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WOMEN ARTISTS

INTERVIEWS
VOLUME 2

CARIS REID & AMANDA VALDEZ

AMANDA VALDEZ and CARIS REID are both artists and writers based in New York who met while working as contributing editors for *Duster Journal*. The interview took place over a series of conversations this past May, while Caris was in Brooklyn, NY preparing for a solo show at Outpost Gallery and Amanda was in a residency in Omaha, the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts.

Conversation with Caris Reid & Amanda Valdez.



AMANDA VALDEZ – How's your day?

CARIS REID – Spent my time in total escapist mode in the studio—ended up being a really productive day. How's your day going?

VALDEZ – I'm in the obsession tunnel indulging in the end of Murakami's *1Q84*, which is 1200 pages.

REID – That sounds amazing! I love binge reading a good book.

VALDEZ – Especially an epic novel and then to be so close to the end—I will miss these characters at night though.

REID – Totally. Losing yourself to literature, or film, feels like it has a lot in common with the practice of painting...

VALDEZ – I completely agree. Ever since I was young I've had the capacity to read for extended periods, which as a painter, that ability is an asset for the kind of isolated practice that I have and I would say you have as well. Being born in Omaha has been a massive indulgence in that part of my personality. I was contemplating the role of writing and reading in preparation for our conversation. Who are some of your favorite writers, both in art and in literature? What are you reading now?

REID – I was an avid reader as a kid too. Obsessively so. My parents had to make a "no reading at the table" rule. Last night I read a Lucy R. Lippard essay on Jo Baer's work and am trying to track down some of Jo Baer's essays from the 60s and 70s—she was surrounded by so many male artists at the time who really diminished the value of painting. I fully respect the way she held her ground. One of my favorite books is *The Alphabet in the Garden* by Leonard

Shlain—he explores the invention of writing and how it coincided with a shift in culture to a more patriarchal society. The book really influenced my thinking over the last couple of years. I also love anything by Joan Didion and I love psychology books. I wonder if our shared love of reading growing up speaks more to our painting practices or to our writing practice? Because I know a lot of painters who have an absolute aversion to writing, and yes, we're both painters who write.

VALDEZ – Coming into writing was a surprise to myself. Growing up I knew that I would be an artist. I didn't want anything else.

REID – Do you think writing was burnt out of your art practice?

VALDEZ – I didn't start writing until the end of my time in Chicago as an undergrad at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Throughout my education I had strong female abstract painting professors and I paid attention to what they did. I studied a lot with Michelle Grauer in Chicago, and then in New York with Valerie Jaudon. Both of them have a deep intelligence and understanding of art and critical theory. For me, while it can be addressed in the work I make, it can also find another form: writing. I approach my writing as a means to engage with ideas, sometimes ideas that have nothing to do with my own practice, but they are ideas I want to engage with. How did you begin writing about art?

REID – You're lucky to have had so many powerful female role models in your life. I was initially involved with the literary magazine in high school, but once I got to art school the focus was on making art, and writing fell by the wayside. After college, while doing a residency in Berlin, I came

in contact with (then) *Dossier* editor, Julie Crellin, and I began writing about the art scene in Berlin for *Dossier*. I've always been enthusiastic about what other artists and creative people around me are doing, so championing their work through writing is an extension of what I naturally do.

VALDEZ – I have the same basic motivation in how I come to my subjects. However, I realized quickly that through writing and the interview format I gained access to artists that wouldn't have a reason otherwise to have a conversation with me. I've been able to talk to people I hold in high regard, like Kiki Smith, Sheila Hicks, Shirin Neshat, and Jonathan Lasker. It's been amazing and sometimes there's total grace to it and other times I get my ass handed to me. Writing is one of the hardest things for me to do, but it yields massive gains personally.

REID – Absolutely. I've mostly chosen to write about artists who I know, but writing has also allowed me to interview artists like David Salle and Tauba Auerbach, who I may not have crossed paths with otherwise. My main motivation has been to champion the works of artists who weren't getting enough attention. That, and I sense that as image makers, we bring a unique perspective to talking about the artwork. It's seeing it from the inside. There's an immersive understanding present.

VALDEZ – Have you ever found it a challenge to wear both hats, of writer and artist, from a time management stance?

REID – Definitely. I was doing a lot more writing two years ago, and started getting bombarded by PR people and artists asking me to write about shows. Additionally, I was in the process of curating a show, and working a day job, and suddenly there was so little time to paint. It helped me realize

I was focusing too much energy on other people's work, and caused me to move away from writing and use that extra time and energy in the studio.

VALDEZ – All that energy and time has manifested so beautifully in your work. In looking at your paintings chronologically from the present on back, I'm so intrigued by the developing relationship between the person, the plant, and the pattern in your work.

REID – Thank you, Amanda! I've jokingly said the shift from people to plants is because I'm turning into a misanthrope!

VALDEZ – For a minute I thought you were going to say because you've tapped your rear and dearest to sit for you already, so you moved onto plants. Do you work from life? Or memory? A photograph? A combination?

REID – Ha! Well, that too. The shift to plants was partially practical. It became increasingly difficult to pin people down for the amount of time I needed them, and to be in the studio when I wanted them so. Photographs inform my process, and so does pure invention. I'm always stealing visuals from wherever I can find them, be it a photo, memory, or something I see on the street.

VALDEZ – I get psychological pulses from the work thinking about life cycles and the plants push me there. It's such an emotional process for me to have a vase of flowers. There's joy, excitement, care, and then anticipation, acceptance, and demise. In your portraits you capture predominantly young people in relationship to facets of plant life. These cues allow for a continued development of their character and their inherent humanness to unravel. I really respond though to the measured sensitivity you have in setting up those relationships. You have made plants firm, you've given

them a tone and pitch, and have elevated them to equal characters.

Reid – Well put. There's a Wallace Stevens quote, "Death is the mother of beauty. Only the perishable can be beautiful, which is why we are unmoved by artificial flowers." I'm deeply attached to plants, I own MANY, and I like to think of them as being as alive and observant as a human. The personification happening in my plants varies from painting to painting, but there's been a developing play within my work of the plant and human interaction.

Valdez – It comes through in your work that you view the plants as their own entities. One question I asked myself was whether they were used in a symbolic manner and I don't think so. They have a presence beyond a mere codified meaning.

Reid – Honestly, they're both. I've used them to hint at the character of a subject, and I've seen the plants as having their own character. There is a lot of symbolism in my work, but I want it to function without the translation of the symbol. It's not for your rational brain to understand, but what about your mind? I was looking at images of your paintings and keep noticing a centralized form that fluctuates between a bulbous area and a very crisp point. At moments it feels like a mutation of a heart, or a pulled tooth. And then reading over your writing about the work, there's a lot of language involving the body. What influences the shapes created in your paintings?

Valdez – When I draw I am dislodging shapes from inside myself. There are times I have a clear reference for where something is coming from, then other times it's deeply mysterious to me. The experiences of my body: floating on a lake, ecstatically dancing, waking up smushed under another body, moving my body down a

boulder in a remote canyon; these bring me to my senses and are so exacting in feeling like the ultimate physical experience.

Reid – Absolutely, the visual of floating on a lake while thinking about your work, really resonates for me. That exacting line where the water intersects the body. And your edges, even the drips, have that same precision. Maybe both our work has that in common. A love of edge, boundary. Your work has such a pulse, the bodily imagery you use to describe it fits beautifully.

Valdez – The thing I have come to know about my shapes and my process, is that I am responsible for ingesting and then I give myself over to drawing to find what has happened in that raw material when it comes back out.

Reid – How are your paintings developing at the residency?

Valdez – I've hit several new veins in my work and I'm thrilled to be working this hard. It's exactly what I was hoping would happen with this time. I was lucky to visit the National Quilt Research Center and Museum in Lincoln, NE right when I got here. I've been taking pre-modern quilt designs and constructing them then using the pieces that I make as fabric for the shapes within the paintings. So one shape will be a intricate pattern, then a painted shape on top. Or I will paint a quilt pattern within my weird shapes and combine the pattern in embroidery. It's creating a new level of material disorientation.

Reid – Excited to see the new paintings! Have you worked with pattern before? I generally think of color blocks within your visual vocabulary, and maybe shapes repeating, but not necessarily patterns....

Valdez – I've used pattern vaguely in the very beginning of this long body of work. When I first started five years ago sewing fabric and canvas together my skills were rudimentary, so I could only sew in a straight line. As my sewing skills improved and I experimented, I brought back my personal abstraction and shapes to the pattern subdued them.

Reid – Are you looking at other patterns outside of the American quilting tradition? Have other textile histories impacted your work?

Valdez – My recent trip to Istanbul to research and experience Islamic patterning has had an influence. Yet, I'm not a didactic artist so those particular motifs are not being introduced in my work. I think if I look back in few years, I will have the hindsight to identify how the Islamic pattern traditions affected my work. I think the direct impact now is subtle. I am struck though by the correlation between Islamic patterning and traditional quilt patterns. They both arrive at meaning visual arrangements by using simple shapes in innovative complex arrangements.

Reid – Istanbul is such a visually striking place. I was there a few years ago, and remember most the powerful presence of the cats all over the city, and the rags. I saw a photograph, while there, of a male politician standing on an incredibly ornate rug, and my first thought was "Where are the women?" Which was quickly followed by a realization that the rug they stood on was made by women, and that the stories and spirit of the women were there in that room on that rug. The symbolism and story telling that is within some of the rugs is amazing. I like to think of them as having a talismanic power, even when the meanings woven into the rugs are unknown to those seeing them.

Valdez – I too in just traveling around, wondered, "Where are the women?" You being up something that is so important to the reverence, research, and social love I have for fabric and textiles. History is embedded in fabric and it's predominantly a woman's history. A woman's vocabulary of shapes and abstraction. Of graphic invention. Storytelling invention. In American quilting, the power that came in sewing was palpable. When I learned that quilts were used as an important means of communication for the Underground Railroad, I was overwhelmed with appreciation for every stitch ever thrown and inspired by the courage and ingenuity of the women constructing these works.

Reid – What a powerful tradition to continue. Codes, symbols, Messages hidden in clear sight. There's something about the needle too...that it pierces, and that it combines.

Valdez – I think of my sewing machine as a power tool. My shapes are their own messages hidden within a minimal clean appearance.

Reid – Love that. Amanda, it's been a pleasure.

Valdez – Truly.

AMANDA VALDEZ, *wild in my hands* (2014)

AMANDA VALDEZ is a contemporary artist from San Francisco, California. She is known for her vibrant, abstract works that often feature bold colors and geometric patterns. Her art is deeply influenced by her Mexican heritage and the natural world. She has exhibited her work in various galleries and museums, and her pieces have been featured in several art books and magazines.

CARIS REID, *Monsters* (2013)

CARIS REID is a contemporary artist from San Francisco, California. She is known for her intricate, abstract works that often feature complex, organic patterns and a rich color palette. Her art is deeply influenced by her love of nature and the human condition. She has exhibited her work in various galleries and museums, and her pieces have been featured in several art books and magazines.



AMANDA VALDEZ, *wild in my hands* (2014)
Facing Page: CARIS REID, *Monsters* (2013)