

HARD-EDGED VIBRANT FANTASY LAND BY EMILY LUDWIG SHAFFER

BY LAYLA LEIMAN x Issue 15, Fall 2019

The Argentinian writer and blind bibliophile Jorge Luis Borges wrote that “If space is infinite, we may be at any point in space. If time is infinite, we may be at any point in time.” This resonates strongly in the paintings of Emily Ludwig Shaffer, which play with metaphysical propositions, visual riddles and paradoxes. Her paintings typically depict interior and exterior, but these commonplace scenes are undercut by a pervasive sense of the unfamiliar and mysterious. Doorways and rooms seem to lead around in circles, time has broken with convention and the distinction between outside and inside seems dependent on one’s point of view.

In her painting Up Out In, Emily positions the viewer simultaneously outside, inside, below, above. It is both night-time and daytime at the same time. Our gaze is led through this labyrinth of contradictions without reaching a finite point. We double back, loop round, lose our way and begin again.

Emily’s style of painting is hard-edged with imperceptible brushstrokes. The invisibility of her hand in the application of paint adds to the sense of illusion and causes us to question whether it is in fact a painting we’re looking at. In Emily’s work, looking and the gaze is foregrounded by the many framing devices she incorporates in her composition – windows, doorways, ponds, wreaths. She undermines the power of the gaze by leading it nowhere and around in circles, which ultimately turns it back on ourselves.

Although mostly empty of figures, Emily’s work is resounding feminist. Her visual language is steeped in sensuality and innuendo that is at once playful and challenging. The visual paradoxes and the illusory framing of space can be understood as the impossibility of containing and structuring what is boundless.

Emily lives and works in New York City. She received her BFA from the Rhode Island School of Design (Providence, RI) in 2010 and her MFA from Columbia University in 2017. Recent solo exhibitions have been presented at institute 193 (Lexington, KY) and Galerie Pact (Paris, France), and she has participated in numerous curated group exhibitions across North America.



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AMM: Hi Emily! You've mentioned your mother, who was an architect, as an artistic influence. Who have been other influences and mentors along the way?

ELS: My aunt and uncle are also figurative painters, so I was surrounded by multiple visual languages from early on. I always find it difficult to pick out just a few names for this question, but for the sake of brevity, some artists I've recently worked for or studied with who have made an impact include Jon Kessler, Mira Dancy, Nicola Lopez and Aliza Nisenbaum.

AMM: Can you tell us about developing your style of painting where your hand is all but invisible in the works?

ELS: It feels a bit more like rediscovering than developing. I remember as a child watching my older brother sketch in a staccato hairy way and I didn't understand why his hand did that. When I put my pencil down I would make clear hard lines, albeit very wobbly. As I went through art school "Loosen up" was a common critique for me, so I tried many different ways of painting for a long time, but I feel like it's only been in the past few years that I've rediscovered the confidence to paint in a way that feels most expressive and natural to me. I will work by hand with oil paint, though, so there are brush strokes, imperfections, and human touches in person that are lost in photographs.

AMM: In contrast to this, the composition of your paintings is self-referential. What is your thinking around your role as artist and presence in your work?

ELS: I see the self-referentiality as a form of world building. I'm not trying to write a seamless science fiction with my work or be too prescriptive with my painterly lexicon, but there is definitely a world I'm exploring here...one that is maybe in the future, or perhaps a faulty memory where much specificity is lost and all that's left are a few details and a mode.

AMM: In paintings such as 'Bird Bath Bow' and 'Shadow box moon back' clear framing devices direct the viewer's eye on the canvas. Your paintings foreground notions of viewing and the gaze. How do you engage with and Hubert power dynamics implicit in the gaze?

ELS: Framing devices are like an echo of the canvas edge. With them, I want to be forthright about the limitations of one point of view, of my own subjectivity, but they are also about creativity within constraints.



AMM: In relation to this the subject matter in your paintings is teasingly ambiguous. Rolling hills resemble bodies, but not quite, figures are vaguely feminine, but not obviously so. How do you play with expectations and feminine symbolism in your work?

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ELS: Painting is a very sexual process. Even if my works end up looking more hard-edged in the end, I'm still painting fantasy lands and using focused, heightened senses to squish around vibrant colours and juices. I try to be very careful with how I use the figure because of the history of the white male gaze you allude to in the last question, but I'm also a physical sexual being so I don't want to make art that only ever excites the brain. Phalluses in the bush or a butt among the hills is a way to express and embrace that side of being a woman and an animal.

AMM: Can you tell us more about the symbolic visual language in your work, such as the creeping vines, lattices, straight-backed chairs, braids, windows, stairs...?

ELS: My paintings are a bit like sentences in that a plant can mean or symbolise one thing in one painting but as its context changes from work to work, it needs to be understood in each unique context. In one painting the potted creeping vine may be something previous or decorative, in another it maybe more sentient, sexual, and/or foreboding.

AMM: Your paintings often portray rooms inside rooms and multiple times of day in one scene. Can you speak this metaphysical aspect of your work?

ELS: There's this Persian miniature painting that I found in a book that illustrates a scene from the Khamsa of Nizami where a prince is standing in daylight outside of a princess's house that is shrouded in night. It isn't known exactly why the illuminator depicted it this way, but it's a tragic poem about two lovers who are never able to be together, so some scholars suppose it's to suggest they are in different time zones, or at least to highlight the distance between them. Persian miniature illuminators often did things like this to depict multiple stories, points of views, or times within a work, and I'm drawn to this loosening of time and perspective within one composition. Sometimes I paint purple skies too, as it could mean either dusk or dawn.

AMM: Doorways, stairs and corners play tricks on the viewer, leading the gaze around in circles like a hall of errors. Please tell us more about defamiliarising the familiar and undermining expectations in your work.

ELS: I want the spaces to seem familiar but not literal. The varied forms of perspective and the elements you mention allow room for more psychological and emotional exploration inside compositions that would otherwise seem straight forward.

AMM: What is the relationship between contained and open space in your work? The image of the night sky reflected (although not a true reflection) in the pond in The Secret Garden Femme perfectly captures the tension between these opposing forces in your work.

ELS: As the title suggests, in the Secret Garden Femme I was partly thinking about the idea of privacy and a safe space. I think it comes from the desire and sometimes the need to contain something expansive.

AMM: Please tell us about the absence of people in your paintings.

ELS: I almost exclusively painted figures in undergrad and I rarely felt like I was having the conversation I wanted to, and I became uncomfortable with the process of objectifying people. So, when I was in my early twenties I got rid of the figure altogether in any sort of literal way. Within the past two years, though, I've started bringing the figure back in the form of stone statues. These statues are predominantly female-presenting bodies, and in the wake of #metoo and a Silvia Federici reading I was doing at the time, they started as monument proposals to female companionship. I'm exploring the world/gardens of these statues in other ways now too, but it's still very important to me that they come off as stone hard and cold.

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AMM: As a female artist do you feel an urgency or necessity to engage with feminist tropes and discourse in your work?

ELS: Yes, but there's a lot of other issues or things I care about concurrent to gender. It's not an isolated issue.



AMM: Looking at your body of work over the past couple years we can see you're experimenting with different ideas in your work. Please tell us about the different directions you've explored and your journey to where you're currently at in your painting.

ELS: It's funny, some people think my work hasn't changed much in the past 5 years and others say I'm making drastically different work from just a year ago. I think both are probably correct. For someone who seems to make such rigid work, the process of ideation is actually pretty intuitive. So much is influenced by what I'm reading or listening to or looking at in a given month, but I am who I am so there will always be some of those overarching themes and concerns we've been discussing.

AMM: We're curious about the edges of your paintings in relation to depicting space and dimensionality. In your paintings on canvas the image stretches to the edges of the canvas, but does not wrap around the sides, emphasizing the two-dimensionality of the painting in contrast to the three-dimensionality of the composition. Please tell us more about this.

ELS: This is something I do in some paintings but not in all of them. It was a way for me to think about the illusionistic quality of my paintings, and to disrupt that in a very small way – like the frayed edge of a piece of cloth.

AMM: Do you have any studio rhythms and rituals?

ELS: I work in a windowless ventless studio in Bushwick so I have a large poster of the Hoh Rainforest on my wall with a desktop rock fountain under it. I try to look over at that corner a few times a day, and I try to go on a short walk during lunch.

AMM: What is your process of working?

ELS: It's hard to say when a work starts. Going to see shows, reading books, listening to podcasts and conversations with friends all give me a lot of ideas that I turn into sketches that may or may not ever become a painting.

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I also email myself frequently with the subject line “ART IDEA” . It’s amazing how cryptic and useless most these ideas seem even just one day later. Like, there’s this one I sent to myself years ago about archers camped out in the crenellated turrets of a White Castle. I still don’t know what “art idea” this was supposed to spark, but my friend Calvin says I should publish them in a book or maybe just to a blog eventually. Sometimes a sketch or idea will just sit for months and never develop, but usually I sketch an image or an idea over and over again until it takes on a form that interests me enough to either do an acrylic painting on paper or a photoshop mock-up of. This is where I try to figure out the colors and the mood of the piece. If it passes that stage I’ll project the sketch onto the canvas to make sure I get the angles right, and then it’ll take 2-3 layers of thin oil paint over a few weeks to finish a work.



AMM: Your work has been included in some exciting group shows not to mention two solo shows in two years. Talking marketing and career development isn’t always a favourite topic amongst artists, but we would be curious to hear your experience post-art school – what have been big learnings for you?

ELS: A lot of my 20s were spent waitressing, gallery assisting, and working for other artists. I learned a lot from all of those experiences.

AMM: What is the art scene like in NYC for emerging artists?

ELS: Everyone who knows me has heard me complain about my studio a lot recently. I can’t handle a windowless ventless space anymore. New York is great for its access to galleries, museums and other artists, but it’s terrible for space. I’ve been living in New York for nearly 10 years and somehow my studio just keeps getting smaller and darker. I’m paying 3 times the price per square foot that I was when I moved here.

AMM: Are you working on any exciting projects right now? What’s next for you?

ELS: I’m doing a solo booth with L’Inconnue at NADA Miami in December and a solo with PACT in Paris in the fall of 2020.

Find out more about the artist: www.emilyludwigshaffer.com

Interview by Layla Leiman for ArtMaze Magazine