

Pottle, Joanna. "Greetings from Nashville: A conversation with Jodi Hays," *James Madison University*, 27 March 2019



*Greetings from Nashville: A conversation with Jodi Hays*

by Joanna Pottle

27 March 2019



Hays discusses her work at Duke Hall Gallery of Fine Art opening reception for *Greetings from Nashville*.

Creative Media (JMU), 2019

**Joanna Pottle:** Who are you, where are you from (more broadly speaking), and what do you do?

**Jodi Hays:** I am a painter and curator. I was born in Arkansas, attended undergrad in Tennessee and Georgia, and graduate school in Vermont. I have spent small chunks of time in NYC and larger chunks in Boston.

**JP:** According to your interview with *Burnaway*, you grew up in a National Park, but now live in cities in your adult life. Can you talk about how those two entities and influences speak to and inside of your work? <sup>1</sup>

**JH:** I was born and raised (mostly) in Hot Springs National Park, Arkansas. My sense of place and personal history gave me footing into understanding paintings through the genre of landscape. I also think growing up in a small town, and with parents from small communities has influenced by sense of community, even within a larger "art" context.

**JP:** Why do you do what you do/what drives you as an artist/human?

**JH:** I make art to be in the world, to live in community, to process my part of what it means to be here. My studio practice is a kind of accounting for this.

**JP:** What is your objective in painting?

**JH:** To make newer worlds (Tennyson)! No less than this.

**JP:** Who and what are your influences? You speak of a "lineage of painting" (*Burnaway* interview)—who is in your lineage? <sup>1</sup>

Pottle, Joanna. "Greetings from Nashville: A conversation with Jodi Hays," *James Madison University*, 27 March 2019

**JH:** I came to abstraction through a painting "trap-door", meaning my life's work is rooted in painting and that has, at times, looked like slippages/nods into perspectival worlds related to the photograph and landscape. I claim some lineage to Matisse — all of it — landscapes to cut outs, his interiors, pattern and color. I connect some of that way/collage aesthetic of working to mine. In thinking about the position of moment (and photography and lenses) I found Richter, Tuymans and Celmins. My big sisters are Amy Sillman, Joanne Greenbaum, Charles Burchfield, Forrest Bess at the moment. I love Guston for his tricky/effective/honest negotiation of his life, work and painting iconography.

**JP:** What made you decide upon Nashville?

**JH:** After having graduated from the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, I got married and we lived in Boston. Back in 2005 Nashville was in no way "it city" particularly for visual artists but it was home to so many deeply effective artists making work. It has been a great place to cultivate my craft.

**JP:** How would you define your practice?

**JH:** My studio practice is a daily one. I make drawings and paintings (I consider them the same thing). There's a similar language to printmaking processes within the language of my painting. I do a fair amount of reading which influences my work and titles. In my process I use tape, hotel key cards, and alternatives to the brush to find my own voice within the paint. My studio practice also has a civic practice (or service), which encompasses everything from curating Dadu, volunteering at kids' public schools, serving on my neighborhood board. These things inch into the practice, but not everything that is personal is autobiographical.

**JP:** In your statement, you give the painting the allocation of "a surrogate souvenir" of various accounts of events and spaces. Can you discuss your thoughts on this phrasing? <sup>2</sup>

**JH:** That is one of the few parts of my artist statement, if not the only, that has remained in my language since I was in graduate school. I continue to return back to my interest in titles and investigating the origin of words. This idea. The word "souvenir" signifies holding on to something, a keepsake, a tangible mark or placeholder. A painting is, among many things, a memory (which is a nod to my generative use of photography).

**JP:** What do you do when you are in a creative rut?

**JH:** I don't wait for (or believe in) inspiration; Inspiration is a luxury. I prefer the word "prompt" I use early mornings and have learned how to compartmentalize my life as an artist, mother, community member, curator, etc. My studio practice is truly a daily one that includes lots of looking, sitting with the work, listening to live music, reading and walking.

**JP:** How has being a mother influenced your practice?

**JH:** I wish men were asked the question as much as women are. That being said, I understand the question. I got married young, so my years have little relationship to a life that is only about myself and my needs. I have had to balance and negotiate my work and time in consideration of other obligations, yet have always managed to privilege the practice.

Pottle, Joanna. "Greetings from Nashville: A conversation with Jodi Hays," *James Madison University*, 27 March 2019

On a very practical note, I don't listen to much in the studio now that I have children. I like the silence. But painting saved motherhood for me. Leaving a full-time academic job to paint and parent was a practical choice that opened up a slower, more empathic pace that includes walks and considers being in the present moment, which has been really surprising and enriching. But also, motherhood saved painting. I have this identity that takes some of the pressure of an identity of "mother" alone.

**JP:** What was your response to the commentary of *Entry*?<sup>3,4</sup>

**JH:** I am deeply grateful that the work can provoke a conversation. I can appreciate the ongoing conversation surrounding nuance and subtlety. The *Burnaway* essay and response have prompted discussions and conversation in my community around the role of painting, in general, in our moment. We are all having to negotiate where we feel authentic and I totally respect that there is room for all of it.

**JP:** You've discussed in other interviews such as (*Voyage Houston* interview), your emphasis on landscape and surveillance and the event of "a friend of a friend" being shot.<sup>5</sup>

**JH:** I mentioned that my practice has always had a relationship to images and photography, specifically of landscape. My front porch's security camera captured a shooting, which happened on Inauguration Day 2016. The event and those right after presented me with the questions of what our role in any of this is-surveillance and power (and resisting that power). All of these considerations were in the work, waiting, and my life overlapped with it in unsettling ways.

In my own way, I am finding this less power-driven, macho voice in painting, the power of a gesture or brush stroke through material.

I just read a quote by Philip Guston, "The act of painting is like a trial where all the roles are lived by one person. It's as if the painting has to prove its right to exist. There are enough paintings in the world. Life and art have a mutual contempt and necessity for each other."

I am not that cynical about the life/art connection, and I really believe that art and painting can advocate, in subtly or a more direct approach. We all have to find what is really honest for ourselves.

**JP:** How does the work feel in conjunction with the rest of the exhibition?

**JH:** The dialogue occurring between *Entry* and other work is immensely powerful, in that the artists are in the same city and our work is influenced by a context that then influences our work, to varying degrees. I began to see my stripes and marks as connected to the immediate sphere of my front porch and fences — that personal connective thread I then began to use in the work from 2017 *Keeper*. You see the same "scene" in *Entry*, which is also the same kind of visual language I leveraged in the *Keeper* show, around the shooting.

**JP:** You've talked in other interviews of the importance of community (*Burnaway & Voyage Houston*). How has your community supported one another? Also, in light of your comment here...<sup>1</sup>

Pottle, Joanna. "Greetings from Nashville: A conversation with Jodi Hays," *James Madison University*, 27 March 2019

*"The work is not about migrants or the public's relationship to police, but the works are dependent on a grid system (laws, leaders, police) and then the system bending, yielding and being interrupted (protests, revolts, moves). The work is still the work, and formal, yet I can sense some of the gray and darkness was informed by the world around me."*

**JH:** The works I am talking about are here:

In 2014 I kind of formalized a practice that continues to this day — making works on paper from my dining room table in my home. The work is dark and grisaille with peaks of color or a shifting or skipping of the grid. I was (and am) trying to figure out a way that a mark, like a brush stroke sets the stage for many more marks, making grids and parallels. These paintings are where I first see my grappling with material, and opening up a more vulnerable space in the work, through paper and scale and media. Maybe the work is reconciling what is happening "outside" the studio with what is happening with the work, safe in a studio, it remains a question.

**JP:** How did you first conjure the idea of and for *Dadu* and *Coop Gallery*?

**JH:** *Coop* was developed over several artists, months and conversations. It was a move to add a critical voice to our city's art "scene", which at that point was anchored in *The Arcade* (an important architectural landmark of resistance — it housed many sit-ins at Walgreens counters during the civil rights movement).

*Dadu* was developed as a way to use where I am, kind of urban suburbia-looking neighborhood and studio space. I host discussion clubs, mural painting parties with neighboring schools, exhibitions and artist talks.

**JP:** How do you see these fitting into the overall art world and market today?

**JH:** Artist-Run spaces are a resistance to more commercial spaces, but a healthy community needs all of it. Our goal at *Dadu* is to create unique spaces for emerging artists and more established artists that will connect with the community and have something they need to say.

**JP:** How does your practice stay relevant and what's next?

**JH:** Like I mentioned, I see as much work as I can, read a lot, and remain in conversation with peers. Currently, I'm preparing for a solo show in August in which I am exploring relationship to material, bringing in vintage curtains as support as seen in the Due Hall Gallery of Fine Art show.

**JP:** What do you wish you had known in hindsight? — like the question, "What would the older you want to tell the younger you?"

**JH:** You deserve to be here just as much as anyone else. But no one owes you anything.

**JP:** What's one biggest piece of advice you would give to an emerging artist?

**JH:** The last answer — work hard, but this is not a meritocracy. The two things you can manage are the excellence of your work and being good to those around you. That's complicated enough.

The bulk of this interview took place between Gallery Assistant, [Joanna Pottle](#) and Artist, [Jodi Hays](#) on 22 January 2019 during the artists' visit to Duke Hall Gallery of Fine Art, followed by an emailed correspondence.