

A photograph of a person lying down on a dense network of tree roots. The person is positioned in the upper left corner, with their head resting on the roots. The roots are thick, gnarled, and spread out across the ground, creating a complex, organic pattern. The lighting is soft, highlighting the textures of the skin and the roots.

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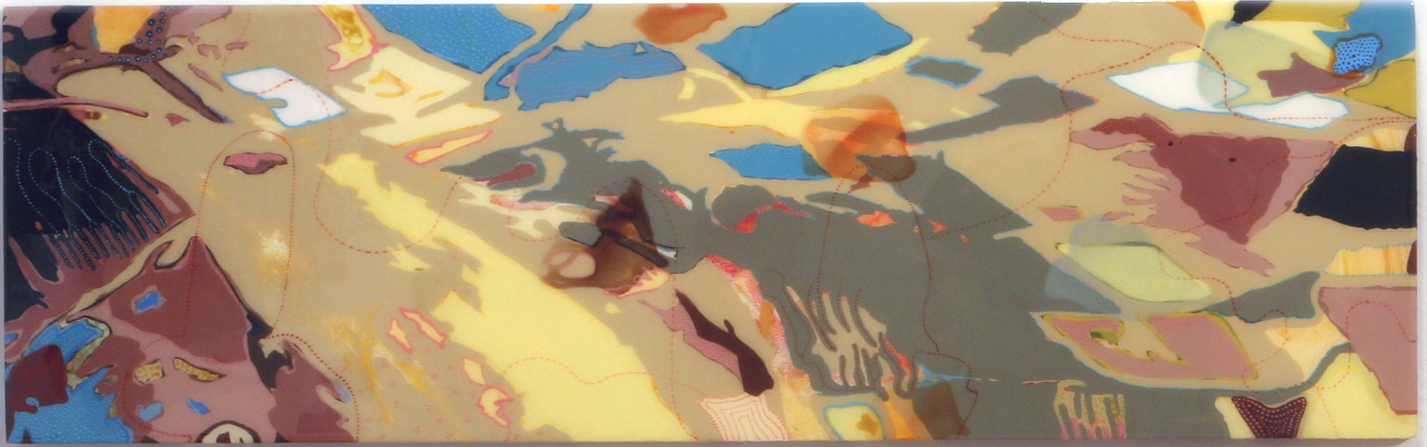
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Leah Oates Interviewing artist Deborah Wasserman



How did you become an artist and did you know early on that you would be in the arts or did you begin as something else? Where there other artists in your family?

As a very young child I knew that art was my calling. I remembered my kindergarten teacher, Mira, declaring when I was five that 'This one is going to be an artist'. I guess I stood out in my ability to paint, draw and 'make things'. For birthdays friends and family gave me: canvases, oil pastels and paints. I would spend hours working with an easel in my room. I remember one of my earliest works (at the age of 8 or so), which was a very elongated painting, combining discrete canvases based on the Mussorgsky musical piece *Pictures at an Exhibition*. It's a painting inspired by a time based medium (music) and it sequentially depicts the experience of a person walking from one picture to another. It's astounding to me to realize that at this young age, I already exhibited an interest in the ideas of: time, progression, narrative and journey, which are now the themes of my work.

I did not grow up in a family of artists, although my aunt is an artist, but living in another country (Brazil), she was not my direct inspiration. Both my parents are lawyers and they each had a very potent creative side (which they are both finally cultivating in the field of writing). They were very encouraging to myself and to my brother who ended up as a musician, composer and conductor. Having that kind of a promising start and support at home may make it seem that my career was easy and the path was already paved for me. This is not at all the truth. My path as an artist was laden with challenges and obstacles and a great deal of time was spent on searching, experimenting, rebelling, doing, undoing, destructing, being lost and struggling to stay afloat (you may say the life of an 'artist'). I could have had it so much easier but I chose to make it hard.

I wanted to 'Do it on my own' so coming to the United States by myself to live and study was an additional challenging choice that resulted in years of financial struggle. Looking back, it's apparent to me that I was moved by a strong urge to find out who I really was and pushed myself to the limit to obtain an answer... one can say that my personal journey was and is my art, even more so than any other object I produce at the studio.

What are the themes of your work and where do they come from?

The themes of my work are TRAVEL (Wandering, migration, exploration, voyage, movement) and HOME. I previously talked about my personal or inner journeys but there were also real, concrete voyages of moving from Brazil, where I was born to Israel, and then from Israel to the USA, where I now reside. These journeys made me realize how Home and Travel are linked in interesting ways: One connotes stability and rootedness and the other is fluid, moving and 'free'. They also seem to contain each other (home is a place one MUST leave, but you can never fully LEAVE as you always carry your home with you...). Does home refer to the place where you were born or raised or is it a feeling of belonging and contentedness? Is it possible to think of 'Home' not as a space, but a state?

One of my earlier installation pieces includes a text that I wrote: 'What is home if it isn't a mother? A home with a hole, where a hole has happened, and all my presence there has disappeared, is gone. Draw sweetheart, draw!' This very simple, childlike text talks about some wound (a Hole) a trauma or an exile from a protected and wholesome Home, resulting in creative expression as a way of piecing the 'hole' together, attempting to recreate the lost wholeness of the source, the home.

When contemplating Travel, I am fascinated by the idea and absurdity of 'taking ones home along' as reflected in carrying (schlepping, in Yiddish) things that we are attached to. My video 'Carry On and On' explores the anxiety of packing prior to travel, having to prioritize and choose objects to travel with and what purpose do they serve? Shot in real time, while packing for a trip, my girls came in, crawling on the floor, throwing in toys and trying on my shoes. I spontaneously placed my baby in the suitcase and closed it (for a very short moment, of course). That image is very potent and expresses a great deal about my reality as an artist and a mother...

Similar concepts are explored in my drawing series (which have the same name) where I compare the suitcase to a body and vice versa. Like a suitcase, our body is carried and tossed around, it contains things and it gets old, worn out. In these mixed media drawings I also incorporate x-rays, while making a reference to both internal body parts and airport scans, taken as a security measure.

In my three last solo shows Wanderlust (A.I.R. Gallery in 2005), Homeward Bound (Bineth Gallery 2009) and Far Away so Close (Roger Smith Arts, 2011) I explore Travel in painting. My paintings are made on formats that are very distinct: elongated shapes and miniature squares. These formats attempt to express something about the movement of Time: pixilated, chopped, expanded and stretched. There is no travel without Time. Time allows the movement, change and shifting of objects, people and ideas in space. I push the horizontal format to an extreme in order to invoke a feeling of an expanded vision, as if you were looking through a window of a vehicle en route and that rapidly changing landscape becomes still and stretched out. When these canvases hang as a group, they look like traffic, like words combined into a sentence. They tell a story that sometimes exists 'between' the canvases, as an entity that emerges from the juxtaposition of combined images.

Probably a direct result of my multi cultural identity and proficiency in three languages (Portuguese, Hebrew and English) is an insistence on mixing and merging painterly languages to create an eclectic blend of styles. It's Babylon par excellence! My work basically negates the hierarchy of styles and refuses to represent or identify with a single point of view. Rather, I choose to embrace all painterly languages, all points of view and still make it...my own. Is it possible? I look at other artists who use pastiche in their work like Gerhard Richter (one of my inspirations) and David Salle, and I see how we differ. I think that their approach is more intellectualized and mine is more intimate and personal.

The imagery that can be found in these paintings is the cacophony of travel: Landscapes, maps, vehicles, airplanes, street signs, airports and words such as: 'Direction', 'Departure', 'When?', 'Dust on the road', 'Far Away', 'Obstacles'.

The experience of travel can be so overshadowed by its documentation where the still photo becomes THE experience. In one of my paintings, you see a bunch of people equipped with cameras. Divided into separated panels, they each seem to be in their individual world, sucked into their lenses. The notion of TOURISM shows up in my work as a way to think about our artificial or mediated experience of time, of never being here, in the moment, in the 'now.' One of my favorite paintings from the Homeward Found series shows a sunset scenario at the sea. Superimposed on that picture is the word STAY. The moment of transition between afternoon and night is a moment of anticipation, excitement and fright. Stay may sound like a command but to whom? Is it addressing nature in transition? Is it an appeal to grab on to the moment and freeze its beauty? I love the mystery that this painting brings about: STAY.

What is your working process? Do you plan things out or play in the studio? Each artist is so different in how they approach their work. How do you approach the creation of your work?

My process and subject matter seem to be intertwined. For example: I am fascinated by the idea of movement and I do most of my deliberate thinking while I am in motion (Walking, riding the subway or the bus, and even while driving). I write my ideas down on pieces of paper, notebooks and stickies. There is something easy going and weightless about this process. When I sit and force myself to 'think' my ideas tend to be very dry and they don't soar.

At the studio, I am too busy to sit and think and I am anxious to try things out. In the process, I realize which ideas 'stick' and which don't. Everything is tested in action and that process actually allows for new, unexpected ideas and solutions to merge. The best studio days are those when I go with the flow of what happens and allow myself to leave behind the worries, the phone calls, the tasks, the computer.

On these days I experience a much deeper level of concentration and whatever I'm doing at the moment feels like it's the only thing that matters. Whether it's a brush stroke, the movement of a pencil or the scraping of the paint with a knife, these actions, as simple as they seem, feel magnificent to me .

My studio has a large row of windows and in the afternoon it gets to be very sunny. What I see through the windows is the top of the MTA Building, in a rectangle shape, and above that – the clear sky. Between starting new projects projects and sales, my studio is now empty and surprisingly, it feels great. I enjoy its emptiness, quietude and the feeling of expectancy in the air: What's the new work going to look like? I tend to be super neat about my materials and supplies. Everything is catalogued, organized and filed away in shelves and drawers. If I reach for something, I usually find it within minutes. Mess rarely interrupts my flow.

I like to work in different media and different projects simultaneously, so they feed on each other and offer solutions to an issue I may stumble upon. It gives me a lot of clarity as to the best and most simple way to execute each body of work. Teaching has been great in this way too because I often test my ideas with the students and come across incredible solutions they may offer. You could call that 'the studio outside of the studio'.

Why do you think art is important for the world and why is it important for you as an individual artist?

Nietzsche said that life without music is like walking through a desert. It's the same for the visual arts. I think that artists create art in order not to 'choke'. If I have a unique point of view, a story, that I feel compelled to share, it's reassuring to know that someone will be on the receiving end to listen and take it in. Both of us go through the motions together, take a journey and return transformed. It's called catharsis.

Art is a fantastic tool to bring people together so they can share and discuss ideas, aesthetics, politics and philosophy. A distinction should be made between art that is political and politics in art. I can see a great deal of value in the

former and potentially a disaster in the latter. Feeling righteous about anything immediately put you in the wrong, as you are always expressing a relative point of view, and yours is never superior to another. To prioritize an art

movement or trend over another, and to do that to the point of exclusion, is sheer politics and very destructive to the democratic spirit of art. Too often camouflaged as being discursive, critical and cultural, art politics will penetrate each and every aspect of your artistic practices and before you know it, you're trapped. It's very hard to remain true to your own vision when your teachers and peers are biased in a particular direction. There are way too many artists out there that are followers, I would say victims of that situation, and you can't find a spec of authenticity and integrity in their work.

I see art as the closest thing to spirituality. When talking about spirituality I am not referring to any organized religion, but rather, to the feeling of connectedness, awe, the stirring of emotions, the experience of stillness, of peace. What I like about art is that it doesn't have the false mystique, the morality and rigidity of religions that represent a 'highest power'. It's made by people and for people. There are no major mysteries and an 'after life' promise based on your good art deeds. Art is at your eye level and it's up to you to hate it, negate it, embrace it or ignore it altogether.

It is false to think that spirituality manifests itself in angelic and sweet forms and is devoid of deviance and ugliness. I think that spirituality is EVERYTHING. Therefore, it is important for a society not to censor art, but rather, to embrace the diversity of opinions, experiences and points of view as manifested through art

And where do I fit in all this? It took me years to figure it out and crystallize my ideas around my particular contribution to art. My art advocates the concept of unifying forces and opposites, as it is expressed in my paintings and merging of styles. There is an element of universalism in my work that goes beyond multiculturalism. I am addressing the individual naked self, even beyond cultural identifications, which I also see as false, as they don't reflect people's real identity.

One of my inspirations is Buddhist philosophy and amongst its many jewels of wisdom, there's one that I particularly cherish, and it's the term Migrating Souls. It describes the circular and never ending journey of humans on this earth, as we migrate from one body to another to take on different births and face karmic deeds and imprints from past lives. How does the term Migrating Souls apply to me? Sitting in my NYC apartment, In Jackson Heights Queens, (the most diverse zip code in the USA), far away from my country of birth, the country where I was raised and my expanded family, ending up here feels completely arbitrary and yet, so perfectly orchestrated.

I must admit that I am quite worn out by this endless search and moving about, especially when not coming across any of what I was searching for. Was I looking in all the wrong places? It's evident to me that home, belonging and peace are hard to find and the whole of humanity is forever entangled in that search with no real success...

These are the core questions behind my art practice and they surface through my art and art teaching. I don't offer any answers to these questions, but rather, I merely attempt to invoke a feeling, to stir up a discussion around these issues and it's up to the viewer to decide what to do about it.

An eternal optimist, I see great potential in bringing up questions, as strangely, many of them already contain the answers. I also think that it's good to release questions into the world as they keep doing their questioning work even, or especially, when they are free to wander around. So there's also an element of acceptance, humor and compassion in my work: I don't have the answers, the search has not ended, and I'm on my way. All will be revealed in due time...

How has being a mom changed your work if at all?

Motherhood stole my time and the childish notion of being a player, an explorer, and a daydreamer... Wake up! No more time for such luxuries! There is an intense need to focus and prioritize at all times plus juggle the various responsibilities and duties that come with motherhood. It's not about me anymore, it's about 'us' and that's a very hard notion to accept. On the other hand, it would have been pathetic for me to carry on like Peter Pan all my life, so becoming a mother was an excellent wakeup call.

My children give me inspiration; they challenge me and generate new ways of looking at things; they mirror me and show me things I don't want to see. It's one of the hardest things to bear! These little people move the energy around the house, mess things up and turn me upside down. It's not the quiet and controlled surroundings I generally crave, and I feel like I surrender my needs and wants to the call of the moment. In some ways it's a blessing as I'm forced to rise beyond myself.

I see many women artists who are very successful and juggle their different roles extremely well. They exemplify for me a contemporary, feminist approach to motherhood: It's OK to embrace your femininity, maternity and still be an incredible thinker and creator. Who is supposed to raise the next generation? Aren't artists potentially amazing teachers? I resent this dichotomy (although I acknowledge it was and is still based on a chauvinistic society) between motherhood and being an artist.

Is being a mother and an artist an easy thing to do? Not at all, and I am often challenged to my limits. Feelings of desperation and anxiety often emerge...but the kids...they keep moving forward with life's force, growing happily ever after. That's soothing: To know that life keeps flowing, moving forward and that I'm going through growth spurts just like my kids...

Finally, motherhood has brought out the lioness in me, it's a very deep and animal like instinct. I am very protective of my children and ferocious when it comes to their well-being. This kind of strong energy is reflected in other areas of my life and it's a very good, inspiring force. I feel that from a skinny, hungry and wounded cub I turned into a lioness and I'm ready to risk my life, in a moment, for my kids...never felt like that before. It's a very powerful and empowering sensation: Providing a home when you feel homeless...

What advice would you give other artists who are emerging?

It's hard to give advice not knowing the issue at stake but I guess the word 'emerging' implies advice to artists who are still struggling to surface, be recognized and noticed.

I'm a great believer in building your arts career step by step. The foundation, as I see it, is cultivating both skills and knowledge in art making, as well as, digging into your inner resources to find out the uniqueness of your voice. An artist must have the courage, humility and discipline to nourish his or her talents, and in my opinion, there are no short cuts. You have to be SERIOUS about art making. This advice IS good as it will keep the charlatans out of the way...

Coming from a generation that was still anchored in the myth of the 'struggling artist', I am inclined to say that struggle per se sucks up too much energy and a big waste of your time! I'm exhausted by this myth. There will be multiple challenges and sacrifices to face, as being an artist is one of the hardest careers. You don't need to pile up additional challenges, complicate things even further or walk around in circles, trying to reinvent the wheel.

We are now living in a new era where it's clearly time to adopt a lighter, more lucid and more contemporary approach to the concept of art, not only as a mode of self expression but also as a career. That means that aside

from doing the studio work, you must develop tools that will help you plan and build your path. It means stop projecting your complex and rebellious self into the world but take an objective look at how things really work out

there, and then decide how you want to go about it. Frankly, this approach has been a saving grace for me, as I used to be rebellious and antisocial and preferred to be painting in my studio rather than networking. The realization that making good work by itself doesn't at all guarantee my success prompted me to adopt a new approach and learn how to wear a few more hats: networking; applying for different opportunities and grants; showing and selling my work.

There are a few excellent programs, which I was fortunate to attend, that helped my career even further: Artist in the Marketplace, Aljira and Skowhegan. These programs are now very competitive and hard to get into, but there is a lot more information out there, available for everyone. I highly recommend the books: The Artist's Guide By Jackie Battenfield, Art/Work by Heather Darcy Bhandari and Jonathan Melber; and Seven Days in the Art World by Sarah Thoronton. There are also different organizations like NYFA, Creative Capital, LMCC and more that offer resources, grants, studios, workshops and assistance for emerging artists. If you choose to take a professional approach to your art career and use all the information that is available out there, things will be a lot easier!

Last...choosing to be an artist, whether you have a trust fund or not, is always a privileged choice. I mean, who else gets to make a career choice based on self-expression and personal fulfillment? Most people just work for a living. If you made that choice, then make the best out of it! Love your studio work, love your peers, love your art and ENJOY what you do! Also, never forget that the whole complex network of people called the Art World, composed of collectors, writers, critics, galleries museums, magazines, fairs, exhibition, catalogues, curators, viewers, would not have come into existence if it wasn't for artists. Artists are the ones that make it all happen!