LA WEEKLY

Meet Radiant Palettes Artist Mary Lai

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Mary Lai pictured with her artwork; lead image from LA Weekly profile. Credit: No explicit credit located for the selected image; confirm before publication.

Mary Lai's work is known around the world for its radiant palettes and messages of tireless optimism. Her paintings, murals, digital works, installations, and most recently AR-enhanced sculpture have lit up global cities from New York to Miami, Dallas, Seoul and more—including L.A., where this week she opens an ambitious yearlong project as the W Los Angeles—West Beverly Hills artist in residence. The prismatic energy of her indelible style was developed prior to her visual art journey, in her career as an accessories designer which included an award-winning namesake handbag collection. The W Los Angeles exhibition draws on Lai's eclectic experience in fashion, installation, and material experimentation to create an atmospheric experience across the building's public spaces. Titled Unlock Your Dreams, the project blends playful nostalgia and inspirational fantasy, while examining and celebrating the power of inclusivity, as Lai speaks to the beauty of following one's own path.

Mary Lai at the W Los Angeles — West Beverly Hills

L.A. WEEKLY: When did you first know you were an artist?

MARY LAI: From a very young age I always loved to draw, make things, and identified as an artist, but it wasn't until my senior year in high school where I created a portfolio that I realized, this is who I am and what I want to pursue for a living.

What is your short answer to people who ask what your work is about?

My work is ever-evolving with vibrant colors and a playfulness on the surface; however my hope is that my work has the substance to leave the viewer with a positive and lasting emotional connection.

Mary Lai

What would you be doing if you weren't an artist?

If I wasn't an artist I would probably have stayed a designer. For a decade prior to transitioning to visual art I was designing fashion accessories, and loved designing products from concept to completion.

Did you go to art school? Why/Why not?

Yes, I went to art school for Graphic Design at Mason Gross School of the Arts (at Rutgers University). I learned more about how to be a conceptual thinker versus learning actual technical skills, but in hindsight those lessons were the groundwork to shape future artists.

Mary Lai in Hollywood

Why do you live and work in L.A., and not elsewhere?

I got relocated to L.A. for a design job in 2015 with my partner. There is a creative energy here and we both found ourselves loving L.A. Once we had our kids we felt like this was home.

When was your first show?

I've shown my art in small shows even when I was in New York as a fashion accessories designer. However, I consider my first show was at The Other Art Fair at the Barker Hanger in Santa Monica in 2019, when I took that leap to be a full time visual artist.

When is/was your current/most recent/next show or project?

I've been selected to be the Artist in Residence 2023 at the W Los Angeles — West Beverly Hills, with an opening on May 11. This will be my biggest project to date, where I take over the lobby with my paintings/mixed media artworks, a large-scale sculpture at the front entrance, and a digital art gallery as well.

What artist living or dead would you most like to show or work with?

Hands down, Yayoi Kusama. Her life and work is such an inspiration to me in the struggles she overcame to prove her artwork would rise above her cultural expectations, gender, race, and the mental challenges even within herself.

Do you listen to music while you work? If so, what?

Absolutely. I'll either be listening to music, podcasts or audio books—it all depends on mood. It can be The Strokes, Karen O, Kendrick Lamar, to Harry Styles. But my usual go-to is my indie playlist.

Website and social media handles, please!

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