

Explore Blissful Forms With This SF Artist's Playful Abstracts

[MONIQUE MCINTOSH](#) February 7, 2021





Artist Rachel Kaye poses in her San Francisco studio.

Something familiar lurks in the twisted contours and soft hues conjured by San Francisco-based artist Rachel Kaye. Maybe it is the ghost of a face or figure, glimpsed only from the corner of one's eye. But more so, the intricate abstract patterns of her color pencil drawings and oil paintings tap into the sheer power of color and shape to spark the senses. "For me, it's less about trying to name an object and more about naming a sensation," she says, explaining the undercurrents of her work.

Kaye found this fertile creative ground a decade ago during a pivotal artist residency at the famed studio of sculptor JB Blunk in Inverness, California. Until then, her work had been inspired by the decadent patterns of French Rococo paintings and was more figurative, exploring the modern equivalents in fashion culture. But after her residency, she found more resonance in a new direction. "It was like I took everything else out of my work and went deeper in smaller moments of patterned abstraction."

This still serves as the foundation of Kaye's current practice. In her home studio—built by husband and fellow artist Jay Nelson—she keeps sketchbooks filled with interesting compositions. These forms could be inspired by the movement of leaves in her garden or by the soothing gesture of pouring milk in Johannes Vermeer's classic painting, *The Milkmaid*. To the viewer, these visual touchstones "may not be recognizable, but I'm using them as a catalyst to build shapes," she explains. "I'm whittling things down

to basic forms and playing with their nuance."

These sketches become the underpinning of the artist's pencil drawings and paintings, which delve deeply into her fascination with color. "This has always been at the core of my practice," says Kaye. "I think a lot about the psychology of color. It's definitely an emotional response for me." With this in mind, she keeps a strict palette for each piece, often incorporating colors that jar her as a personal challenge to bring them into harmony. These range from a moody field of purples to her recent wave of orange shades, which felt particularly consequential during the severe California wildfires.

How Kaye manipulates these hues depends on the application. With her pencil drawings on colored paper, "a lot of unknowns happen because the pigment of the paper bleeds through, so it's a lot of fun playing with that." Applying texture and fine details help amplify these color experiments. In her paintings, she employs thick oils to create brush strokes with dimensions. Featured prominently in both her mediums is her signature pointillism, which makes forms "become almost pixelated, so there's no hard edge," she says.

Years into this approach, Kaye still finds the sense of discovery part of the process. "When I get into a zone, that's when the magic happens," she says. "That's the beauty of abstraction. It's a dialogue with this constant mystery."

PHOTOS: KRISTEN LOKEN