

# Making Art in the time of COVID-19

## Amy Howden-Chapman and Emma McIntyre in the United States

Chloe Lane  
28.05.2020

“There was no way I was going to start again without them.”

When New Zealand painter Emma McIntyre moved to Los Angeles eight months ago, she packed many of her prized paints and brushes into her luggage. Now, she is finishing the first of a two-year MFA programme at ArtCenter College of Design while in lockdown. Although she knew she would be able to buy supplies cheaply in the US, she still brought the oil paints she had amassed over the years, which, in her words, “make my palette.”

“I lean in to acidic, bright colours, and often use their complementaries on top to create passages of intense colour, and parts where the layers combine to become earthy and muddy. I have a love/hate relationship with fluorescent colours—alone I find them so garish, but they are often so crucial to achieving my desire for the work to glow from within.”

McIntyre loves a grid: The chessboard, the harlequin pattern, the grid that is suggested only by the arrangement and repetition of solid dots or body prints made with her knees or breasts. These grids are imperfect, the work of a deliberate but human hand. The watery layers of paint have a translucence, an untouchable, almost celestial quality. But McIntyre isn't mapping constellations for us to marvel at from afar—instead, the gift of these works is something more grounded, muckier.

“I look at a lot of Impressionism, and I think about how to create those atmospheres with colours that are related to what might be an L.A. palette—the bright and shiny façade, delusions of glitz and glam, the pollution, the dirty dustbowl that it is, but also the beauty of the nature and the light.”

I want to zoom in again. Now I’m looking at the work of an archeologist mid-dig. Move closer to the paintings—to that carefully plotted rectangle of earth. That’s where the good stuff is, the real treasures. The variations in McIntyre’s marks are one of the pleasures of her works, the dirty, dusty layers giving way to solid jewels of colour. The curious scratches on the surface of the paint—tracks left behind by small animals, or some long gone humans spinning their own tales?

“I have some special brushes I brought over ... I also make a lot of my marks with whatever I can get my hands on—my fingernails, cloth, sandpaper, bubble wrap, etc. so my needs for tools are versatile in that way. Although I do have some rubber shapers and a couple of stamps I can’t do without ... I’ve also been doing a bit of body printing lately, so the private studio [at ArtCenter] has been good for that, ha ha.”



Emma McIntyre, *An artist book made while in isolation*, 2020.

McIntyre sends me snapshots of her favourite colours of the moment. Each of these well-travelled, scrunched-up tubes of paint—Old Holland Yellow-Green, Violet-Grey, Brilliant Rose, Provence Violet Blueish, Brown Pink—is presented in its best light, yet still they do little for me, even less than every Instagram post of poorly risen sourdough I've seen in the last long month. But bread is bread, and only an artist knows what her tools are worth.

Until the arrival of COVID-19, McIntyre often spent 60 hours a week in the ArtCenter Grad Art Building. Her schedule included classes taught by the author Chris Kraus, the critic Bruce Hainley, and the painter Richard Hawkins, a class on the history of contemporary art in L.A., critiques, approximately five studio visits with faculty and guests every week, and then after all of this, making work. Like a cat following the sun, she spent her days moving between the studio, classroom, kitchen, and courtyard, and back again.

Apart from the obvious—losing her studio—California's lockdown has also meant losing the pressure-cooker effect of being at school. However, since her classes and critiques have moved to Zoom, she has found a new appreciation for the language of art. Knee-deep in the fear that can come with the territory of being an abstract painter, she worries she often doesn't have "the right words" to talk about what she does. Zoom has shifted this.

"No one can engage with the materiality of the work to its full extent, so there is a greater focus on its conceptual aspects. I've started finding a new language for my paintings that I didn't have before."

McIntyre lives close to Elysian Park in the heart of L.A., and shares her apartment with her husband and their dog. Her "studio" is currently set up in the yard, and with a single wall and no ceiling to play with, she has only been able to work on one painting at a time. Her workspace is also weather dependent, and L.A. has been surprisingly wet since lockdown.

In drought-stricken California, nobody wishes for less rain. But a rainy day also means a no-work day for the unexpected plein air painter. She has also struggled with what it means to be an abstract painter during these times, worrying that she is just 'rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic.' She has found some solace in the writings of American painter Amy Sillman, particularly the piece *Unpresidented Times*, which Sillman wrote the day after Trump was elected. It's a freaked out, angry, but also exuberant letter that asks, "what do we do right now? Our desires are conflicting and ill-fitting... do we re-tool our art practices, or just keep going, putting the anger into the work? What would be the point of abstraction now?"



The outlook from Emma McIntyre's studio. Image courtesy the artist.

On rainy days, McIntyre's large work in progress remains propped up beside her bed. When she isn't writing and reading at her kitchen table, she spends her time looking at this painting and thinking about it, looking at it, and thinking about it. "Art has always sought out and celebrated new forms and new ways of being in the world," she said, "and in the constantly shifting landscape of the COVID-19 crisis it's encouraging to remember that."

---

I think of the evolution of my husband Peter's practice over the last six years as a portrait of the ways our life has changed during that time. Before we left New Zealand, he was making 6 ft x 4 ft paintings on carpet. They couldn't be rolled, and were heavy—no good for shipping from Florida to New Zealand—so he started making small paintings on plywood. If it couldn't be carried on his bicycle, it couldn't be carried. When a few years later he started his MFA at the University of Florida and had access to the wood and metal workshops (and we finally owned a car) he began making furniture. Then our son arrived, so he turned to small paintings on paper that he could work on at the kitchen table any time of the day or night. His output has altered again now that we are in self-isolation in New Zealand and most of his tools still haven't left Miami. His watercolours, pencils, and a small selection of woodcarving tools were all he packed with him. Since we have returned he has started whittling—odd-looking spoons made from branches found on our daily walks.

Though it doesn't always feel like it in the moment, could there be a freedom to this accordion of external constraints, and its constant expanding and contracting? Maybe it can clear a path for making different kinds of work, or at least encourage us to rethink our work and what we can contribute in a more active way. I'm reminded of a Josef Albers interview I read long ago, which took place after Albers moved to the US. The interviewer asked Albers if the increase in the scale of his paintings was a reaction to the American landscape. He replied with something along the lines of: "No, we bought a larger station wagon."

It feels like our station wagons have been miniaturised. But could this brave new Zoom world we live in have actually done the opposite? And given us all the station wagons? The roomier, faster, louder, smarter, funnier, and even more powerful ones? I guess we'll have to wait and see.



Emma McIntyre is a New Zealand artist currently based in Los Angeles. In 2019 she was awarded a Fulbright General Graduate award to study an MFA at ArtCenter College of Design, Pasadena C.A., where she is currently in her first year. She graduated with a BVA (Painting) from AUT University in 2011, and an MFA from Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland, in 2016. Her first major solo exhibition, *Pink Square Sways*, took place at Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland in November 2017, followed by a second solo exhibition, *Rose on Red*, at Hopkinson Mossman Wellington in 2018. She has exhibited regularly at institutions and artist-run spaces since 2015, including in: *A Trip to the Beach*, Play\_station, Wellington (2017); *Grid/Colour/Plane*, Malcolm Smith, Auckland (2017); and *Painting: A Transitive Space*, ST Paul St Gallery Three, Auckland (2016). She is represented by Mossman Gallery, Wellington.

→ Emma McIntyre