

Aliza Morell | Q&A

Your work often feels both intimate and expansive. How do you think about scale—not only physical scale, but the emotional or psychological scale of an artwork?

I like that reading. Interiority and escape go hand in hand.

The color fields my streamers live in can read as atmospheres or surfaces, which are opposites. I'm not trying to illustrate depth—these are very dense, opaque colors—but I love how a seamless surface can flip flop optically. They could be suggestive of a geometric plain, a flat surface extending infinitely. I grew up in the midwest where vast, flat landscapes and long sightlines create a sense of openness. I think I'm always trying to recreate that feeling on some level.

The sense of time in painting also fascinates me. Because paintings are still and front-facing, the fourth dimension is in processing. It's a very intimate type of reading because there is no built-in duration (music, film, performance), linear structure (text), or physical mass to move around (sculpture, architecture, etc). So much is up to the viewer.

Can you take us into your studio and describe what a typical day of working looks like for you? Has your studio practice changed over time?

Every new series requires a different approach but I love “building” paintings and inventing systems.

My current work happens in discrete stages. I usually know which phase I'll be working with in a given day. The exact process is always evolving, but essentially, I build installations with ribbon, make drawings of the installations, and refine the compositions two-dimensionally before transferring them to canvas. I spend full days in the studio experimenting with and mixing colors, filling sketchbooks and unstretched sheets of canvas with my tests. Sometimes I mask out the shape of the streamers using hand-cut “stickers,” and sometimes I work directly on top of the colored grounds. Either way, the final stage is painting the streamers.

Within each step there are dramatic changes, but the process is like a path forward. Some of the paintings in this show had to be totally scrapped and restarted, but I had my drawings or colors to reuse or build upon in the next try.

How much of your work is planned before you begin, and how much emerges through the process of making?

Sometimes I just have a feeling and have to fumble through the darkness to get my hands around it, and sometimes I can really see an image in my mind. Many paintings begin in relation

to existing ones. It helps to trust my process when I can't see the way. For *Yellow Sky*, I had a vision of a cool yellow expanse backlighting a silvery X, which was a more fully-formed image, but difficult to make into a successful painting. I held very tightly to what I first envisioned, working out the composition and colors through trial and error.

The deep plum background of *Stop Motion* was a response to *Yellow Sky*. Each color tuned and deepened the other. I committed to the background, and the rest of the painting flowed intuitively.

I can be very determined, but ultimately, you have to listen to your paintings. I often find myself taking an 11th hour risk when something isn't working.

Materiality seems to play an important role in your work. What draws you to particular materials, and how do they influence what a work ultimately becomes?

In the very beginning I was attracted to painting and drawing because it seemed like the most essential art-making process. Something I could do with almost nothing...a pen, a burnt stick, old cardboard.

Now I love the alchemy and possibilities! Once I'm inside of a series, I'm usually after very specific qualities and have to figure out what materials will do what I need and how to use them. In that way, things change a lot between bodies of work, and unfortunately, I never get too comfortable. For this show, I found myself relying on fluid acrylics, which were brand new to me.

What are you looking for when you look at art? Has the way you look at other artists' work changed as your own practice has developed?

It's a gift to see the world through other people's eyes. My taste is very broad but I like to see skin in the game. If work looks too easy or repetitive, I have trouble trusting it. I also read a lot of press releases and think, that's a really great idea, but why is it a painting or a sculpture, or whatever. I get excited by work that stands on its own, even when I don't understand it.

What has surprised you most about the way people have responded to your work? Have viewers ever found something in it that you hadn't considered yourself?

Last year a classical chamber ensemble licensed some of my work for their album covers. Recently, an electronic musician reached out about using a painting for theirs. It's so exciting to me that people would seek out the work for such divergent sounds, especially, because I'm listening to totally different stuff.

What is something people often misunderstand about your work when they first encounter it?

Descriptions I push back on are “tight” or “controlled”. To me, this is a far out, subversive, emotional world, and I owe people my conviction and specificity. Because I work in stages, there's a lot of room for experimentation. It doesn't leave a trace, but it gets me to new places. I worked with gesture for many years, which I adore in other people's work, but it became performative for me to get “right.” Nowadays, by refining things more slowly in layers, I can actually handle the paint more loosely.

Do you think an artist can ever truly know what a work is about, or does its meaning ultimately belong to the viewer?

The best paintings are mirrors.

What is the hardest part of being an artist that people outside the art world rarely see?

I feel such a responsibility to make work. There are people in my life that see me suffering emotionally, financially, and physically lol, and don't understand why I've structured my life around this. I used to want more validation for the struggle, but these days, I wish they could understand the highs. My artist friends are magical people and the thrill of invention has no ceiling.

If you could spend an afternoon in the studio of any artist—living or dead—whose studio would you want to visit, and what would you want to ask them?

Current artist: Robin F. Williams. I've been loving her process videos on Instagram! It seems like she's having so much fun.

Historic artist: Sargent, to watch him paint fabric. His touch is mesmerizing.