

Jackie Lipton at AMP

A PAINTER WHO “WRITES PAINTINGS”

By Christina Schlesinger

THE PAINTER JACKIE LIPTON, the daughter of two poets, understands words. Who else would have intuited the RAGE and AGE in *couRAGE*, the title of her new show at AMP (Art Market Provincetown) Gallery in Provincetown? I have followed Jackie's work since the 1980s, when she made her dark, encrusted, layered, and word-laden AIDS paintings. The word *AIDS*, as well as images, names, and phrases of those lost to AIDS, are buried in these works. Eclipsed, painted over, submerged in a rain and torrent of lines, but they are there, hurting. Some words are even those of her father: buried in her art are “the words my father told me just before he died.” A writer of poems herself, she discards what she writes. Instead she makes paintings. You could call Jackie a painter who “writes paintings.”



couRAGE, Curious Yellow, 2019, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 48 inches
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In her family, Jackie was designated as “the writer,” while her younger sister, Irene, was “the painter.” However, both grew up to be equally talented painters; in fact, it was Irene who first recognized Jackie's animated doodling—her habit of writing over writing—as drawing, and encouraged her to make art. Nonetheless, both words and the act of writing itself become important, as well as loaded phenomena—tools in Jackie's work. Her paintings begin as compressed stacks of lines, sketched out with graphite and black paint, a kind of “pre-writing” of drawn strokes and scribbled shapes, curvy, lazy, and wayward, with circular forms creating rhythms. As she works, her process becomes a quest to find the inner logic and structure of the paintings she is creating. Over and over, words, scrawled and illegible, are exposed, buried, dug out, scraped, covered, and transformed.

The trajectory from the dark AIDS paintings to Jackie's current body of work travels through time and ends up with an ecstatic and expansive vision. Her process of hiding and revealing continues as she expresses her own complex internal world: “whatever is in my head.” She chooses not to paint from life, but allows form and structure to emerge out of the work; finding and claiming that inner structure motivates and thrills her. She calls this process “jumping in without a safety net,” meaning that she's jettisoning conscious thought. Conscious thought gets in the way, obstructs movement. “I never, not once, do what I intend to do,” she says. She will finish a painting many times. Just when she thinks she is done, she will “do one more thing” to throw off the balance, mess it up, sometimes deliberately wrecking it to increase the stakes to a higher level.

Jackie's paintings *Into the Blue* transitions into her *couRAGE* series. Now a diptych, *Into the Blue* was originally exhibited as two separate paintings. The painting's black scribbles and tangles, the spidery quality of the lines, suggest underbrush. Squiggles



Into the Blue 1, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60 inches



Into the Blue 2, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60 inches

of reddish-brown intimate leaves, small furry animals, and the woods. Other areas, built up with micaceous oxide, are heavily textured, adding density and earthiness, along with a hint of sparkle, shine, and mystery. Rising above and beyond this black calligraphy is the triumphant blue of the painting's title. Jackie uses blue insistently and consistently, a deep but airy and transcendent blue of early morning or just before twilight, a blue whipped out of phthalo, but without its darkness, sweetened with cerulean and cobalt. With this blue, Jackie takes the viewers on a journey, immersing them in sky and water.

I asked Jackie to explain "couRAGE" in the context of her new paintings. She responded, "Intense colors are courageous, they are right there; they don't hide." Her courageous use of color is abundantly clear in *couRAGE*, *Curious Yellow*, in which joyful and luscious yellows and purples present as a bouquet of flowers in springtime. A hint of yellow appears in *Into the Blue*, but here the yellow is transcendent and abundant. Billows of yellow and circular soft bud shapes of purple float over and almost obscure a complex arrangement of drips, marks, scrapes, and openings. A curious black shape, a kneeling or bowing figure, near the center of the canvas, seems to anchor the whole composition.

Jackie has always had a deep attraction to the color yellow (many of her early teachers in fact complained she used too much yellow), and she can use yellow in different ways: ebullient in *Curious Yellow* and discordantly in *couRAGE*, *Dancer*, in which the nested yellow shrieks out behind a mass of purple shapes and swirls of greens. The gorgeous painting *Accidental Heart* uses yellow in an intriguing way. Somehow it becomes a recessive color in this painting, aspirational, something to reach for as you clamber through the cliffs of blue and green.

A profound early experience caused Jackie to become an abstract painter, realizing that she didn't need to go to the external world for subject matter. Initially, she had thought she wanted to be a Realist or Surrealist painter. As a

child, frequently alone, emotionally unmoored, she was a reader and a dreamer. She wanted to capture various dream scenes in paintings but grew frustrated in her attempts. She saw scenes but couldn't paint them. After a lot of reading, her mind full of thoughts and images, she let process take over as she began to paint. She made a collection of shapes out of a field of layered colors with some flashes of brightness; from this emerged a shape like a figure X with arms outstretched. As the form and the painting's inner structure became clear, she felt bathed in a sense of joy that cut through her pain. "That's what painting is," she thought. She understood that what she wanted to see

was already there, made tangible by the act of painting. Trusting this process became her life.

Jackie suffers from migraines; she soon discovered that the only way she could mitigate the intense pain was by actively painting with color. All her senses are amplified during episodes of migraines, and she is flooded with images: she experiences synesthesia, touch, hearing, smells, tastes, all perceived as colors. She creates almost in a dream state, awakening to see what she has produced. Early on, she encountered resistance from her teachers to this way of working. Crucial early support came from Paul Brach, who Jackie met when she was seventeen and who recognized her need to let the paintings paint themselves.



Accidental Heart, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 48 inches



couRAGE, Dancer, 2019, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 48 inches



couRAGE, Blue, 2019, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 48 inches

As a teacher, he gave her the freedom and permission she craved. Another important artistic relationship was with Elizabeth Murray. They visited each other's studios and found many commonalities. Together they tackled the problem of when to finish. They both would finish—and not finish—their paintings many, many times.

The paintings of the *couRAGE* series are replete with intentional suggestions urging viewers to travel on a voyage to somewhere new. The paintings' glorious colors—fuchsias, pinks, lavenders, greens, yellows, and blues—soar with airiness and expansiveness as you catch glimpses into an intricate inner space. Showing her layering

process is of paramount importance to Jackie; it is a way of revealing her thinking, a window into her mind. She deliberately leaves openings in the painting to the drips, scrapes, and gestures that have previously unfolded. If she paints over something and then wants to recapture it, she remembers not the mark but the gesture, the impulse, the feeling that led to that mark. The colors ride over layer upon layer of these drips, marks and skeins of calligraphy. You peek through and venture into other worlds. Often, she will use smaller brushes as her paintings grow in scale; the smaller brushes make her feel more like she is writing as she covers the large expanse. Mindscapes emerge, immersions in forest, sky, and water abound, and we bear witness to the writing of a language known and unknown. In *couRAGE*, if there is AGE, there is youth; if there is RAGE, there is also transcendence. ❏

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