

the fullest

HOME IS WHERE THE ART IS FOR ARTIST MARA DE LUCA

10.11.2017 / Chelsea McCarthy / Art



I call [Mara De Luca](#) to let her know I have arrived. I used to work here as her studio assistant when I was in undergrad at Otis College of Art and Design. I hear her arrive on the other side of the gate, I see her smile as she slides the gate open with two hands.

Mara is warm and centered, alert and generous.

I follow her back through the dense jungle of thick green leaves and healthy bushes, large ceramic vessels are strewn throughout the property. There is a kiln to the right of the path and a pond of moving, recycled water used to irrigate the garden. Mara's studio is private and in the back corner, behind a tree. The large roll up door is pulled back — her long and narrow studio airy and well lit. I slide around the perimeter of her studio, processing her new paintings. She has cherries and mint tea for us to share. We pluck cherries from their stems while we catch up.

We easily slip from our personal conversation into discussing gentrification, ideas of the home and studio, issues of the art world, our chosen community and a lot more.



What is your relationship to your home?

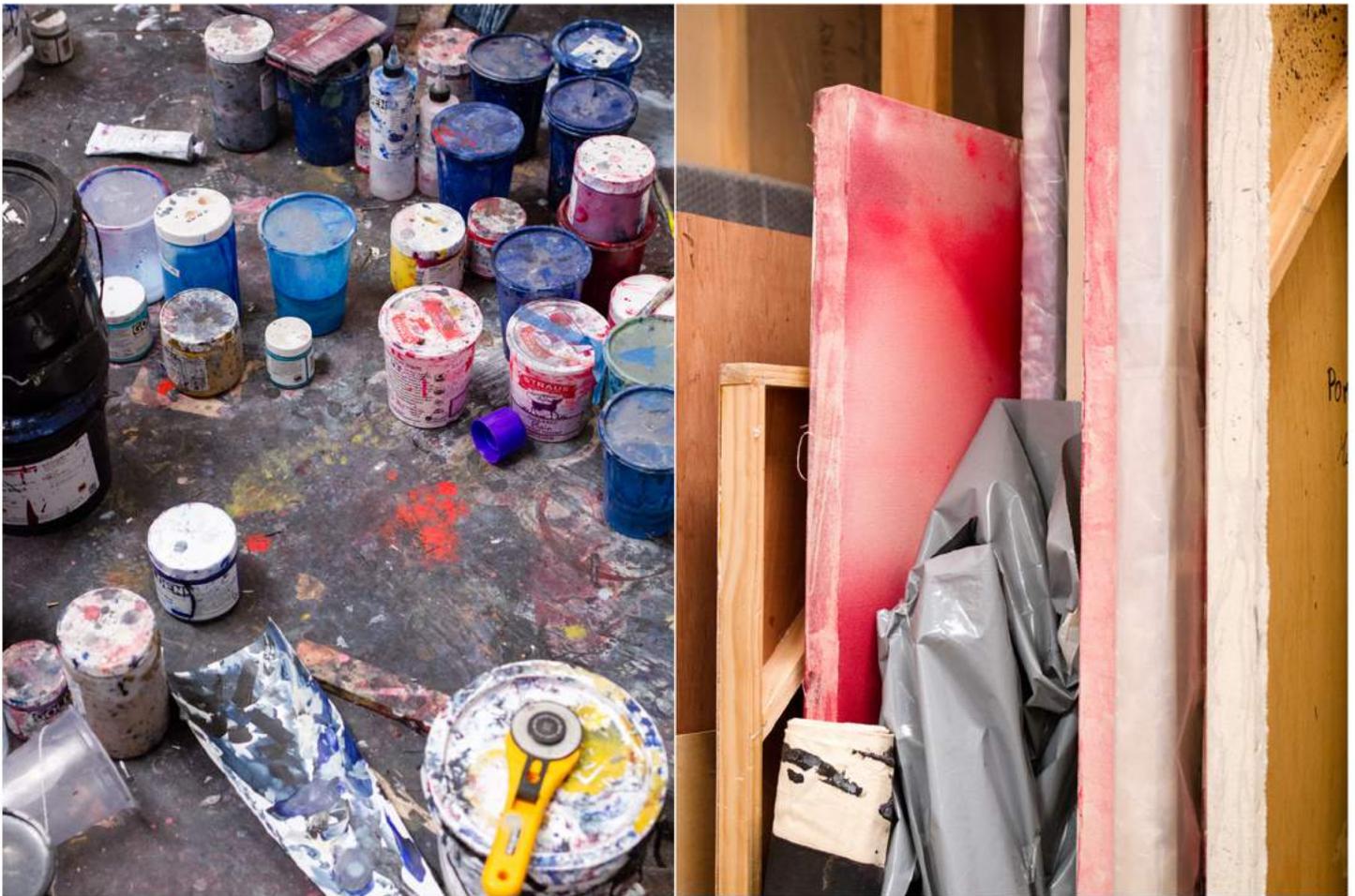
Home is the studio. I have been in this studio for 13 years. My studio is a place to reflect. It is where I put my energy and feelings, the studio is a cocoon for the self. Making paintings is a reassurance in a way; creating a tangible object where existence becomes real and felt and seen. To a large degree, my studio is a neutral space, free of social and psychological constraints. My house is not. When I am at my house, the body comes into the space — there is an unspoken force to look and be a specific way. My studio is free. The world complicates everything.

Los Angeles is a racially and economically charged city, your studio and your home are both in predominantly black/latino neighborhoods. What is your experience living and working in neighborhoods that are changing?

I've always lived and worked in neighborhoods that are changing — some in more extreme ways than others. This neighborhood in particular has transformed quite a bit because of the new metro line that opened a few years ago. I think it's a unique example: in this case, an improved quality of life for the local community, rather than a more typical gentrification where people are pushed out of their neighborhoods. On the other hand, the change is bringing about many new businesses and residents. It's hard to see my neighborhood transforming in this way. Stretches along Jefferson Boulevard that were previously anonymous and quiet are now bustling with galleries and new "artist district" studios. In my work, I am involved with the local family-run businesses. All of my metal work and plating is done right down the street. I hope that over time a more radical gentrification of this area won't push these businesses out.

I find Los Angeles to be cryptic and exciting. A place of collapsed time with a history of forgetting. How do you experience Los Angeles as a place of constant transformation and its ability to stretch?

I lived in Berlin for a couple of years and there is a historic residue there. Italy is always turning into a museum. Even the transformation of European countries is more like conservation. Europe is more difficult because of the load of history. There is a freedom in Los Angeles. The "No-Man's Land" idea of Los Angeles is inspiring — it allows for the manifestation and imposing of ideas; there is psychological and physical room. I feel veils of Los Angeles history through the literature I choose to read.



I know you are a dual citizen, how do you deal with having two homes — the US and Italy?

My identity as a woman is very different in each place. Femininity is so different in Italy; there are certain formalities for women and a body language that I don't know. Men and women interact differently; when I am there I become more aware of being a woman. Usually by the end of my stay I look and feel different. I pick up on selected tendencies. My time in Italy is one of restoration and healing.

Is your work at all about being a woman?

My studio is genderless and free, however my experience outside the studio as a woman has informed the content of my work. My background, interactions and relationships play a big role in the emotional content of my work. In grad school I learned a lot about post-structuralist theory. I was taught to explore theory through language that had so much to do with feminism. It taught me about mark making in a theoretical, feminist way. Theoretical when you acknowledge that gesture, the hand, illusion and painting ideas have political implications. The theoretical constructs are so ingrained that I don't need to directly address them. Authorship does not scare me anymore. I am not afraid of including myself in the work. I went to grad school at CalArts where there was a lot of fear of including yourself into your work — a fear of being judged. I am not afraid though. I am happy to have the freedom to really be myself — there is so much more freedom when fear is not present. I am also not afraid of visual pleasure or beauty. My paintings are gesturally feminist.

I know from working with you that your paintings are indicative of what you see and experience in Los Angeles — fashion billboards, sunsets, the way the Los Angeles sky fades into the horizon at dusk, all gestures upwards, toward the sky. Where do you think this tendency comes from?

Looking up to the sky relates to fantasy, the heavenly, the spiritual, the sublime. We can project so much onto the sky. I love baroque ceilings and paintings of the sky, I can project my own sense of transcendence. The sky is finite and infinite.

Your body of work, "Angel Beach" references Joan Didion who spent extensive time living in Los Angeles. Didion's writing is intense and her subject matter heavy. What was your method for combining Didion's writing and the fashion billboards that inspired your color choices and mark making?



There are moments in your work where the mark making cancels space. Deep black amongst washed out blues and purples. Or diptychs, one monochrome and the other clouded with black and subtle rays of white. I want to jump inside the dark space and be there, except I can't because the pigment has soaked through the canvas, the layers reveal themselves and I am left standing looking at a flat surface.

I am questioning virtual reality and painting. Bertolt Brecht broke the 4th wall in theater, he was always making the audience aware of the structure of the production. If you can see the audience, the audience can see you. The illusion falls apart. The side is where the illusion ends, there was never a two dimensional plane. The rupture happens at the side, when you realize there is an edge and you cannot get too comfortable. The edge is exposure to the working of the painting, technical and/or material. It is fun to include everything so the illusion can be pleasurable, then the criticality comes in and you see the workings of the illusion. The rupture, the drips, the fabric, layering surfaces — there is a mood for both illusion and reality, both are emotional.

Paintings are objects to be lived with — looked at, walked by, brushed up against. Do you consider these notions when making your work? Do you consider your painting to be a relationship, or more like a momentary relief?

Both. The paintings that I live with are deep relationships; I am very committed to them. There are slow experiences and immediate. With time, all of the ruptures and intricacies start to reveal themselves. The longevity is part of the process of looking and living with them. Work always has its own expression and aura.

What is your favorite thing, object or artwork in your home?

A Kathe Kollwitz proof of a drawing that I grew up with. It is of a mother and child; expressionistic and beautiful. A painting by Deanna Thompson of an armchair and sofa in the desert. An all black painting by Peter Halasz that is really quiet and powerful. At different times of day the stars in the painting emerge. You have to live with it to see and understand it.

What was your process thinking and working through your new body of work?

I have read and re-read John Fante's book, "Ask the Dust." I am thinking about the vulnerability of living in Los Angeles. The sense of vacancy and loss while also feeling the throb of life — seething and vast. The loneliness of the sky and longing of the moon. The paintings are heightened, a lot more cuts, more illusion and anti-illusion. The metal elements are eccentric and more playful, they are hidden and not matching up to the form they frame. The paintings are more emotional; I am going after a mood. For example, the split paintings are a reference to the sky splitting open.



Similar to her paintings, the more time spent with Mara the more she begins to open and reveal herself. We talk openly about relationships. We trade secrets on our thoughts about the cosmic world, ways to change our story and the challenges of making new patterns. She gives me a lot of good advice. Advice like spending your energy wisely and not trusting other artists. A lot of the art world is predictable and boring, she says, so she encourages me to pursue interests outside of my studio practice. She knows what she is attracted to and what is not working. She is a force of bravery.

Mara lives and works in Los Angeles and Italy. She is represented by Quint Gallery in San Diego, TOTAH Gallery in New York City and Edward Cella Art and Architecture in Los Angeles.

Chelsea McCarthy is an artist and entrepreneur who lives and works in Los Angeles.