

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Brooklyn Rail
Marina Adams with Alex Bacon
Alex Bacon
1 May 2019

BROOKLYN RAIL

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Image: Portrait of Marina Adams, pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

Marina Adams met with Alex Bacon in her Greenpoint studio to discuss her many interests—from poetry to Alma Thomas to tennis to plant consciousness—as well as her unique approach to painting, seeking out meaningful forms and connections, both within her canvases and between them and the viewer. For Adams all of these concerns reinforce her painting's subtle, but powerful protest against what she terms our “culture of convenience.”

Alex Bacon (Rail): I'm very interested in how artists understand their origin stories, which could be something in childhood, but also something that happened later, or a narrative of development. Could you talk about yours?



Image: Marina Adams, *Another Kind of Memory*, 2019. Acrylic on linen, 88 x 78 inches. Courtesy the artist and Salon 94, New York.

Marina Adams: That question brings back a memory of when I was a child. I remember feeling that everything in the world should be art, that everything in the world should have the touch of the handmade. And if I think about the beginning—I think about Cézanne. He was the first artist I saw, when I was in junior high or high school, where I thought to myself, “I want to paint as realistically as that.” That was my intention. That experience, that kind of clarity, became a goal—what I wanted the work to have. Ironically, I had this idea that his work was literally photographic.

It wasn't until years later that I just laughed at myself. But at the same time, I thought it was prescient in terms of the kind of clarity that I had experienced—that clarity, that kind of realism, that I mistakenly thought was photographic. Now we know, especially with Photoshop, that photography is not to be trusted [Laughs] that everything can be changed in that medium and that in fact, painting is kind of a truer, more real source.

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Brooklyn Rail
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Rail: That's amazing. Where would you have seen work by Cézanne?

Adams: I had a great teacher, Jackie Streisinger, who I met in an after-school art program at what was called the Yard School of Art in Montclair, New Jersey. It was in someone's house—a place where you used pastel, you did portraits from photographs, and all the lines went the same way. Then Jackie comes in and totally disrupts the whole thing. They fired her, of course, so she started teaching at her house, and my friends and I started going there.

She was the one who introduced me to Cézanne. She directed me to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, so I went and saw one of the landscapes. It resonated so strongly. There are those moments of epiphany in life that are very important. That certainly was one of the earliest ones.

I still think about how Cézanne finds an edge, what that is, and how we see. That's something that enters into my work: how we see, how we experience. That comes back to a kind of being, to the physicality of painting—and also to the understanding that art is about being lived with. It's very much against the internet. What the internet does to art—and I think you see this on Instagram—is diminish it. It eliminates a true experience of art. Though there isn't 'one true experience', but multiple truths in experience.

Rail: What about abstraction? Was that important to you early on?



Image: Marina Adams, Mambo, 2018. Acrylic on linen, 98 x 78 inches. Courtesy the artist and Salon 94 Bowery.

Adams: I have a problem with the term "abstraction." It references something real that is then abstracted. I don't think that way; I don't find it interesting. Even the work that I do now, I hate calling it "abstract." To me, the things that I deal with are very real.

Rail: What do you feel when people see things in the work? Is that okay?

Adams: Yes, absolutely. I think, as an individual, you bring your own experiences and your own references to the work. One of the reasons I allow my love of pattern to be predominant in the paintings is that pattern is a language that crosses boundaries. It offers common ground. I think it's interesting that

similar patterns were utilized in different places around the world, places that most likely didn't have physical contact. We can see pattern in the most basic things and I guess what I love is that it forces you to get very basic, and it's in basic truths that we can find communion. We find how we're alike, as opposed to always thinking about how we're different.... And all those barriers and borders that are put up by race, religion, and nation-states can be overcome.

Rail: Were these ideas always in your mind as a goal, leading you in the direction of where the work is today? Or are they something you are only aware of when you look back on what you've done?

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Brooklyn Rail
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Adams: I think it's about developing as a person. It doesn't all happen at once. You're living while you're thinking and thinking while you're living; you're developing something. My practice leans toward letting the work lead me, as opposed to thinking it up and then executing it. That has to do with experiencing and feeling it out—how to move through a space, and how the body is important in that. My size affects the work to a degree, but also maybe not, because these paintings are a little too big. [Laughs] I have to get on a ladder. But I do love working big. I'd love to do a mural, actually, or a large ceramic tile piece. I'd love to take on a whole wall.

Rail: Some artists talk about the physical limits of their body determining the physical limits of the painting. What you're saying is that this size is new, and that it goes beyond your body.

Adams: Yes. They're ten inches higher, but the same width as before. This painting is called Cheops (2018), like the ancient Egyptian pyramid. Right now, I'm reading a book about the Great Pyramids. I find their mathematical precision to be a sign of both intelligence and sophistication in terms of communication, on an extremely high level. We don't have anything like that built in our age, so I think we have to examine times when people were in tune with the rhythms of the planet, the stars, the universe.

We have examples of cultures that were in tune. If I think about the drawing in pottery from the American Southwest, I also think about its similarities with the patterns in weavings and rugs from the north of Africa. I find it interesting that indigo pigment was developed in very disparate parts of the planet, all at the same time—in Mexico, West Africa, Japan, etc. It's not as if you just take the indigo leaf and put it in water; there's a process to breaking it down, so how did that simultaneity happen? I find that to be very interesting.

Rail: All of your work is titled, and in a meaningful way. For example, you have been talking about Cheops, and one can see the pyramidal forms in it. Then there are also all the things you said about the intelligence and the synchronicity of ancient Egyptian culture, of which the pyramids are a manifestation. Could you talk about titles in general for you and your work? And also their relevance for the subject matter of the work, which I assume goes beyond just the pyramid form that appears in the painting?

Adams: It's a challenge for me to find the right title—sometimes harder than painting the paintings, because you can have a title that's great, but it has to commune with the work. Titles are words, and I find that words are a way of bringing people into the work. I think they're particularly important if you're not giving a narrative, if you're not giving a storyline, if you're just presenting an experience—particularly in a literal world, and we're in a very literal world, particularly in the West, where people want and believe in reason and ideas. I'm not giving them either. Language can exist, in the same way that color can exist; it can just be.

Rail: Do you have a running list of titles?

Adams: Sometimes I write my thoughts down, or I'll hear or read something. You know, you steal; artists are thieves, and so I just put down whatever comes to me. In terms of titles, I go and look for something appropriate, something that resonates with a kind of truth. They don't necessarily make sense, but I guess you could say there is a rhythm.

This painting is called Mambo (2018). There's something about the shapes and the movement—I wanted to bring an awareness to rhythm. "Mambo" is the name of a music and a dance. Over time it became quite defined, standardized. The origins however, have much more to do with feeling—with body feeling, with body movement—and that's where I'm going. I love the idea of a dance or sound. I guess it's my way of dealing with something outside of painting, because I'm so involved with painting. And so

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Brooklyn Rail
Marina Adams with Alex Bacon
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1 May 2019

language allows me to get involved with other ways of producing art, or challenging what art is. Just bringing it up—naming it, putting another thought into the world.

There is, of course, the danger of description, but then the flip side is to use titles to create more space—another way in—or to broaden the experience in another form.

Rail: Language is important to you--the titles of your paintings being one example. Another we've talked about is poetry. You've collaborated with poets and so perhaps you could talk more about the role of poetry for you. Not only about these collaborations, but also how poetry and literature—since we've also discussed fiction and nonfiction—flow into your work.

Adams: For me reading is a way of becoming aware of what other individuals—brilliant individuals—have put into the world themselves. It is like food for your mind. It's how I look at art too. It's really about feeding myself so that I'm nourished when I go to the studio. That's where poets are extraordinary- great poets open up new mind space just with words.

And one of the great things about reading is that you can always go to the end and find the sources—I remember having read the writer Christa Wolf and she led me to Ingeborg Bachmann. That's just one example of how one person can lead you to another, and that's how you expand, how you broaden your reach. And you can unearth what was buried. There are different agendas in the world. One agenda is always trying to bury another agenda, and that's why artists and creative thinkers have to continuously make sure that our work is getting into the world. Because it has an effect.... It's like a pebble in a pond, it has a ripple effect. That's why you do it, you never know who's going to see it, how it's going to effect them, and what it will encourage and allow them in turn to do.

Rail: A photograph of one of your paintings on Instagram doesn't convey the spatial expansiveness that it has in person. Scale is so important to them.

Adams: Yes, and the other thing is the touch. You can't experience the touch on the screen. When you stand in front of these, it's that touch that moves you. This is so important. With Mambo, it's almost as if there's not much there aside from this. In the work of artists like Agnes Martin and Alma Thomas—two of my favorite painters, along with Hilma af Klint—there's such a large experience, yet it's so pared down. They don't give you any out. "Deal with it." [Laughs] I think that's good, because we live in a culture of convenience, and it's killing us. So I think we need to have work that demands something from us.

Rail: That aspect is often missing from art historical and critical interpretations of abstract painting. Often, to read these descriptions, you'd think that it's only about the geometry, the balance of color, and so on. But I've always felt—about say, Ellsworth Kelly's paintings or Carmen Herrera's—that they can seem totally flat. But if you really look, you see that it was handmade, and that's very important to the experience of the painting.

Adams: Yes, and it is the intellect in the handmade that is felt but unspoken, and therefore often unrecognized in an academic way. So again, how do we make thought visible without words? And I think that can happen when artists allow us to see their thought process. In the past I've talked about leaving my tracks. I don't go back—if something's in the way, I get rid of it—but it's not about hiding anything. I really do want the process to be visible in the work.

Rail: One could say that in more recent years your work has become bolder. It has fewer parts, but somehow there's a lot to unpack within those few parts, perhaps even more to see. You see it all at once, and that creates a strong initial reaction. So there's that immediate seduction. But it's very easy for an artwork to grab your eye. Anything can do that—an ad on the subway, for example—but to sustain

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Brooklyn Rail
Marina Adams with Alex Bacon
Alex Bacon
1 May 2019

looking is something else. This is not the goal of the subway advertisement; it grabs you for ten seconds and then you move on. That's most of life. Looking is sustained by the ways in which the painting unfolds, which is both visual and intellectual.

Adams: That, at least partially, is what's so radical about it. It stands in opposition to what we've been given by the State. It's a stance against what I've termed our "culture of convenience."

Rail: Yes, but without sacrificing beauty and appeal.

Adams: Never! Never sacrifice!

Rail: Beauty versus criticality is an old dichotomy, but somehow it never dies. It's the idea that, if it's colorful and beautiful, then it must only be about the sensual. Of course, we know that's not true. Cézanne would be a good example, or Matisse, or any number of artists. Your stance is oppositional, without being a negative cancellation of pleasure.

Adams: This is what happens when you take the helm of your own ship. You don't let someone else form the narrative. I can't speak for all artists, but I personally refuse to let the work dwell in the negative. And yet, I am affirming through the work that the radical can be positive. I think all the best radical ideas are positive, and they are dangerous. I've always felt, in that respect, that art and artists lead by showing another way.

I've been reading another great book called *The Secret Life of Plants* (1973). I've been reading it for a year. It's so good, that when I finish, I'm going to start at the beginning again, because there is so much in it. It brings up a number of figures, and one of them is Goethe, the German philosopher who was also a poet. He understood that plants communicate on a much higher frequency than humans. They are much more sensitive—and much less violent as well. They feel, they sense, and they change, metamorphosize. And he realized before Darwin, though he wasn't given credit, that plant forms are not predetermined, but flexible, which enables them to adapt to changing conditions. And through their life, they heal the soil.



Image: Marina Adams, *Dinah's Mixed Emotions*, 2018. Acrylic on linen, 98 x 78 inches. Courtesy the artist and Salon 94, New York.

Rail: How do the ideas in this book play out for you, either in art in general, or in your practice specifically?

Adams: There are many levels. One, I'll say, is about communication. Here I am, making these things, and I think about why. It's a basic question, right? You can say so much about the artist's role, the idea of showing another way of living, but also about creating something that literally electrifies the space and, with that, communicates. What's so great about visual art is that, like plants, artists don't use words, but they definitely engage energetically. Thinking about the world in terms of energy, as an energetic space, really interests me, and it plays into my thinking about what I'm doing

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Brooklyn Rail
Marina Adams with Alex Bacon
Alex Bacon
1 May 2019

here in the studio—what I'm putting into the world and how I'm trying to communicate. That brings color into it too, because I think color is unique and universal.

Rail: Unique in what way?

Adams: There's something about color, it's unlike everything else. I can break painting down and talk about drawing and scale, surface and touch, among other things, but there's something about color that you can't describe. When it's powerful it holds the spirit, maybe like great music. And it's not limited to painting, which is one of the reasons people love fashion.

Rail: It's interesting. I'm curious then, about where your colors come from, and I mean that in the simplest and most abstract of ways. Do you mix your own colors? How do you choose the colors, whether it's at the paint store, or in the mixing bowl, or both? Your colors are not always naturalistic, so there's clearly a color language that is beyond looking at a landscape, although I imagine that also plays in in some cases.

Adams: I think everything plays into it, including what's available in the kind of paint I use. I used to use oil, and now I paint in acrylic. Certainly experience plays into it, color memory. But those kinds of things are less important to me than the process and act of being here and responding to what's necessary. How can the color sustain a longer interest or life force? I can only get to that by responding to a reality, and the reality is whatever it is I'm working on. I can have desires, but they tend to get overruled. Sometimes they stay; sometimes they have to go.

That's the first thing, in terms of process, that I learned as a young painter. That was a big thing to learn—that more often than not, you had to give up your favorite part, the most beautiful passage. Whatever it is, you had to give it up; you had to destroy it and bring it back. Picasso taught me that. What you do is build a fearlessness, and a confidence that whatever you've had, you can get back.

Rail: It's that hard to quantify thing that is why you can't break down art-making into a rulebook or a recipe that someone else could execute. What comes first for you, the drawing or the color? Or is it all one thing?

Adams: Actually the drawing comes first. I work in charcoal to get a sense of scale, of line and shape on the canvas. This frees me, so when I begin painting, there's already a space there; a space that I can get involved with in a direct way. And that frees the touch as well. This way of working, though it has a longer tradition, is something that was a major shift from how I was working when I got out of graduate school. At that point, I was trying to figure out everything at once.

As an undergraduate at the Tyler School of Art, I was introduced to mostly European painting. I was able to study in Rome for a year where the epiphanies just kept coming—I remember the scale of the buildings, and not just seeing them but living in the pensiones with high ceilings and huge windows. Then there was the food—of course! the language, the landscape—I remember thinking that the painters just painted what they saw; they didn't make it up. And the artists—Masaccio, Caravaggio, Donatello, Bernini, I'd never even heard of them. Then I came to New York to go to Columbia University and my world was blown open in another way. I remember going to the Xavier Fourcade Gallery where I fell in love with late de Kooning and Joan Mitchell. And I did my thesis under the influence of Ad Reinhardt.

Rail: So when you're talking about this shift, it happened a while back, it's not a recent development...

Adams: No. In the monograph Salon 94 is publishing in conjunction with the exhibition, we are looking at approximately the last 10 years of work, and this shift happened before that I would say.

Rail: How did you choose 10 years? Is that arbitrary?

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Brooklyn Rail
Marina Adams with Alex Bacon
Alex Bacon
1 May 2019

Adams: You could say it was arbitrary, but at the same time, it's an increment of time and space that makes sense, which is why we can even label it.

Rail: There is the old adage that it can take a lot of work to make something look effortless. I think that is absolutely true, especially with your paintings, where the ease with which we move through and around the pictorial space is important to our experience of them. If they were too regimented and there was a lot going on, they wouldn't work. They need that sense of openness. When you first look, everything is so seamless. I don't mean in terms of execution, but rather that at first, we take in the composition as a whole, which is then belied by the fact that there is so much to unpack. Evidence of the act of making is conspicuous, so that it is clear that there was a lot of effort involved, but you never feel that. This is a very difficult balance for the artist to strike.

Adams: One of the things that is said in a place that I go to practice yoga is about effort turning into grace. That without effort, we can't have grace. And that seems to be what you're saying.

Rail: Absolutely. I actually do a lot of yoga myself. I think I was drawn to the practice originally because my experience on the mat resonated with how I felt in front of certain artworks. There is a spiritual side to yoga of course, but I also see it as a way of looking and experiencing the world, and making sense of that. This is also what art can do. Like you said, with yoga physical excursion is involved, but the goal is not to turn the body into a machine, even though it does have physical benefits, but it's more a way to go inside yourself mentally through physical means.

Adams: Absolutely. I think it's what drew me to yoga many years ago as well. I always said it was a parallel practice. One informed the other for me.

Rail: To go in a different direction, using another exercise analogy—is painting like a muscle, something you have to flex and exercise regularly for it to get stronger? You were saying a few things about how your development has not been a linear progression—that instead, things accumulate over years. You do things, you learn, and there is some development. You don't work within a fixed format, and yet I wonder if forms nonetheless recur?



Image: Marina Adams, *Cheops*, 2018. Acrylic on linen, 98 x 78 inches. Courtesy the artist and Salon 94, New York.

Adams: I think what you're referencing is in the drawing. The drawing has to do with responding to the fact that now I'm working vertically in a rectangular space, so how do you move through that space? When I find a way of moving through that space that feels good to me, I utilize it. Then I will move through the space of a different canvas in a similar way and see how it changes, because everyone is different. It's like people: we're all the same and yet we're all different.

I'm always trying to create a larger experience, which sometimes leads to more colors. I used to, maybe out of necessity, limit the color. I'd say, "I'm going to use three or four colors." Sometimes I would repeat. I

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Brooklyn Rail
Marina Adams with Alex Bacon
Alex Bacon
1 May 2019

think all artists make rules for themselves and then ultimately break them. Rules are only useful so long as they're useful. Then, when they become impediments, you get rid of them, or you break them.

Rail: Do you also mean that about form?

Adams: Yes, definitely. For me, it's about pattern too. You find structures and patterns that work. If something is flowing, I'll re-use it. When something's not happening, you have to be in the moment, and you have to change. You have no choice. Just like plants.

Something I've studied too—that I think is outside of what one would assume—is tennis. I love in particular, women's tennis. My mother used to watch tennis, so I liked it early on. When the Williams sisters, first Venus and then Serena, entered into the game, they blew it wide open in so many ways. One thing that really interested me was watching how Serena could turn the game around if she was losing. It was with this incredible will of hers—she'd change the direction of the wind. She was able to recognize something and change it, adjust. And that's the key: being able to recognize and adjust.

I think about this in terms of painting. If I'm "losing" the match, then unless I can change, I'm going down. So you have to change. It's a great practice, because things that force you to adjust are very healthy. The people who get caught up are the most rigid among us. You see that right now, even in politics.