Yunhee Min in her Echo Park painting studio

BEYOND LANGUAGE

COLOR, MATERIAL, AND SENSORY PERCEPTION CONVERGE IN YUNHEE MIN'S LUMINOUS, IMMERSIVE ABSTRACTIONS.

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When the artist Yunhee Min first moved to Los Angeles at age twelve in the mid-'70s, she remembers being struck by the city's sprawl, the sheer scale of the boulevards—so utterly different from the dense, compact urbanity of Seoul, South Korea, where she'd spent her childhood. She also remembers L.A.'s particular scent: "I don't know if I can even describe it," she tells me, over a pot of green tea in her skylit Echo Park studio. "It was a physical, sort of sensational impression."

Min has translated that early attunement to place, scale, and sensation into an oeuvre of remarkable breadth spanning painting, site-specific installation, and architectural intervention. Her work has appeared in major collections and exhibitions across the U.S. and abroad, including LACMA, the Hammer Museum, and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. She has also completed a number of large-scale public commissions—most recently a sweeping, color-drenched transformation of the Hammer's lobby staircase—that extend her chromatic language into the built environment, affirming her place as a key voice in contemporary abstraction. At the heart of her practice is painting: luminous abstractions awash with layers of color that seem almost to shift, shimmer, and breathe.

Having grown up in Los Angeles, I'd undoubtedly come across Min's work over the years—but it wasn't until the opening of *Pacific Abstractions*, a September 2024 group exhibition at Perrotin LA, that I first encountered her paintings. I could barely pull myself away. Anchored by gestural sweeps and translucent washes of pigment, her compositions resist stasis, vibrating with movement and rhythm; even subtle narrative. Her colors feel by turns unexpected and inevitable, linked through nuanced echoes that sometimes recur from one canvas to the next. Despite their vibrance and dynamism, these works carry a quiet, almost meditative calm—a pull that is at once soothing and profoundly affecting, drawing the viewer into an emotional cadence that lingers long after stepping away. Color is central to Min's work; what she calls her "most immediate and primary vocabulary." But attention to material is equally vital: "It's one thing to know what paint is or what it looks like; it's another thing to actually use it. It never really goes in the way that you think it will."

Min's path to becoming an artist, she says, was "a bit of a messy, meandering story." As a child, she played the violin ("It was regimented, but I think it taught me something about feeling," she says), but never studied art or visited museums. She excelled in mathematics, and started out as a math major at UC Irvine, but felt somewhat lost: "I didn't really know what I wanted to do, and figuring out the future felt daunting." A pivotal moment occurred when she enrolled in her first design course. "There was this collage assignment," she remembers. "My teacher pulled me aside afterwards and said, 'This is the best piece in class. You should go to art school.'"

Min took her teacher's advice and transferred to ArtCenter College of Design in Pasadena, where she began painting for the first time. "Art interested me in a way that other things hadn't up until then," she says. "There was something that felt consequential to me, and exciting—like it was this vast thing that I could embark on. I felt like I had arrived somewhere that I could stay."

A year abroad in Germany at Kunstakademie Düsseldorf—where she worked closely with ZERO Group artist Günther Uecker and learned to mix her own paints from pigment and oil—deepened Min's engagement with material and recalled the sense of displacement and wonder that had marked her first years in Los Angeles.

Today, as a professor of art at UC Riverside, she urges her students to step beyond the habitual: "You don't have to go to grad school right away. Take some time off, go to Europe, or anywhere—and look at, *see,* the world."

Min herself is no stranger to pausing, reassessing, looking closely. In the mid-2000s, while working on a series of large-scale installations and architectural interventions, she found herself grappling with "the problem of painting and its relationship to a physical space." That led her to take a two-year hiatus from her studio practice to pursue a master's in Design Studies at Harvard, which she says brought a certain clarity and structure to her approach.

On the morning of our conversation, Min's studio—designed by her architect husband, Peter Tolkin of TOLO Architecture (who also designed their home next door)—is bathed in soft light. A sliding glass door overlooking the outskirts of Elysian Park is cracked open, the first vague hint of autumn's chill in the air, and Min's standard poodle, Gilda ("The only living

above:
Ongoing works on paper for color studies

facing page:
Yunhee Min's studio, designed by TOLO Architects

creature allowed in here while I'm painting, because she doesn't judge,"), alternates between a plush chair and the cool of the polished concrete floor. Looking around this space, one can sense the wide-ranging influences of Min's travels, the rigor of her interdisciplinary training, her deep sensitivity and sharpened capacity for seeing. Stacks of canvases lean against walls; hundreds of colorful paint jars and tools populate various surfaces. A dropcloth on the floor—strewn with brushes, squeegees, foam rollers, and a stack of paper plates on which Min has been testing different color combinations and paint viscosities (currently, she favors a "nonfat milk" consistency)—delineates one of several workspaces. In one corner sits an architectural model of the Memphis Art Museum, where Min is currently at work on a site project involving custom handwoven curtains and lenticular window adornments, the designs of which will be drawn from frottages she's taken from the surrounding cobblestones. The studio's walls are hung with paintings in progress for *Stills*, an upcoming solo exhibition at Vielmetter Los Angeles; most of these smaller in scale than her usual works ("You have to lean in closer—that changes the experience").

Though Min often sets up deliberate structures and systems within which to create—this studio a physical embodiment of that proclivity—she relishes the unpredictability that defines an artistic practice. "That's what keeps you going: the possibility of surprise, of reaching a place you didn't imagine. That's the magical part," she says. "Do it enough times and you start to trust it. Different artists work differently, but if I knew exactly where I was headed, it would be less interesting for me. There's always something you didn't anticipate, something beyond language, embedded in the experience itself."

> "SUSTAINING AN ARTISTIC PRACTICE IS ABOUT ASKING QUESTIONS, NOT FINDING ANSWERS. YOU HAVE TO WANT TO FIGURE SOMETHING OUT FOR YOURSELF."
>
> — YUNHEE MIN

COLOR IS CLEARLY ESSENTIAL TO YOUR WORK. CAN YOU TELL ME A BIT ABOUT YOUR RELATIONSHIP TO IT?

I always start with color—and with the material of the paint itself. I've worked with many different kinds of paint—house paint, oil paint, sign paint, Flashe paint, different kinds of gouaches, acrylic—which all have different characteristics. I like working with paint as color, but also as material. And over the years, I've explored different ways of working with color.

In the mid-to-late '90s, I made a series of paintings with hard-edged bands of color, and for those I worked with mistints, which are custom-mixed colors rejected by their original commissioners. People come in with their piece of wall flake to get the color matched, and if they don't like it, or they don't think it's the right color, they reject it—but the store keeps them. Those colors are usually marked down drastically. I was doing scenic painting and some set decoration for commercials, so I was always going to paint stores to get colors matched, and I would see these mistints.

It became interesting to me, and I decided to work with only these colors. I made my own sort of archive, and I cataloged the colors, and I had a whole system. At the time, "do-it-yourself" culture was really burgeoning, with Home Depot and IKEA and things like that. So I thought of these colors as a sort of barometer of taste and design. I worked with these mistints for quite some time—and my relationship to color, at that time, was filtered through this system that I'd built. It was a conceptual strategy, if you will. My selection of colors was already kind of "screened" through culture. Once a color was cataloged, I would make a swatch and get it remixed, and it would be a color in my system with a number. I worked that way for a while, and it eventually led to a shift—and part of that had to do with going back to school to study design. I was interested in architecture, because I had started doing site projects dealing with physical space, built space.

WHAT DREW YOU TO PURSUE YOUR MASTER'S IN DESIGN STUDIES RATHER THAN A TRADITIONAL FINE ART MFA?

Working as a scenic painter, I got to experience scale in a new way. I'd go up on those scissor lifts, fifteen feet in the air, painting a huge stage to look like it was on fire, for instance. If you were to go close up, you couldn't tell, but you were basically making a scene for the camera to understand that it looked like fire. I think that experience gave me a certain understanding and intuition about scale, and about different kinds of spaces. All to say, it came to a point where I was doing more and more site projects, and I wanted to think about this stuff. I had already been showing my work for a while, teaching in different places, and I just wanted to take a break and have some time to think about my relationship to architecture; what I wanted to do about it. I wanted a pause.

What I was thinking about at the time was the problem of painting and its relationship to a space. That was the basic question that I wanted to think through—because up until that point, painting was always in some relationship to its support, to architecture. I saw that as a very fluid and overlapping relationship. There were a lot of questions that I was asking myself, and going to school was a formal way of giving myself permission to take some time off.

Harvard is sort of an embodiment of modernism—modern architecture, and the history of modernism in America, with [Walter] Gropius and people like that. I took lots of classes; I met a lot of people. I began to understand architecture culture—or really, architectural education culture, which is very different. I also spent time at the Carpenter Center, which is half a block away from the design school. Stephen Prina, who I had worked with at ArtCenter, was on the faculty there. At the time, the program was called Visual and Environmental Studies—they've since changed the name [to Art, Film, and Visual Studies]. The building itself is the only Le Corbusier building in North America. I'm really happy I got to spend time in that building.

WAS IT MOSTLY THEORY AND READING, OR WERE YOU ALSO DOING PROJECTS, BUILDING THINGS?

I didn't do studio. I was able to observe people, but I did the history and theory track, so I did a lot of reading. I was seeing how other students worked. Architecture students don't sleep—it's a very different way of working than being an artist. You have to work with other people. It's essentially, fundamentally, a collaborative process. And then there's the relationship to clients, for example—the project itself. There are so many aspects that are consequential in ways that art usually isn't, at least not right from the start. Architecture is, from the beginning, a design pursuit. So that was all very interesting. I was also teaching quite a bit at the time—at the Carpenter Center, as a Teaching Fellow at the School of Visual and Environmental Studies, and also at the Museum School in Boston. The museums there are wonderful—the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, especially.

HOW DID THAT COURSE OF STUDY INFORM THE WORK YOU STARTED MAKING AFTERWARDS?

I think it changed how I thought about painting. I started to see its pictorial potential differently. I started to see its pictorial potential differently. Part of the reason I began making bands in my paintings was because I didn't want to wrestle with composition every single time. So I created systems for myself. For example, I'd divide the painting into four equal bands and work from there. That way, I didn't have to come up with a new composition every time, which had started to feel tedious. And then, lo and behold, these systems became really interesting to me.

YOU'D ALMOST EXPECT THE OPPOSITE—THAT ARCHITECTURE, BEING SO MATHEMATICAL AND SYSTEM-BASED, WOULD PUSH YOU INTO FREER COMPOSITION, AS A SORT OF REACTION.

I know, right? Go figure. But it gave me a way back into painting that I didn't really have when I first studied it. Part of it, in retrospect, was tied to the era. I really believe that we inherit a certain amount of history. Whether we acknowledge it or not, we carry some relationship to it. I'm a product of a particular time, and of the people I've worked with. Nothing exists in a vacuum. Painting in the '90s—not just my personal relationship to it, but the broader climate—was reacting to the '80s: to neo-classicism, the Pictures Generation, conceptualism. All of that left questions in the air.

WHAT KINDS OF QUESTIONS?

There were different approaches. Some paintings, looking back, seemed rooted in doubt or skepticism. Coming out of the '80s, there was skepticism toward a certain kind of expressivity. Expressive painting itself was under question. I suppose you could say that now, too—but back then, it felt especially present.

But thinking about my own trajectory—it wasn't a linear path. It wasn't direct. I often think, *Gosh, why did I have to go through all that? Why did it take so long? Why did I have to take that path, when it feels like it was always right there?* But life doesn't work that way. Living through different paths is part of arriving "there." And it's never going to be the same if you had just gone directly, even hypothetically. The experience is what it's about.

CAN YOU WALK ME THROUGH YOUR PROCESS?

I try to let the painting tell me what it wants. That sounds corny, but what I mean is—it has to start somewhere. I make gestures, use color. I often use different kinds of tools. For a while, I made a group of paintings using squeegees that are usually used for screen printing. And I still work with very liquid paint. When the consistency of the paint gets close to water—or like nonfat milk—there's always a point where you give up control. The wateriness means you're on the verge of losing the edge, losing definition. That's interesting to me. Nowadays, you can buy heavy body or medium body paints—lots of consistency. But I like working with things that set up conditions where things happen outside of my control.

I once used a huge roller that's normally used for soaking up moisture on tennis courts after rain. It was so wide, really hard to handle. But I liked that—it set up situations where unexpected things could happen. Sometimes it's a disaster, or it doesn't work out—actually, many times. But that's part of it. I make a setup for myself, then respond with new gestures. At that point it can get complicated. Sometimes I think, *Oh my god, this is terrible—what is this?* Part of painting is making those judgments. And often, things happen that you don't intend, and only later do you see what they mean.

So, it takes a lot of looking. I think of it like getting to know a person. You meet someone, and it takes time; different situations, conversations—until finally they become familiar. At some point, the painting becomes its own thing, and that's when I can step aside and say, "Okay."

The work I showed at Perrotin last fall were the smallest paintings I've shown. Exhibiting those works gave me a chance to see them differently, and to pursue that direction further. Before that, I had been working mostly larger. Not monumental, but big enough to respond to my body. I like sizes I can handle myself, even if they're a bit challenging. That way I don't need another person—because part of what I love about painting is being alone with it.

Min's poodle, Gilda, naps in the studio

WHICH IS VERY DIFFERENT FROM SITE-SPECIFIC PROJECTS.

Exactly—those always require other people. I get to use new materials I've never worked with before. I get to think about actual, physical built space, and the way people might move around in that space. Very different concerns from painting. With painting, I look for a certain kind of complexity. Especially today, in the world we live in, we're so saturated with images—every day, all of us, just an exorbitant amount of image exposure. That's the life we know, and it's not going to change.

I've realized more and more that painting—though it's a very old tradition—still offers an experience that nothing else can. I always tell my students: "Yes, it's great that we can look anything up on a phone and instantly see what something looks like—but don't mistake that for knowing it." With a painting, there's no way around it: you have to stand in front of it. And when you do, no bells go off; it doesn't move for you—you're just in conversation with it. You're absorbing it quietly. It doesn't tell you what to think. For a lot of people, that's a strenuous proposition.

OUR CULTURE TEACHES US TO SPEED UP. SO THE ACT OF LOOKING AT A PAINTING IS KIND OF RADICAL. IT'S SLOWING DOWN, ENGAGING WITH SOMETHING PHYSICAL.

We're constantly distracted. That's why experiencing painting today feels like such a different way of being. And I'm not just talking about *my* painting, but painting in general. It offers a way of connecting. You don't need to say anything about it—that's not the point. It's about looking, contemplation; staying with something, engaging with it.

DID YOU SEE THE HENRY TAYLOR AND JAMES JARVAISE EXHIBITION AT HAUSER & WIRTH? I LOVED IT—AND IT MADE ME THINK A LOT ABOUT STUDENT–TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS. I'M CURIOUS ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCE AS A TEACHER. DOES WORKING WITH STUDENTS EVER OPEN UP EXPERIMENTATION FOR YOU, OR INFLUENCE YOUR PRACTICE IN SOME WAY?

Oh, yes. Absolutely. I feel so fortunate that I get to teach. It was never an ambition of mine—I never thought I'd do it. For me, the best thing about it is that it becomes part of your practice. It's a way of teaching yourself. I honestly don't think I really knew anything until I had to start teaching it. Re-reading materials, trying to explain them—that's a whole different kind of learning. Teaching is not easy for me; it doesn't come naturally. Some people are great at it, and I envy them. For me, it's always hard work. But I love working with students, especially grad students. They make me think. They make me question things.

Teaching keeps me engaged. And of course, students are younger every year, so it keeps me connected to the younger generation. I think that's vital. One of the most important things I learned from Stephen Prina, watching him teach, is that he is never prescriptive. He doesn't impose his taste or judgement. Instead he asks questions that allow his students to find answers for themselves.

facing page:
Various studio tools

above:
Min works on impression studies of cobblestone frottage for her site project at the Memphis Art Museum

There's no reason anyone "should" be an artist—the world doesn't need another painter, strictly speaking. So it's not about practical application. Of course the market, politics, and social factors matter, but ultimately, sustaining a practice is about asking questions, not finding answers. You have to want to figure something out for yourself. Without that drive, there's no reason to do it.

DOES WITHHOLDING JUDGMENT WITH YOUR STUDENTS HELP YOU WITHHOLD JUDGMENTS OF YOUR OWN WORK?

Yeah, I think so. I try to remind myself of the same advice I give them: if something looks horrible, walk away; don't judge too quickly. Come back later and spend time looking. So yes, I try to practice what I preach. Judgment always creeps in—it's kind of inescapable. But having that longevity with yourself—to be able to walk away and come back to the work—matters.

HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN A PAINTING IS FINISHED?

For me, it's when the painting feels like its own thing—when it's not about me anymore. When it holds itself in a way that's familiar yet distanced at the same time. It sounds cryptic, but it's really a feeling. Sometimes you can make just three gestures and it's beautiful—and you wonder, *why not stop there?* Artists like Raoul De Keyser or Alex Katz do that brilliantly. But I've realized that I'm not that kind of artist. For me it's not enough, even if it looks beautiful. Maybe it's psychology, or maybe it's a need for more spatial complexity. At the same time, I do want paintings to look like they "just got there"—whether it took two days or six months.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE CENTRAL QUESTIONS YOU'RE CIRCLING IN YOUR WORK?

The questions shift with each body of work. For example, I made a series on glass with very liquid paint. Glass is an almost inhospitable surface for wet media. It felt like a laboratory experiment. Other times, working with squeegees, the paint left was so thin it was almost gone, just a residual trace. Those paintings raised questions about depth and flatness—how something can feel shallow and deep at once, which is contradictory. And the process itself was very physical—the body's movement became embedded in the marks, even if not legible.

With the smaller paintings I've been making recently [for the Vielmetter exhibition], it's different. In the past, my small paintings were like private studies, but this new body of work carries a different weight. The smallness [of these works] is a real, physical limit. Maybe I'll include a couple of larger pieces in the show, not sure yet. But with small paintings, you have to lean in closer—that changes the viewing experience.

ARE YOU ENJOYING WORKING SMALL?

Yes, I am. And interestingly, I'm using brushes more, which is kind of new for me. As a younger painter, brushes stressed me out. The marks I made with them didn't feel like mine—they felt like they belonged to history. That disconnect led me to experiment with other tools, which felt more liberating. But now, with these works, I feel differently. The weight of history feels less heavy, and I'm actually enjoying the brushes. So we'll see where that goes. ¤

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Yunhee Min's solo exhibition, Stills, is on view through December 20, 2025 at Vielmetter Los Angeles, 1700 S. Santa Fe Ave #101, Los Angeles, CA 90021.