

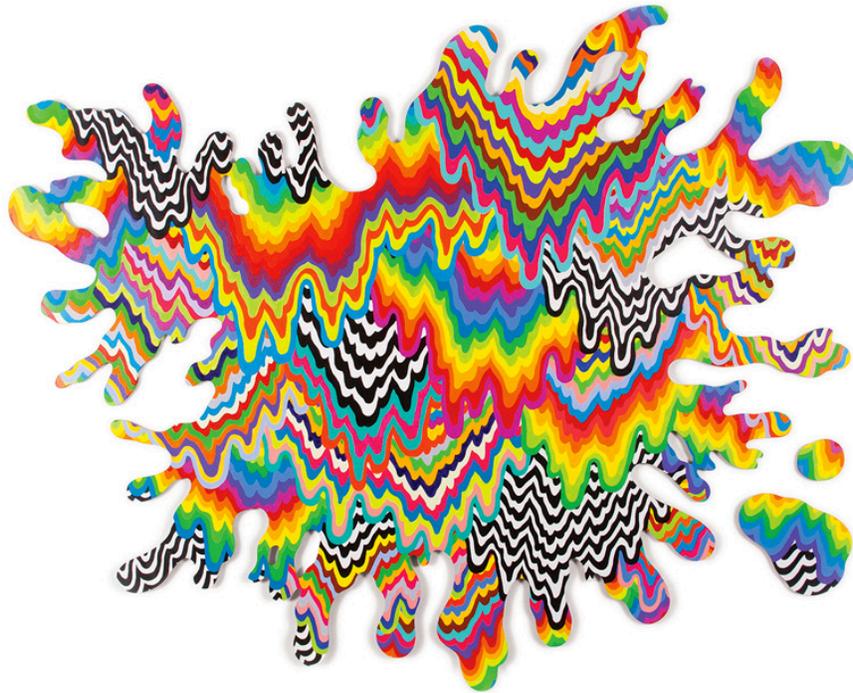
“Good Vibrations: LA artist Jen Stark’s dizzying creations show up in galleries, on TV, and everywhere in between”
Neil Janowitz / August 17, 2018



Of the many fan letters Jen Stark has received, she’s particularly fond of an email from a mathematician. The note explained how he had come across a diagram in his research that reminded him of Stark’s 2007 sculpture, *Burst*. He included a PDF of the figure, an isometric circle with an array of warped triangles sharply rising. Add bright pops of color, and it wouldn’t feel out of place in her East LA studio.

Stark doesn’t fully understand the mathematical theory underpinning the model (it relates to an abstract algebra concept known as outer automorphisms), but she finds the note validating nonetheless. The Miami-born artist has been interested in patterns and organic shapes all her life, but the complexity of her work really took off when she began crafting colorful sculptures out of construction paper in the mid-2000s. “I think a lot about fractals – one small shape that is identical to the next and keeps on going infinitely,” she explains. “Or how plants or succulents grow, spiraling out from the inside.”

It’s fitting, then, that the growth of her own ambitions and work has been exponential in nature. Early in her career, she adopted a rainbow motif that became her signature pattern; from there, her work has proliferated with vigor to include prints, T-shirts, and elaborate 3D wall sculptures, and then broadening further in such forms as wooden pedestals and large public installations. More recently, her Technicolor fingerprints have been all over sprawling murals, products such as cell phone cases, even animation for an MTV awards show. Stark’s work continues to evolve yet remains part of a whole; it becomes something larger and newer, but unmistakably connected to its origins.



Splatter, 2014, MDF, paint, 5 x 4 ft.

“I love working very tiny, taking a shape and making it bigger and bigger,” says the 35-year-old artist.

tark’s relationship with color and construction paper took root in 2004 in France. As a Maryland Institute College of Art junior studying abroad, she sought to scratch her creative itch on a student budget. The sturdy, multicolor paper was one of the cheapest materials available, so she took it back to her studio in Aix-en Provence and set about crafting. “I was experimenting with labor-intensive work – simple geometric shapes; I would cut a cone out with a hole in it and make ones that were smaller and smaller, like Russian nesting dolls – and dissection, having cuts in each layer,” she recalls. “Eventually I started having more and more layers and making it more sculptural.”

Back in the States, she kept it up. After graduating in 2005, she got a job at a design company that created art walls for retailers. The position provided not just income, but also guaranteed quiet time: She spent 18 months traveling to various cities for two weeks at a time, decorating stores by day and refining her own work in hotel rooms at night. By 2007, Stark got her own studio and left the full-time job; she also stepped up to archival acid-free papers, cardstock, and foam core. Her pieces from that period previewed the meticulous, multi-layered structures that would follow, while clearly sharing the DNA of her initial efforts in France: slices of paper spilling from the wall in the 2007 pieces *Square*, *Circle*, and *Triangle* or whirling off the wall in the 2008 pinwheel *Speed of Light*.



Circle, 2007, acid-free paper, glue, 12 x 12 x 3 in.

The online art world embraced the precision and kaleidoscopic joys of Stark’s sculptural work, earning her an audience that continues today as a six-figure Instagram following. That reach grew in 2008 as she began developing her now-ubiquitous “drippy pattern”: thick rainbow waves melting downward, sliding over each other, often interspersed with bands of black and white. The design is bright, fun, and endlessly adaptable, and Stark has applied it to everything from amoeba-like wooden cutouts such as 2014’s *Splatter* to leggings, billboards, and the underside of a Chicago shopping mall escalator. In 2014, the Miami International Airport commissioned Stark to paint the pattern on a concourse ceiling (dripping onto the walls, of course). In 2015, Facebook invited her to paint a similar mural in one of their offices, and later that year MTV and Miley Cyrus asked her to adapt it for motion graphics for the visual theme of the 2015 MTV Video Music Awards, which Cyrus was hosting. (Stark also did the set design, a large wormhole Cyrus slid down for her grand entrance.) The year after that, Google came calling for its My Live Case series of Pixel phone covers.

What she’s achieved along the way is an enviable balance – between commercial and creative, between that melting design and other multihued patterns, between handcrafting and mass-production – that she works hard to maintain. Stark is constantly thinking about the types of work she wants to do. Public art installations are of particular interest at the moment; her *Tunnel Vision*, a 20-foot-long rainbow of steel rings, was on display in Santa Monica earlier this year.

She is especially mindful about how much commercial work to accept and for which companies. It’s more than just a desire to avoid overextending: She wants what she does to *fit*.

Joshua Liner Gallery



Meltdown, 2014

That sense of purpose is a virtue that Eric Wareheim, the multihyphenate performing artist and member of comedy duo Tim & Eric, is quick to point out. He's been a fan – and friend – of hers for years, inviting her to design a label for his wine brand, Las Jaras. “The first thing you see in my home is a huge Jen Stark vortex that goes into the wall about 3 feet,” he says. “And whether you like abstract art or traditional art, you go right up to it and look at it and think about it. What makes her stand out more than other artists is how she can dabble in different places, do some products, but then come back to these really fine art pieces. It doesn't seem like she's ever compromising her integrity.”

Stark seems constitutionally incapable of such a compromise. She mentions commercial work with a shrug – she seems enthusiastic about the projects, such as an upcoming brand collaboration, but would just as soon discuss upcoming shows at two LA galleries or a public piece she has in the works.

Or how she wants to continue broadening her skills and craft, and keep her trajectory spiraling upward. “I want to do more stuff in the computer world,” she says. “Three-D, virtual reality, augmented reality. I'm not very versed in it, but I know people doing those collabos. I would love to dive into that.”

Math geeks would surely approve.