

JUXTAPOZ

Art & Culture



Hayley Barker

Riot Grrrls and Rabbit Holes

Interview by Gwynned Vitello // Portrait by Max Knight

Hayley Barker invites you to skip stones along a rippling riverbed, but to grow old with you, as well. Her still lives are not still. The flowers were just picked and the vase has history. Her landscapes unequivocally stick their landing. In a profusion of frothy and sometimes fiery color, follow her down the proverbial garden path, smell the proverbial roses and then see what's around the bend. Invigorated by her residency at Laguna Castle and anticipating a show at LA's Night Gallery, Hayley was as fulsome with words as she is with a paintbrush.



Flowers from Blair, Oil on linen, 80 x 65 in

Gwynned Vitello: Your life and work channel Alice in Wonderland, full of singing flowers and inevitable rabbit holes. You often portray what is about to be revealed.

Hayley Barker: In so many ways my life has been a series of dreams and road bumps—or rabbit holes. But that's not too unusual! By age 49 or so it becomes possible to better see how everything eventually connects despite rabbit holes and false starts. I'm grateful to be here, alive on this planet.

How does a girl from Oregon plunge into performance art, and how is that expression interpreted as opposed to traditional visual art?

I grew up in a very loving, creative, and literate family in Salem, a middle-sized, very green town. As an undergrad at the University of Oregon, I thought I'd study literature and painting, but just after turning 18, was sexually assaulted by a convicted felon who was living on campus. This overwhelming experience led me to drop out of school for a bit, though I returned to take a few painting classes, hoping to pursue it further; however, the experience of rape left me wanting to express something beyond painting.

Add severe PTSD, and I felt a political and personal urgency, the need to explore other mediums. When I saw Karen Finley perform, the raw power blew my mind. I was this white girl growing up in the Pacific Northwest in the '90s going to a ton of Riot Grrrl shows! It was also the time of Kathy Acker, PJ Harvey, and Diamanda Galas, so I was inspired by these wildly mediumistic performers. I felt seen and tried to be like them in my own way, freed by that punk ethos, the immediacy of charging out boldly. I sang, moved, spoke, and invoked spirits, not shy or victimized within that context, but used it to exorcise my demons. Performance met my needs—until it didn't anymore.

Being raised Catholic, so emblemized by performance, from vestment-clad priests raising gold chalices to choreographed kneeling, head-bowing congregants, were you influenced by such symbolic physical engagement? Absolutely. As a young woman, all my art was dramatic, symbolic, and ritualistic. I was trying to transform pain from within into something beautiful, a place between horror and beauty, spirit in the midst of the complexities—trying to locate grace.

That physical engagement is still at play today. I'm a feminist earth-based witch, and every single thing means something, comes from somewhere. Everything is alive. Ritual and intention infuse so much of my everyday life from painting to gardening. I no longer need an audience as witness.



Side Yard with Kali, Oil on linen, 100 x 82 in

What other elements of home and college contributed to your self-expression?

My family is very creative. We never had much money, but for play, I always had some kind of art materials. Mom is an avid reader, walker, and gardener. My dad, a writer, and occasional painter shared his watercolors or collage materials, so my imagination was being fed all the time. I loved playing in the dirt, in the rivers. We always went to museums. As a kid, we lived in Long Beach for a bit, and I recall my first visit to LACMA and being blown away by the paintings.

I loved putting on plays, singing, making stage sets, and costumes; also making illustrated books and accompanying audio tapes. Making seemed like the noblest thing a person could do, yet also the most normal. I realize now the luck in having a loving home full of music, poetry, and art.

But you also survived ovarian cancer at quite a young age. Knowing the survival rate, how did you navigate those dark waters? How has that affected your perception of life and art-making?

I was lucky to find the cancer early, and a full hysterectomy saved my life. It took months to heal, and years to emotionally and physically process; and while it was really hard to go through menopause in my early 30s, I feel deep gratitude that I had health care and survived. The privileges of being a white woman in the medical environment, not to mention having access to health care via my partner, all of this played a huge role. That said, losing my uterus and ovaries was terrifying. I survived it only with the love and support of my partner, Tim, who is everything to me. Thank goodness for family, friends, therapy, and meds.

I recall a vision coming out of surgery and anesthesia, laying in my hospital bed. I saw miles of rolling green hills covered in row after row of paintings—all the paintings I was supposed to make. They were all beautiful! I had to get through the recovery so I could make them all!

The “mysteries of womanhood,” the complex processes within the reproductive organs, are fertile ground to consider the complex and unknown.

I have always been interested in the body and womanhood, first through the experience of rape and then cancer. Womanhood wasn't doing me too many favors back then, and it was hard to feel safe.

With painting, I consider how my own body fits into the landscape of my everyday life. There is anxiety and mystery, as well as joy and pleasure, in this experience. The everyday landscape of a garden or still life has certainly always been more of a feminine subject matter, so for me, these mundane things are the stuff of life, and thus, quite sacred.



For Ms. Hawk, Oil on linen, 80 x 65 in

How have addiction and recovery played a part in your perception of mind and body?

Getting sober has been the hardest thing I've ever done—also the most rewarding. With the help of the recovery community, I have more patience and presence of mind. I don't need to escape my body anymore. I can just be, with true ease. In sobriety, I have more peace of mind, and painting is my meditation.

Go into more detail about the transition from performance art to painting. Did it require a different approach and maybe more discipline?

I was doing video and performance through my twenties, which in the '90s, just felt right although I always drew and sometimes painted privately. I studied video and performance in grad school at the University of Iowa with Hans Breder, former teacher and boyfriend of Ana Mendieta. I went to U of I because of her legacy and loved making it within close proximity to her work. I learned so much about how materials are magic.

Out of grad school, I resumed drawing with more rigor and regularity. A curator happened to see my drawings during a studio visit and asked to show them along with a video I'd made. After a few months of showing 2D work, that was it! I focused on sharing my drawings and wanted to paint more. I showed with Charles Hartman Fine Art in Portland for five years, and when Tim and I moved to LA, painting became my focus. It requires a similar discipline to performance, which is always physical, exhausting, and rewarding.

Painting is an endurance sport, too, but more in a long-term sense. I'm required to tend to my physical health as a baseline for showing up in the studio, to be well in order to perform painting every day with my whole being. I liken it to being a professional athlete. I eat well, get a lot of sleep, and exercise. I arrive in front of my paintings ready to extend myself, ready to let the colors and movements of making move through my body. It takes all I have.

What materials did you use at first, and what do you prefer about oil on linen?

I started with oils in high school. I never liked acrylic paint, though I used watercolor and gouache for many years. In the early 2000s, it was charcoal and pastels, which allowed me to develop a kind of mark-making of my own. After seeing the Burchfield show at the Whitney I felt the need to make something more grand and enduring, so I really learned how to paint with oils. Today, I love the pigments that are mostly organic, and the textures that oil and brushes allow. I make paintings more like drawings with thin applications of transparent and opaque color. I love showing the gestures, washes, and rubbings that create layers of color.



Sycamore Trees, Oil on linen, 100 x 82 in

Why do you use photography, rather than plein air? I imagine you enjoying and exploring a natural scene, but taking that experience into your studio to create your vision. Do you have an initial vision, or does it evolve?

I use photography to document natural places and things that I love, from plants, and places, to the altars I make. Photos are a way to get some distance from the actuality of a place. I am interested in mood more than realism.

I did a lot of plein air drawing but quickly saw the limitations. It's pleasant and meditative but doesn't help me make good paintings. Photos offer more detail and the vision I have comes early in that photographic process. It's like I see something familiar, and knowing that it has more to say, my process evolves these inklings into a more nuanced scene. It's all about finding the right symphony of marks, colors, and spaces, which hopefully, evokes something deep and mysterious within the viewer.

Let's talk about the duality, as well as the broader interpretation of landscape, which in your case is more than just representation. Is color the key component?

For me, most of what it's about is color, but it's married to mark-making and brushstrokes. I don't believe in duality or binary thinking. Life seems more about both. Beauty and death. Strength and fragility.

The gestures and colors that a landscape evokes come intuitively through sitting with that special place or thing in the studio. I try to know it more deeply through memory and my imagination. Exploring what colors a landscape needs is to try to convey the deeper reflection of what that patch of earth means, in this moment, in my body and heart. It only makes sense to me that the nature-loving girl from Oregon who experiences trauma and '90s feminist punk culture ends up back where she came from. In the dirt, playing with plants. Painting what she needs and feels, which is beauty and wonder in being alive.



View from Isa's Room, Oil on linen, 80 x 65 in

Do you feel you bring out music and movement in the colors of the landscapes?

I paint while listening to music, and am sure the tone of what I listen to makes its way in. Making a painting is weaving a spell. Making a show is writing a song. I have synesthesia as well, so colors are memories are music are space. I often feel limited by the number of pigments on Earth. I see so many more colors than I can mix!

Are you drawn to a particular natural scene, forest as opposed to the sea? Do particular settings speak differently? The Riverwood series have very dramatic sunsets which are generally portrayed in waterscapes, especially the ocean.

I don't like the sea. It feels like death. The limitlessness is too much! Different natural scenes do speak very differently to me, and with each I choose to paint, I try to portray my specific relationship to it.

The Riverwood paintings are about a very sacred place to me, a landscape I am intimately familiar with, about thirty minutes away from Salem, where my childhood friend Jennie's family had a cabin. We knew every rock and deep swimming pool in the river. Knew every season and light. I hold her and the river in my mind as among the most sacred relationships I've ever had. I painted Riverwood when I was missing her.

Looking at Sideyard with Kall, I have to ask about your relationship with animals. The cat is such a strong element here. Ms. Hawk rises beyond her utilitarian colors and possesses such strength in her portrait. The skunk in Night Porch has dignity. These creatures, including the Brown Widow spider, are not just accessories.

Animals are such a big part of my life, have always been, and are now even more so. I love their wisdom; they feel like angels to me. Plants and animals live in harmony with the Earth. They are so sacred. There is a skunk that lives in my side yard. I see her every time I need to see her. She is a guide. She teaches me about grace and boundaries. And I am a cat woman. They are pure love.

For me, Entrance to Bozo, Bozo Front Porch, and View from Isa's Window for Laguna Castle really create the anticipation and expectation that portals represent. Are you speaking to hopes and fears?

Portals speak to passages of time and experience that lead to new perspectives and new ways of being. Portals help to locate us in terms of "I am here now, but I see I'm heading towards this new place." I hope these places in-between create a physical relationship between the painting and the viewer, whom I hope to bodily implicate in relation to the scene.



Night Porch with Skunk and Crescent Moon, Oil on linen, 80 x 65 in

Though the moon in Waning Crescent is diminishing, it doesn't strike me as sad, but as a beautiful transition.

I observe lunar and seasonal phases and cycles. Like portals, there is nothing innately negative or positive about leaving one phase and entering another. Phases show that time and experience are cyclical, stretching from long before us to long after. I find comfort and possibility in knowing that one phase of my own personal story is not the beginning, nor the end.

The new pieces for Laguna Castle thrust the viewer right into the scene, rather than a vantage from a distance. Why the immersive close-up?

This experience of being held by nature suffuses my work. I don't feel like I need to go into the "wild" but can find it in my own tiny front yard garden, and in the terraced city garden that is nestled around the apartments of the Laguna Castle. To be enveloped by nature is to feel safe in the arms of something much older and wiser.

There's so much to look at in Small Path (Gateway). The little enclosure is not claustrophobic but welcoming.

Thank you! I love having a lot to look at in my paintings. Returning to that feeling of being held, I guess that I always return to the pleasure of horror vacui. My garden, even while quite small, feels teeming with life. That is how I feel compelled to show her. That is how I like to paint.

It's always interesting to know about an artist's studio, work schedule (or lack of one), and inspirations.

My current studio in the San Gabriel Valley is in an area full of auto shops and tow companies, but it's quiet. There is a view of the mountains. My drive to work is short and freeway-free, which was utterly intentional. I work five days a week, up around 4 a.m. every day without an alarm. I read in bed for a while, work out, get to the studio and try to do all I can before running out of steam around 2 p.m. or so. I take a nap, try to work a bit more, then go home to my cats and relax. I'll do tasks that need attention, have dinner, and crash. Repeat... I love a good routine. It helps my sobriety and my focus. My staff of three women, who work a couple of days a week, help with admin and prep, though I still do all the painting myself because I'm a control freak. Inspirations come constantly, as I'm always looking at the world around me, my neighborhood, and the animals therein. We live on land stolen from the Tongva, so at the very least, we try to honor this land and treat her and her creatures with dignity.

I relish tending my garden of roses, succulents, and natives. It's modest, and I am pretty much a novice, but I find great pleasure and endless inspiration from getting my hands in the dirt. I love bringing some incense and music into the garden and leaving the phone inside. I treat it like a ritual. I feel so blessed to have a yard.



Sycamore Trees, Oil on linen, 100 x 82 in

The Laguna Castle residency addresses urban landscapes with a special focus on the needs of older folks. What does this opportunity mean to you?

I am invested in the nature of the every day, and I live in LA—so our nature is usually found in more compact places. I love the resiliency of the natural world that survives in difficult settings, including wildlife, hawks, P-22, and the scavengers in my own yard. I am in love with the colors of Los Angeles nature.

The residency called Latitude for Art is focused, according to its mission, to "develop(s) creative communities in urban and rural settings with artist residencies and long-term housing for artists and seniors benefiting surrounding neighborhoods through cultural exchange, contemporary art exhibitions and exploration of new ideas." It is run by my dear friend Martin Cox and his husband Thomas DeBoe and is currently housed in Laguna Castle in Echo Park, an intentional residential community created by Cox and Isa Meskin.

I was very much inspired by the apartment that I was able to stay in, which belonged to Isa-Kae Maksin who passed this past spring. Most of her personal effects were there when I stayed, her books, tchotchkes, jewelry, decor, and art. Spending time with these items within the context of Laguna Castle was incredibly moving. I got to know her through her things. I loved the trees outside her bedroom window, the bulletin board of collected photos, postcards, and protest buttons, and her collection of necklaces on a hanger on her bedroom doorknob. You could feel her spirit, her love of cultures, her sense of civic duty, and her activist sensibility. No one is a saint, surely, but these deeply felt sentiments came through in her home, as she left it.

The opportunity to stay at Laguna Castle, the current site of Latitude for Art, was one that came organically through visiting Martin there in the garden encircling the apartments. I was inspired by the beauty of the garden, which has clearly been tended over many years, but also how this intentional community offers the possibility for aging in place. I love that Laguna Castle folks can stay in their homes as they age, a most humane situation that our violent capitalist culture denies most beings.

One of my goals is to eventually have a home that I own, so that I, my partner, and perhaps friends and relatives can age in place, where I could tend a garden of plants and beloveds over decades. What a privilege that would be, over time, to know my plant and human friends deeply, going through all our personal portals! So, Laguna Castle inspired me on that level as well.



My Folk's Place, Oil on linen, 2023

What came first, paintings or show? Did you have a theme in mind when presenting your new work?

The paintings are always already coming. I have a backlog in my mind, body, and heart. I feel them in my hands wanting to come out. The works for this show started coming before the residency—and since then—a flood of new possibilities. I feel blessed to never be lacking in ideas. It's true that trauma utterly shaped my artistic choices for a number of years. But I feel the need to share that because today I have the opportunity to paint beauty, a beauty yearned for desperately, after so many years lost to pain. I need this beauty to survive. I was given the gift of healing and I hope the beauty in my paintings offers some relief or hope to those who have experienced similar loss.

Hayley Barker's solo show at Night Gallery in Los Angeles is on view through March 18, 2023. This article was originally published in our Spring 2023 Quarterly.

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