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BRIANNE PETRONE

CULTURE

# AN INSIDE LOOK AT THE WORK OF MARY FINLAYSON



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**O**n September 25th, I had the wonderful opportunity to dive deeper into the work of one of Seattle gallery ZINC Contemporary’s artists, Mary Finlayson. Mary met me virtually from her vibrant and energizing studio space. She shared some valuable insights on her creative and technical processes, inspirations, and background as an artist. Originally from Vancouver, BC, Mary now works and lives in San Francisco with her husband and two young children.

When asked to address the feminine energy that her work exudes, Mary shared that it’s not actually a conscious consideration she makes while working. She describes her work as “self-portraits,” and explains that in the beginning stages of her painting journey, her subject matter was entirely of women. Over time, the figures were slowly replaced by objects. Even though the subject matter had changed, Mary says that “I always approach my paintings as elements of myself.”

I asked Mary to elaborate on her early career as an artist as well as her upbringing, which she described as “a wobbly path.” She stated that her mom cannot remember a time that Mary wasn’t producing tons of artwork, even as a child. “She made a real effort to [give] us each our own interests,” Mary recalled from her childhood, “When she recognized that I was interested in art, she really helped accommodate that.”



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Mary went on to acknowledge the voice that painting gave her during her adolescent and young adult years, saying that she was always certain she wanted to be an artist. This led her to get her BFA in painting and printmaking in college. However, Mary did not know how to make her way as an artist quite yet, and she went on to get a bachelor's degree in art education and a masters in art therapy.

Working as an art teacher and therapist gave Mary “the objectivity of looking at art from another angle.” She remembers her work from the time as “dark and emotive,” something she didn’t feel up to sharing with others because it was so raw: “It was more for myself, I guess.” Working with kids aided a shift in how Mary looked at art, and her color palette and subject matter changed through this experience. She found herself feeling “jealous of their ability to be creating all day long,” and this inspired her to quit her job to pursue artistry full time in 2017.

Giving herself the opportunity to create to her fullest potential allowed Mary to truly develop her voice as a painter. Her first and foremost source of inspiration is the relationship between colors. Mary’s work is full of bright and energetic contrast because she likes to use colors that don’t traditionally “work well together.” Mary describes her intuitive coloring process: “Once I lay a color down, then I’m responding to the previous color...I think of it as a conversation.” Lines and patterns are pulled from pieces of Mary’s life; she shared that her sister is into quilting, which she often likes to reference in her work. Another small piece of imagery that appears in Mary’s work is books—these are often to pay tribute to an artist that’s inspired her or a personal memento of a loved one.

All of these elements are a great way for Mary to incorporate her love of color and challenge any static quality that may arise: “The lines add vibrancy...the eye doesn’t really have a resting point.” Another unconventional way Mary enhances her work is by disregarding some traditional structures of painting in order to create the aesthetic she’s truly drawn to.

Mary’s aesthetic is fresh and unique, which can be partially attributed to her use of her medium. “I never used to work in gouache,” Mary said. She used to work in oils, which looked really different because of the oils’ blending properties. After watching her husband do work as an illustrator in gouache, she realized that she could layer and contrast colors more effectively through that medium. Mary also recalled, “I realized I could do printmaking through painting, because it has the same aesthetic, completely.” She incorporates flash paint (vinyl emulsion) as well now, creating a nice matte finish. Mary noted some challenges of using gouache included the incredibly small tubes and cakey consistency. “It’s all worth it because I really love the finish of them,” she said.

Mary added that her current process is very different from the intuitive way she used to work: “I have found that the best strategy for me in working

with gouache is to have my composition very well planned in advance. I know exactly the image I'm going to put on a canvas before I paint it." What she does not know ahead of time are the colors she will use: "For me that's the real fun part, getting to make those creative decisions on the fly."

Currently, Mary spends most of her time either painting or chasing her children around. As she reflected on the pandemic's effect on her, she recognized that for many years her work had referred to her own home and her desire to share that. In quarantine, like many of us, she became sick of her own home, and said, "In this show for ZINC I was thinking a lot more about my paintings as an escape, a controlled, colorful escape. I was also wanting to offer that to the audience." Looking ahead, Mary said she'd like to have more time to consider her work and make bigger pieces. "I never thought I would be able to be a professional artist," Mary said as she expressed her gratitude for the opportunities she has today.

Mary's closing note in the interview was a small piece of advice for young artists: "Be true to yourself and have conviction in what you're doing." Mary also acknowledged that she doesn't think she could have become an artist sooner than she did because of the self-doubt that prevented her from pursuing what she really wanted. After a while, Mary said she began to run out of excuses and couldn't deny her desire to be an artist anymore. "I spent a lot of time hanging kids' work in hallways and being very proud of the work they were doing," Mary said as she noted the hypocritical feeling that accompanied "telling them they could be artists when I wasn't doing it myself." Mary's commitment to herself shines through the authenticity in her work.

Mary's vibrant and energizing show, "From the Inside," will be available for viewing at ZINC Contemporary on November 4th.

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Hello! I am a senior at Seattle Pacific University, majoring in Visual Arts and English Literature. This year I will be serving as the Campus Correspondent as well as the Senior Editor at HC SPU chapter. I am originally from the Olympic Peninsula area of Washington. Some of my interests include outdoor recreation, collaging, reading, and writing.

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