

“Kathryn MacNaughton: On sex, breaking down beauty and mark-making”
Alexia Bréard Anderson / December 5, 2015



Some time ago, I invaded the studio of Toronto-based painter and multidisciplinary artist Kathryn MacNaughton to chat about her process, practice and most recent body of collage work *I'm Out Of Fucking Time* recently opened at Huntclub. Vintage magazine hoarder and lover of abstraction, Kathryn is in constant exploration of natural composition, pushing the digital and analogue boundaries of mark-making and representation of the female body. We had a stirring conversation about channeling creativity, breaking down beauty and the pressure of "superstardom".

What's your first memory related to art?

I was always the creative kid growing up. One memory that stands out is going to one of those day camps at Harbourfront Centre and creating a sculpture out of different shaped pieces of painted wood. I was about six years old and I remember my dad thinking it was the most beautiful artwork he'd ever seen. Even at that age, I remember looking at the sculpture and being reminded of Henri Matisse and his cut-outs, the colours... I'd hate every class except for art class, where I was the top student. Honestly, I think art was the only thing I was good at as a kid. (laughs)

Channeling that creative freedom comes so much easier as a child. Why do you think this is?

I think it has a lot to do with getting close to that feeling of painting something for the first time. That first brushstroke is so fresh and so intuitive that it feels - and looks - effortless. When you start overthinking what you're doing, everything changes and the work comes out seeming forced.

How do you clear your mind to approach that painting process?

Every time I paint, I'm almost thinking about something completely different in my head. I'm having a conversation with myself, thinking about life, really. Music definitely helps and I also listen to a ton of podcasts. When I listen to podcasts, my mind just goes somewhere else and that's so necessary for me to be able to paint.

Does this music or outer conversation have a big influence on the result?

Totally, but it doesn't always dictate it. There are moments when the music stops and I just continue painting and just completely forget that I'm not listening to anything. I can be sitting there for hours without really realizing it. (laughs) It's so refreshing, because I tend to overthink and overanalyze a lot.

We're bombarded with so much content and layered identities that it sometimes it becomes difficult to just focus on the essential form.

I really enjoy hyperrealism, for example, but I don't feel a connection to it. I'm not sure why, but that moment isn't there... I don't gravitate towards an emotion through it. It's like seeing the most stunning person in the world but they have no personality. You're so in awe by their beauty, but they don't actually have anything to say.

What differences do you note between your paintings and your collage-making?

I feel like when I get those blanks, I hover more towards collage and digital work. It gives me a fresh start if I have a block on painting and don't want to take a 'break' from art-making. I move towards another creative outlet that is a little less draining. It's also good to have a different point of view.

It's like you're taking a break from looking inside and shifting your perception to something elements of you and how they go together.

Totally. Abstract painting is all about intuition and emotion, a more meditative experience; while the collage work is more about my voice as a woman. I'm fascinated by our gender and sexual liberation and what we represent within it. Moving to the computer and creating compositions digitally is also very helpful when going back and forth between the two.

Do you find that breaking something down compositionally helps in seeing its beauty as a whole?

Yes. In this show for example, I'm trying to do stuff that is a little more personal, like a portrait of myself. I took a naked selfie and incorporated it into one of my collages. I'd never looked at my body in that way and it was so weird! ... But as soon as I took it out of context and put it in an abstract environment I began to see something beautiful. It's fascinating how once I saw it from a different perspective all the personal criticism and body shaming washed away. It made me question why we do this to ourselves. Now that the work is done I can see that this series raises a lot of different questions that I don't have answers to about the female form and sexual liberation. I see all the flaws and my vulnerability.

How do you know when a painting is finished?

I have no idea, I just feel like it's done. The other night, I said to myself: "Okay, I'm just going to do one little touch-up to this collage and it will be done." ... and I ended up spending four hours on it. On one scribble! I worked on it for four hours for one little line. That's insane. It's crazy how the tiniest detail can change an entire piece. Colour plays a big part in it as well.

What's the most important lesson you've learnt as a creative?

I think it's really important to make mistakes. I feel like it took me a really long time to figure out what I was trying to do and I'm still figuring it out, really. When I was younger, I wanted that immediacy in style and vision and I don't think we're taught enough that it can sometimes take years. You need to allow yourself to have different outlets and create works with different styles because at some point it will start connecting and become one. You will walk right into a wall if you expect that from the beginning.

There's definitely a lot of pressure on our generation to have a distinctive, cohesive, 'curated' style from the bat but things like that shouldn't be forced.

It frustrates me that we are in our twenties and need to be superstars. I'd much rather be 70 years old, at my peak and making the most beautiful work and coming into myself at that age than burning out in my twenties. Having ambition is perfect, but you have to be okay with the fact that it might take you a long time to get there. You're still doing what you love to do and that in itself is amazing. You don't need to be a superstar right away.

Social media also fabricates that image for a lot of people because the only thing that is publicly shown is their 'success'.

This has always bothered me so much... so many people have told me that I need to be more present with my artwork and I don't understand why. Why do I need to be this brand? Why can't the work speak for itself? Why do I need to be this cool hipster girl that poses in front of my work? I find it sad to see images like that and later on meet the person in real life and be disappointed. It's sad to see that complete misrepresentation of self.

Being worried about how we look to others, we tend to fabricate our ideal selves rather than actually creating them.

There's a lot of fake it until you make it... which I do believe in though. In moderation.