

Not Dead Yet: 10 Questions for Painters -- This Week -- Ali Smith

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This week Ali Smith takes on the Q & A while having her second solo at Mark Moore Gallery.



Why do you use these particular materials?

Oil paint is incredibly versatile to me: it can take on so many different qualities; it can be sculptural, sensual, poetic, plastic. It can evoke so many varied reactions in people and it has a certain richness that you can't find in other materials. It parallels what I want to express about my life.

Name an artist you'd like to be compared to.

I'd be honored to have my work compared to Amy Sillman. I think she has influenced so many painters of my generation. She has such a great humility about the way she works: she's not afraid to be awkward in her paintings, and the work is all about exploration of the medium--a true dynamo.

What can't you live without?

My family and friends, painting, the pursuit of good food, chocolate, music, novels, lattes, music, Paris.

What jobs have you done other than being an artist?

I worked at a fancy French bakery in college where we would have to dump out very rich hot chocolate made from Valrhona every night at closing, worked as a children's museum staff, hostess for a month, taught French for three years, gallery director, and I've taught art in college for several years.

What forms first in your mind, a concept or a skill you want to explore?

Often an image or a combination of images might come to me -- so I guess a visual concept, or sometimes an overall image comes out of a sketch or collage or painting on paper. I will often get a visual idea that is very fleeting and often paintings are an attempt to try to get that idea back -- they might turn into something else entirely, which is perfectly fine with me.

Does where you live influence your work?

I guess I often live in my imagination in terms of how I make paintings, but I definitely think where I live plays into the work. Long Beach is a city of contrasts: we have the beach and ocean, yet there is the ugly, looming port with all of its pollution and cranes, which are kind of other worldly and strange. I'm also influenced by the landscape of Southern California: huge, majestic mountains against the flat planes of concrete. There are a lot of contrasts and scale shifts in my work, and it's also fairly complex -- my paintings take a while to reveal themselves, as does Southern California.

Is there any kind of media that affects the way you approach your work (i.e. film, TV, radio, social networking, print)?

I will often find newspaper images of absolute disaster, rubble, fallen apart structures or very gaudy images of decor, kitsch, temples, that are striking to me, and in terms of film, I relate to older films that are almost like moving paintings -- some '60s or '70s sci-fi films with fantastic, vibrant color. I look at sculpture a lot because



movement is really essential to the work, as is music -- I want each painting to have a different, specific feeling or temperament to it.

What's the most important career break, you ever got?

Max Presneill, artist and curator, helped me a great deal by bringing my work to Mark Moore Gallery, and the gallery has done so much for my career, in so many ways.

What are the fundamental beliefs that drive the way you work?

There has to be an essential belief or confidence in intuition and working in the moment, balanced with a more analytical approach, but also a belief that what I'm doing is somehow worthwhile, and that painting is still valid. And the idea that there will always be something new to say with paint.

Abstract painting can be tough, because viewers often feel more at ease being able to see images in a painting, or to connect to something immediately, and I often have to resist the urge to turn a shape into something that is obvious or recognizable -- the imagery needs to shift, yet still be specific enough to carry interest in the viewer. I'm okay with people seeing images in my work, I just don't want it to be tied down to one thing or one feeling, or to limit the reading.

What comes first in your work, pleasure or pain?

They both go hand in hand, but usually I have a lot of anxiety when I start a body of work, with lots of doubt, and then I get into the work and feel really good, and towards the end there is a bit more doubt, but somehow it all resolves itself. I guess the doubt is good -- it means I'm making something new and I don't know how the work might unfold. There is also the pain of finishing the work, of letting it go and exist in the world, and hopefully not come back as storage in my studio! And in the paintings themselves, pleasure and pain coexist on many levels, and that tension is such a fundamental part of my work.