

Thirteen Questions for Ali Smith

By Tracey Harnish Tue, Feb 28, 2012



Ali Smith (born 1976, Newport Beach, CA) received her MFA from California State University, Long Beach (CA), and has since had solo exhibitions in New York, Houston and Los Angeles. She has been included in numerous group shows, including those at the Laguna Art Museum (CA), Irvine Fine Arts Center (CA) in addition to shows in Boston, Tokyo and Basel. Her work is included in the collections of the Laguna Art Museum (CA), Frederick R. Weisman Foundation (CA), Progressive (OH) and the Chaney Family Collection (TX). Smith lives and works in Long Beach, CA.

Did you draw when you were a kid/what age did you start?

When I was still in my mom's belly, she was reading books about how to have a creative child, and as soon as I could grasp objects, she would give me crayons and would bring me to museums a lot. My Dad built me a little drawing table with a roll of paper and an easel, and some of my best early memories are of painting, making little sculptures from play dough, digging waterfalls and pools for barbie landscapes in the front yard, and once my parents let me and a friend tie a string installation all over the living room. I grew up in a big, crazy old craftsman style house that was great for climbing trees, imagining, playing hide and go seek in the dark—from early on, my parents helped me to see the world in a different way. I remember my parents being really excited by a drawing of a witch I did in kindergarten—it just always seemed natural to me.

What has been your biggest sacrifice for art?

Without a doubt, the time spent away from my two and a half year old. It really is true that becoming a parent is a huge identity crisis, but a woman who is a lawyer isn't going to stop being a lawyer, so why should an artist? Many of my mom/artist friends are dealing with how to balance everything, but overall, I'm really lucky. I'd go crazy if I couldn't paint, but every second with my kid is incredible. It's really not that bad of a life, I just am always trying to create some sense of balance and not feel too guilty. Having a kid forces me to not be too solitary as an artist and to think about someone else's needs, which means I never take for granted my studio time.

What artists that aren't dead, influence you?

Mark Bradford, Amy Sillman, George Condo, Lee Bontecou, Steve Roden, Annette Messager, Marlene Dumas, Elliot Hundley, Sarah Sze, Arturo Herrera, Jacob Hashimoto, Pia Fries, Jane South, Liz Craft, Lari Pittman. After a certain point, though, you kind of have to tune out the artists you admire and focus on your own voice.

What artists that aren't dead, really bug you?

I'd never admit to that, but maybe artists who focus a bit too much on promoting their own image rather than their art, though becoming a parent, I've really learned to try not to judge people too harshly.

What do you listen to while you work?

Anything I can dance to or that can carry me away emotionally: DM Stith, Cut Copy, Fleet Foxes, Ladytron, Sparklehorse, the Pixies, When Saints Go Machine, Coco Rosie.

What are you working on now?

Just finished all the work for my solo show at Mark Moore Gallery, up now through April 7th!

What was the last show you saw?

The California Design show at LACMA.



What's the most indispensable item in your studio?

My ipod. Can't paint without it! And my dog, to keep me company.

What is it that is spurring ideas for your work these days?

So many things—sometimes it might be collages or paintings on paper or quick sketches I've done that trigger an idea for a painting. I have lots of images I'm always looking at, though I never paint from them directly, maybe they inspire the spirit of the painting or a small detail: books on décor, old children's encyclopedias, outside art, textiles books; newspaper photos of patterns, decaying structures, wastelands. I often think back to specific places I've visited that were particularly beautiful and strange: the Madonna Inn, Sans Souci Palace in Germany, Joshua Tree, Gaudi's work in Barcelona.

Do you collect anything?

I'm not a huge collector, but I guess you could say vintage clothes and art books. One goal is to finally start collecting work by my friends and other artists I admire.

What are you reading right now?

I like to read a lot: novels, some theory and art bios, detective series such as the Sherlock Holmes Mary Russell series, the Montalbano series by Andrea Camilleri. A good artist friend just recommended a fun young adult series by L.A. Meyer (yes, I'm admitting it), about Jacky Faber, a girl teenage pirate and adventurer. As a sleep-deprived mom, sometimes you need pure escapism, and with naps, I can get some good reading time in.

What do you like to do when you aren't in the studio?

Spend time with my family, garden, read, cook, figure out where to eat—my stomach drives me a lot of the time. I try to sew sometimes but generally get too frustrated. Hoping to travel more soon, and finally go on some real dates with my husband.

What's your favorite post-gallery meet up or restaurant?

Since we have a kid, more like pre-gallery meet up—Pitfire Pizza in Culver City is great for kids and adults, as is A-Frame, and now that Koolhaus has opened on Washington, that's not a bad place to go after openings, if we can swing it. What kid can say no to an ice cream sandwich?

Ali Smith currently has a solo show at Mark Moore Gallery in Culver City, open to April 7.