



An Interview with Lauren Manninen

Amid the cacophony of artists that are out there it is refreshing to come across an artist that makes you stop and ponder their art and the story behind it. The art world is a kaleidoscope of colors, styles, mediums, and stories all vying for attention but all of that falls away when you gaze at Lauren's works. They stand alone, not begging for you to compare them to other art by another artist, but to simply have a conversation with the piece one on one. The noise of the outside world falls away and you find yourself at the center of a storm of colors and textures that at first glance seem chaotic, but upon closer inspection flows across the canvas in a fluid and natural manner.

Straddling the banks of the Cedar River, 20 miles north of Iowa City rests Cedar Rapids, the home of Lauren Manninen. She received her degree in Fine Arts from the Minneapolis College of Art in Design in 2014.

Lauren is enamored by the meditative act of making, and being completely in the moment of creation. She is comfortable working in a variety of mediums including woodworking, fiber art, and bookbinding, but, it is the conversation she has with the canvas that leaves her feeling invigorated and endlessly curious about where the brush will lead her next.

Her work is informed by abstract expressionism, Zen Buddhist practice, and time spent studying art in Japan. Lauren was kind enough to take sometime away from the studio and answer a few of our questions about her art, and her approach to making art. Oh, and her dope ass studio cats. Cause you know... kyatz.

ARO (A): Thanks for doing this interview with us. I remember when I first saw your work I just had to find out more about it and about you. Especially your centering series. I can stare at those works for hours.

Lauren Manninen (LM): I just put a few more up on my website in the centering series. They really feel like my freshest and feel like the work I'm engaging with the most. I appreciate the chance to talk with you about my work. I think it is important for artists to regularly talk about their work to help them articulate the ideas they are engaging [with].

A: So tell us a little bit about yourself. What was life like for a young Lauren growing up?

LM: I grew up in Cedar Rapids, Iowa which is a decent sized city. My mother is a figure skating coach, and my father an engineer; I like to think I got a bit of their creativity and analytical traits. I've been making art ever since I can remember. I had a drawing room setup in my parent's attic that I would go work in, even in the sweltering summers. During high school I was always working on a new project with some friends, whether that be learning how to turn a wood lathe or planning "sewing party all-nighters". Once we even made a quilt to cover a whole truck for a parade float.

A: Painting in the heat couldn't have been fun. Hopefully your studio situation has improved a bit.

LM: My current studio is actually fairly modest, I work out of the sunroom in my house, but it provides really nice painting light. It is cooler than the attic was.



LM: I actually spent a lot of time in my early years doing digital art. I don't doubt that it is real art, and you can do some really amazing things with it. I spent my early career working in graphic design. I think the ease of manipulating shapes and images in digital art allows for young artists to learn about color and composition in a quicker way. I'm always excited to see what comes out of the digital art field.

But for me, I like the object-ness of traditional painting. You develop a relationship with the canvas as you build layer upon layer. You can add bold texture, and have gravity do some work for you as the paint drips down the surface. You also develop a relationship with your tools, I have favorite brushes, I know which paints have a different personality. I know it all sounds a bit romantic, but the tactile-ness of working with these materials right then and there, and working with them to create something that moves with you is comforting.

A: So fast forward to now. How do you survive and thrive as an artist?

LM: I'm 25 now, and started doing art full-time this past spring. I'm really fortunate I'm able to. I sell some work at fairs, and teach a few art classes a week to support myself.

A: When did you discover your passion for art?

LM: I think it was always there. But I was a very nervous child, and art allowed me to feel confident in myself. I was always teaching other kids how to draw dragons or something like that.

A: As an artist that works in traditional media how do you feel about digital art? Do you think it's real art?

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A: What allure does abstract expressionism hold for you?

LM: I like how many abstract-expressionist paintings are like a map, they contain history that tells you how it was made. You can imagine the artist working the paint. I also find them challenging to execute, to get them centered and balanced. I actually find traditional portraiture to be much more forgiving, and I do some of those from time to time.

A: When most people think of meditation they think of someone sitting lotus position, palms up. Can you explain how creating art is similar to this for you?

LM: My meditation practice comes from the Soto Zen school. Which is all about being here and now, and paying complete attention to whatever you are doing. I practice traditional meditation. But it also links into mindfulness and treating the environment (or my paintings) with respect and attention. You get into a state of flow sometimes, and that's a great feeling.

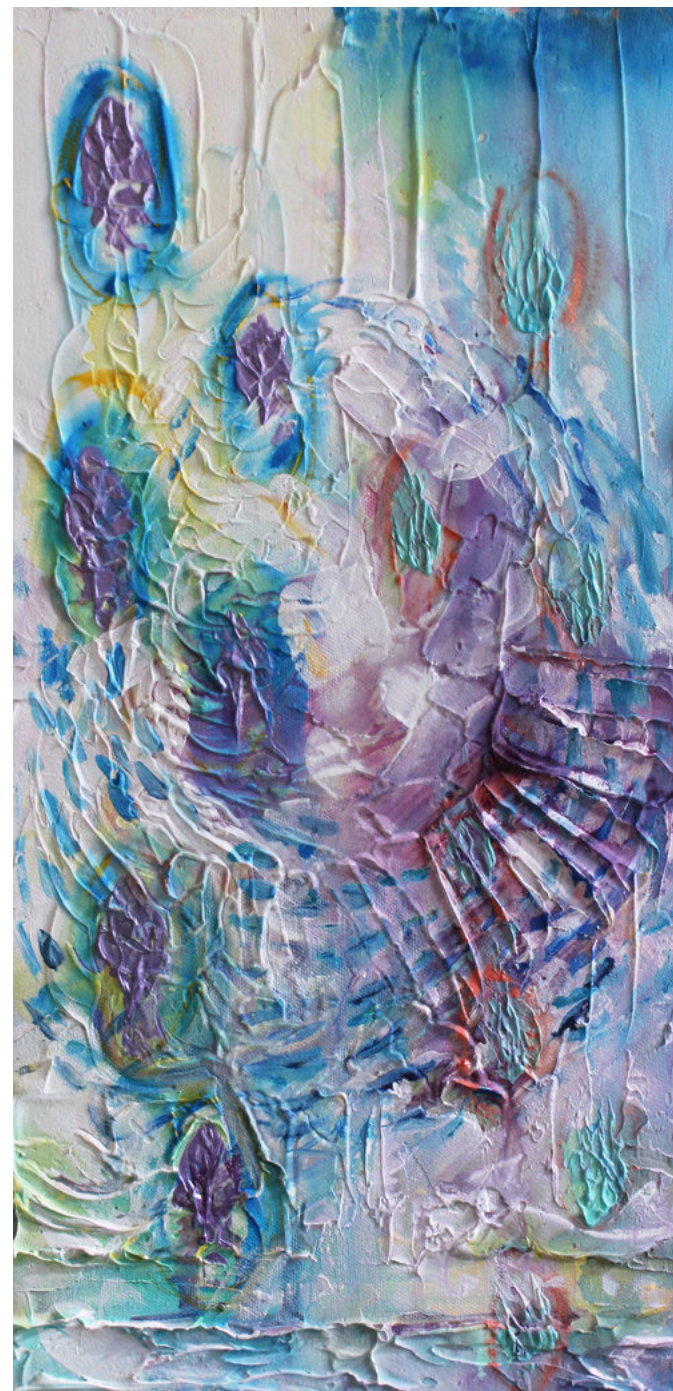
A: Some people might not consider abstract expressionism art or feel that it is just 'splashes and squiggles'. How should viewers approach your art? What can help them understand it?

LM: I think for some people, art needs to be done with "skill and good technique". It just seems like a lack of understanding into the artistic process. I think if they saw the time it takes to make a piece they would appreciate it more. I love watching other abex artists paint on youtube, it's almost like a dance.

But my view has always been that anything can be art so long as someone says it is. That does not mean it is good art. And just because it's not good art, it doesn't mean it shouldn't have been made. Making art is very therapeutic for some people with little experience and it is important for them to make it too. It's about the process of making art.

A: Is there an overarching theme or message that you want to convey through your art?

LM: I think the message tends to change based on the series, but overall my paintings are a celebration of color, mark-making, and the push and the pull between the painter and the canvas.



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I try to create art that is accessible by my audience. Because of this I think it is important not to take myself too seriously, it alienates people I think when they are intimidated by art because they don't understand it.

So maybe my message is "It is important to greet a painting as a potential friend."

A: You've had the opportunity to study abroad. How long did you spend in Japan?

LM: I spent 6 months studying at the Osaka University of Arts, and was fortunate enough that I had been studying Japanese since High School. It was a great experience and I would love to go back for a visit soon. The arts culture is amazing in Japan, and everyone I met was working so hard and creating some really amazing stuff.

A: Would you consider your self an Otaku girl?(a big anime fan)

LM: Haha! I wouldn't say an Otaku girl, but I would say I'm a pretty big nerd. People seem surprised when they find out I play DnD, watch anime, and play a lot of video games.

A: What's your favorite anime?

LM: I'd have to say Cowboy Bebop. My friend actually named his corgi Ein.

A: How does your art pre-studying abroad in Japan differ from the art you create now?

LM: I was doing a lot of experimental digital work before I went to Japan. Like making virtual environments using game design programs. I got back in touch with traditional media after doing a few paintings there for an illustration class.

A: Do you spend time meditating outside of creating art?

LM: I do, I'm also lucky to have a Zen community in Cedar Rapids that I am a part of.

A: Walk me through what goes through your mind when you sit in front of a blank canvas. Do you approach it with a particular goal in mind or is your approach more free flowing?

LM: I try not to set a goal, I mostly just see where the paint leads me. So the first thing I do is get some texture on the canvas. I use a lot of modeling paste, which is white. So I put that on and leave it until the next day. Then I paint it over with some colors that call to me. It's a back and forth, I just do what seems like the next best thing. I do a lot of flipping of my canvases as well.

A: Most artists have an art ritual they do before they start creating. They may have to drink from a favorite mug while working or listen to a specific playlist. What's your art ritual?

LM: I listen to a lot of podcasts and music while I paint. But other than that my only other quirk I have is I like to paint sitting on the ground. My two studio assistants like to chill next to me when I do.

A: Tell us about your studio assistants? How helpful are they?

LM: Haha, I have two black cats, Lumin and Luna. They are sometimes helpful, sometimes not. They are no longer allowed to help change my paint water.



A: How can we expect your work to evolve moving forward?

LM: I'd like to continue to build my Centering / Storm Systems series. I feel there is a lot of ground to investigate there. I was also thinking I may revisit some portraiture here in the future. I try not to plan too much, since I often get ahead of myself, and the ideas will not come naturally.

A: What advice would you give aspiring artist?

LM: Keep doing work consistently, and put it out there! No one will see it if you don't do a bit of self promotion.

Also reach out to arts organizations in your area, having a community around you that is enthusiastic and supportive of the arts is hugely important. Even if you just attend or teach a few classes.

A: Do you think formal art training is important?

LM: For me it was fantastic, though I don't think it is necessary for everyone. I had so many interests when I started, that having 4 years exploring what I wanted to do was invaluable. If you work hard, network, and put your work out there things start to come together. People follow and support artists that resonate with them, it's just a matter of finding them!

A: Where can our readers go to see more of your work and interact with you?

LM: I have a website at LManninen.com and I'm on instagram at LManninenStudio. There's some pictures of my studio assistants on my instagram as well :)

