



# MARGARET WITHERS

BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

My father worked for different Texas oil companies in the 1970s and '80s; because of the nature of the work every two or three years my family was uprooted, moved across county lines, and resettled. Creating stories for myself became my way of processing the changes I experienced. With a buried bathtub in our backyard, I cast myself as an old woman drawing water to make gruel; in an empty boxcar I was a hobo biding my time; in an abandoned apartment complex I was a single successful woman throwing lavish parties. The work I've done so far depicts the emotional landscape of my childhood as I remember it—a blur of color and movement flashing by the static iconography of the past: those tiny company houses where the roughnecks lived, old-style telephone poles and pumpjacks. Enveloping that landscape, out of balance in scale, space, and perspective, are these figures that seem to dominate and subdue not with violence, but with curiosity and playful interaction. Interrupting the flow of abstract shapes with simple, flat black-and-white houses and telephone poles breaks the viewing pace, as if a light bulb had popped across the setting of the implied narrative—pulling the viewer into an undefined space where he/she can figure out the story or imagine a new one. I believe it is important to draw people in and capture and spark their imagination with art.

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**TAC:** Tell us about balancing a sense of order and disorder in your imagery.

**MW:** Being human, our minds immediately begin to search for order when we encounter something that initially seems confusing. We edit out the noise that makes us uncomfortable and focus on what we understand. Art has the capacity to capture people's imagination in that liminal space that can open up between finding order in the abstract while encountering the familiar icon. The lines, dots, and dashes act as connectors between these two disparate groups, and the balance that I work toward is what will best serve the tension or drama that exists between these components. The viewer is encouraged to wander within the painting and figure out the story by following the movement with his/her own intellect and personal history of the icons as he/

she encounters them. Using seemingly random shapes and icons to create worlds and movement comes from a long tradition and vocabulary in art history, including artists such as Carlo Carrà, Giacoma Balla, Max Ernst, Lee Bontecou, and Arshile Gorky, to name a few.

**TAC:** You spoke of your past and how it lacked a sense of settlement or permanence. How did this begin to work its way into your imagery?

**MW:** As Agnes Martin once said, "Art is the concrete representation of our most subtle feelings." As a child I was often left alone and was easily entertained by imagining my own worlds, and by creating countless fictions and stories that I would then act out. Eventually, like all kids, I outgrew imaginary play and found creating art to be a natural external and substantive progression of my imagination. The imagery I use today is what

eventually came to the surface from countless hours of painting.

**TAC:** What abstract expressionists do you look to for inspiration and why?

**MW:** There are many great Abstract Expressionists but I think the artists that have influenced me most were those that moved between movements. When I was young, my inspiration came from Miro, Klee, and Kandinsky. The first time I saw a Kandinsky in a museum in Paris, I was overwhelmed because it had this strong pleasurable and wondrous effect on me. The way that these artists utilized familiar shapes, color, and movement blew me away; I felt like I had met kindred spirits—others who created worlds. Today there are several artists whom I look to for inspiration. What inspires me are artists who use icons, color and

movement to create worlds or who hint at a narrative—artists like Lee Bontecou, Gert and Ewe Tobias, Marcel Eichner and Philip Guston, to name a few, sound artists such as Janet Cardiff and Bruce Nauman, and video artists such as Pipilotti Rist.

**TAC:** What is next for you as an artist?

**MW:** I have a solo show coming up in November at the Landau Gallery in Belmont Hill, MA, that I'm preparing for, in addition to a couple of group shows. I also have an upcoming residency in November at the Millay Colony, where I plan to work on a series of large-scale canvases and very large sheets of paper. As side projects I'm also working on a collection of nine poems that will each go with a separate painting, and a play about my father and his camper and the last year of my childhood in 1979.