

## IN THE STUDIO WITH MAKIKO HARRIS

DECEMBER 28, 2022



In the studio with Makiko Harris, a mixed-media artist whose practice explores an abstracted concept of the self. We met with Makiko to tell us more about growing up between the Netherlands, Tokyo, and California, their greatest influences, and unexpected sources of inspiration.

**When did you first begin to see yourself as an artist?**

I was always a creative kid, and continued to engage with art throughout my life. However, it wasn't until after I tried a few other possible careers first that I realized I was meant to be an artist. I worked in fashion merchandising and then in user experience design before transitioning to primarily working as an artist. I am grateful for the business and project management skills that working fashion and tech have taught me, they are very useful for life as an artist.

**Where are you from and what was your upbringing like?**

I was born in the Netherlands, have lived in Tokyo, and was raised primarily in northern California. I am half Japanese and half American. The Japanese side of the family mostly lives in a small town in Hokkaido, the northernmost island of Japan, and the American side is mostly in California. A stable sense of home or belonging has always felt a bit slippery for me, a bit out of reach. For much of my life I've felt a bit like an outsider, and this has significantly impacted my work and my perspective. I think in many ways, I seek a sense of belonging within myself, which makes the way my body relates to the making process and to the material so important to me. Recently, I've been exploring how my identity is created by my context and in the eyes of others. Some provocations include: Does having a defined identity or sense of

belonging freeing or limiting? Does such a thing as a distinct identity exist, when all bodies, at the end of the day, are abstractions of our own perception?

**Paint us a picture of your artistic journey. What inspired you to first pursue, and then continue to practice artistic work?**

I have been painting and working with material for as long as I can remember. There are photos of me at age 4 painting on the walls in the art room at the Children's Museum in Boston, MA where my family lived at the time. For me, painting and especially painting abstraction has always been about being connected to my body, my intuition, my voice – finding a sense of home within myself. I was creatively inclined throughout childhood and early adulthood, and was lucky to go to schools where involvement in the arts was not only encouraged but expected. It wasn't until college when I realized that a love for the arts isn't a default experience. I felt different from my classmates in how much I cared about my art classes, which gave me the first inklings that being an artist might be a path for me, although it took many years after graduation to make the transition. After college while I worked professionally, I took evening classes at the California College of the Arts. This is where I really started deeply engaging with material, paint, looking, my inner dialogue, trusting the process, showing up for classmates during a crit. It was also during these evening classes that I started to recognize that the feeling I felt during my studio work was something a world apart from everything else in my life, and something worth pursuing over and above everything else. I am also eternally grateful to my longtime teacher in abstraction at the California College of the Arts, Patrick Dintino, who believed in me and gave me the courage to see my work in a new light.



**What's the message of your work? Where do they come from?**

In this body of work with AucArt, I explore an abstracted concept of the self. Based on my own multiracial background and through a use of color that references my own body's pigmentation, I push back on overt identity categorization and instead embrace what I believe is a more generative space of multiplicity and ambiguity. My paintings are intentionally and necessarily abstract, even if through color and form they reference my body and cultural identity. My aesthetic is bold, femme, instinctual.



**Who & what are your greatest influences?**

I admire the women of the abstract expressionist movement like Helen Frankenthaler and Joan Mitchell. Their work was so bold and unapologetic in a field dominated by men. Painting abstraction was, and in some ways continues to be, a very American, very male pursuit. I think it's great to see women claiming their own territory within the genre. Some other artists I admire and take inspiration from are Louise Bourgeois, Carolee Schneeman, Julie Mehretu, and so many others. I also am influenced by philosophy, design, and fashion!

**An unexpected source of inspiration?**

When I'm feeling in a rut I like to go thrift or vintage shopping. It's less about the buying and more about paying attention to the multitude of materials, colors, textures, and smells. It helps recenter my focus to the now and to my senses. This helps me be present for any new ideas that might arise.

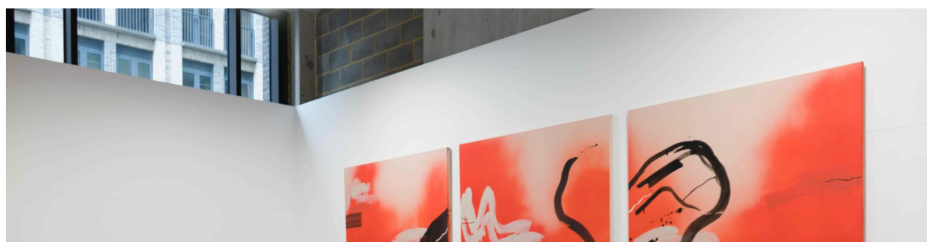


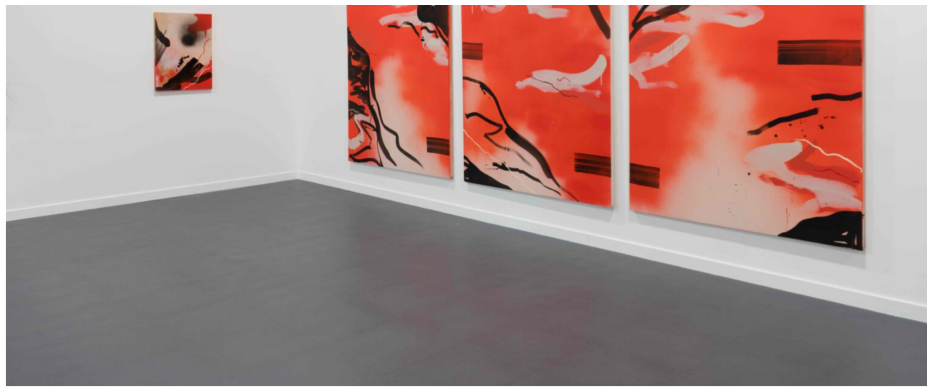
**What do you want people to take from your work when they view it?**

No, I do not have my audience consciously in mind when I am creating. I think our job as artists is to show up at the easel/studio/wherever you work, honor and enjoy the process, and be as honest as possible with ourselves and our work. While it's important to be thoughtful of how we might present or share work with an audience, once the work is finished and out in the world I don't think we can really control how it's received. I think at that point, we have to let go. At the same time, of course at some point I hope my work means something to someone beyond myself. I hope the work feels empowering.

**What events in your life have mobilized change in your practice?**

I moved to London last year after living in San Francisco, CA for the previous 10 years. In London I have been earning my MA in Contemporary Art Practice at the Royal College of Art. In this past year my work has grown and changed by leaps and bounds. While my practice is still grounded in painting, I am currently also exploring installation, sculpture, and sound. Themes of the body, feminism, identity, and power are still consistent, but I am experimenting with new media. I am always experimenting!





**What are your ideal conditions or catalyst for creating a “good” piece of work?**

Good work rarely comes out of nowhere for me. I need to feel emotionally and physically safe. I need space. I need my tools and supplies all close at hand. I need solitude and quiet (or at least my headphones). This is why residencies have been some of my most productive times – time away from day to day life to focus on work in a beautiful space is such a dream. However, even if I don't have the luxury of stretches of time like I might during a residency, I still need safety, space, and solitude for good work.

**Tell us the inspiration behind your works?**

My works are from the 2022 series '*Be a Body with Me.*' This series explores the intimacy between the body and the material through a use of color that reflects my body's pigmentation, and an intuitive and curvaceous use of line, shape, and negative space.

**Something in the future you hope to explore?**

I hope to develop more ways to combine my background in music with my path in the visual arts. I am a classically trained violinist and released an electro pop album with a San Francisco based band in 2018. More recently I have been collaborating with other artists and musicians in London on creating visual album projects and improvising over live DJ sets. I hope to create sonic elements to my own paintings and installations in the future...we will see, I am excited to explore!





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