and quirky art.

We'd love to learn more about your artistic background—how did you get started painting?

I can't remember a time in my life where art didn't play a role. According to my mom, I was always bringing more artwork home from preschool and kindergarten

than she knew what to do with. At 17 I moved to the other side of Canada to complete a BFA, determined to be an artist. When I graduated at 21, I had a lot of ideas of who and what I wanted to be, but I had absolutely no clue how to make that a reality. I did odd jobs and fumbled around trying to pay the bills while painting on the side, but I was totally unfulfilled and rarely painting.



An array of Finlayson's past paintings and textiles adorns her studio.

I ended up going back to school to do a masters in art therapy, and then another degree in art education. I figured if I could have a career adjacent to being an artist, that would be the next best thing. I spent years working with children and adolescents, teaching them how to use art to channel their feelings all the while stifling my own.



Finlayson's fun tiger motif is also available as a rug.

Then in 2017 my work visa expired, so I had to take time off work while I waited for my green card to be approved. The break from work forced me out of

excuses. I signed up for an artist residency and decided to finally give it a go. After that, things really started falling into place—I decided not to return to work, and to focus instead on what I had really wanted to do all along.

What inspires you in your artwork?

Color is my focus and my greatest source of inspiration. A while back I started to strip back the complexity of my work, and I began to shift my attention more toward the composition and color.



Fruit Bowl, 2017

My focus on interiors and still lifes allows me to experiment with how colors intersect and combine. Interiors have become a great canvas for me to work with; I'm always looking for new spaces that inspire me and objects that feel personal.

What is your process like? Do you usually set up scenes of physical objects to paint, or do you work from photographs or mental images?

I start by collecting images I like, photographing spaces, and then collaging those pieces together. Then I do a small sketch of it with colored pencil to get a sense of color and form.



Colorful masks adorn several walls throughout Finlayson's home.

While much of my work is planned ahead of time, my approach to color is much more intuitive. I never have my palette mapped out in advance. I aim to achieve a sense of balance overall, so that is something I am also considering as I paint—deciding how powerful one color is against another, and whether it allows the other to speak or not.



A vivid Moroccan rug leads to Finlayson's home office and studio.

In order to make this effective, I have to think about quiet areas and louder

ones that balance each other out. Color adds energy to the work and contributes to the movement of your eye on the piece, so I also try to consider how I want the viewer's eye to read the piece and where the eye should (or shouldn't) rest.

Which of your works are you most proud of, and why?

I think my favorite painting would have to be *de Kooning with Plants*. This was the first painting I made after leaving my job to be a full-time artist, so it's the marker of a huge change in my life. Stylistically, it was an important shift in my work as well.



de Kooning with Plants, 2017

How do you find work/life balance when working from a home studio?

It's definitely a challenge, and it has taken me a while to figure out—but I think I've finally found a way to make it work. The studio is completely dedicated to my work, so once I close the doors it's pretty easy for me to shut off outside distractions.

Interruptions make for disjointed paintings, so I try to account for any distractions before picking up my brushes. Sometimes this means I have to work at strange hours, or put other tasks on hold. I've come to accept all of those aspects and have shifted my approach accordingly.



Duchamp and The Art of Looking Sideways, in progress

Any tips or lessons learned over the years that you'd like to share with aspiring artists?

I think the most important thing is to not give in to self doubt. Have trust that it will come together and never have the expectation that the path will be obvious or linear. The first step is to put the work in, so focus on producing work and give yourself space to figure out the other aspects as they come. You will never know what's coming ahead of time, and while there is no clear path, over time it does at least start to shift into focus.



Finlayson's home is a shady oasis on a quiet street in San Francisco's Potrero Hill neighborhood.

During my BFA there was a poster in the printmaking studio that said "Not knowing where to begin is a common form of paralysis. Begin anywhere." Over the years this has become a sort of mantra. Begin anywhere. That's the most important step, to just begin—it doesn't matter how or where. I say it to myself every time I pick up my brushes, or when I don't have an idea. I just remind myself that starting is the biggest hurdle, and once that's out of the way the rest becomes easier.

What's coming up in the future? Are you taking on any new projects, or are there any dream projects that you'd like to work on?

I'm working on a new body of work for a solo show next year, and I'm taking on some side projects that are really exciting. As far as dream projects go, it's pretty cheesy, but really my dream is just to keep doing what I'm already doing. I'm still in disbelief that I'm finally a working artist, so for however long I can keep doing this I'll be fulfilled.

Visit [Mary Finlayson's website](#) and [shop](#) to learn more about her work, and follow her on Instagram [@Painted_Mary](#).