“Art was always my path—from childhood on into college,” says Heather Day. The San Francisco–based muralist began painting when she was very young. “I worked in a breadth of mediums, from recycled cereal boxes to acrylic paint. As I grew older, it was more about making something, and the medium was simply the vehicle to do so.”

Day completed her first mural in 2013, at a giant San Francisco warehouse and loft space where fellow artists live and work.

“I was drawn to the potential and the unknown,” she says. “That was a great moment for me and my work: I was suddenly faced with approaching more than a two-dimensional surface. It was about space, architecture, and challenging boundaries.”

BREAKING RULES

Day views being an artist as an opportunity to step into a space with an energy that didn't exist previously. “I strive to challenge new spaces and break rules,” she says. “If you can't break rules in art, where can you?”

Large-scale murals provide more opportunities to break those rules—her work often wraps from the wall to the ceiling and down to the floor.

“In those situations, I’m dealing with boundaries that were created by someone else—and breaking them instantly,” she says.
The scale of murals appeals to Day. “Scale offers perspective; large works encourage movement,” she explains. “I’m constantly stepping back before making my next mark.”

Day’s style is influenced by a style that emerged in New York City in the early 1940s.

“Abstract expressionism continues to influence my work; I often think that my paintings are a collage of some of my favorite artists—such as Helen Frankenthaler, Joan Mitchell, and De Kooning,” she says. “More recently, I’ve admired Katharina Grosse, Sam Gilliam, and Anish Kapoor.”

RESPECTING COMMUNITY

Day considers the surrounding community and the environment when developing the concept for a new mural.

“For the Flax Art and Design public mural in Oakland, I knew that the neighbors and local commuters would see the mural every day,” she says. “It’s important for me to take care of these walls as they develop and respect the surrounding community.”

The same goes for private commissioned murals—whether in museums, public spaces, or commercial buildings.

“I take into account the people who are coming and going each day and recognize my responsibility as an artist,” Day notes. “Murals are a response to an environment and a balance of respecting the existing structures and decisions the community has already made.”
FINDING BALANCE

Day has always valued the element of chance and process in her work, but more recent, larger projects have forced her to plan more, as she deals with a larger scale and bigger budgets. Adobe Sketch is one aspect of her process.

“In the past, I would physically paint gestural marks onto printed photos of walls and surfaces, but I learned that wasn't the most efficient or conceptual way to understand how the mural would look,” she explains. “Scale is a huge component, and in some cases, painting with small brushes on a printed rendering didn't feel natural or make sense.”

Her conceptualization process begins with an image in Sketch—one a patron sends or one she takes on-site. Then she begins loosely drawing on top of that—imagining the potential of the mural. She creates dozens of iterations of digital renderings before committing to making a physical mark—experimenting with brushes, opacity, and color.

MIXING IT UP

Large-scale murals are only a small part of Day’s creative output.

“Working on different surfaces lends itself to recycling a process and finding a rhythm. In a month, I’ll work on everything from wall murals that wrap onto the ceiling and floor, to smaller works on paper and canvas,” she says. “Switching among scale and surfaces also forces me to experiment with new mediums.”

She has no strong preference among these mediums, as long as she can mix it up.

“I couldn't work on murals for an entire year; it's mentally and physically tolling,” she says. “I also couldn't stay confined to the studio, working on canvas or paper. I enjoy a balance of the two aspects in my practice.”

Challenging projects appeal to Day. “When I’m walking into a meeting or a mural site and I feel like I’m moving into uncharted territory, I know I’m on the right track. I thrive when I’m pushing myself to my limits,” she says.

Even large walls and vast interiors can't hold her imagination. One day, she would love to paint a giant intersection—“everything from the streets to the buildings,” she says. “I'm fascinated with the idea of painting serving as an interruption to our lives—a means of paying more attention and relishing the color and texture we overlook in our everyday lives.”