

Inside the Artist - Rachael S. Lorimer January 2015



Tell us about your journey in art / as an artist.

It starts right at the beginning. I'm from a very creative family. I was really little (a toddler) when my grandfather sat me down with paints and intentionally gave me red, yellow and blue to mix secondary colors from primary. I always had a creative place to play infused with the basics from the beginning. Because I had the support of my family, I was able to explore creatively with independence and encouragement, and I think it fostered a visual learning that carried forward through college. It shaped how I observe, collect and interpret information in the world around me.

I also had a family that was strongly anti-marketing – so I saw very little TV and every so often a movie. I wasn't visually exposed to incessant commercials or ads. It created a sort of visual isolation that allowed me to observe my surroundings and draw from the world around me instead of what was being shown or presented to me. It was more self-directed.

In high school, I had the incredible opportunity to focus on technique in drawing, painting, sculpture, photography and printmaking. I had a group of teachers who recognized and fostered my desire to learn, and they treated me like an apprentice. It allowed me to gain depth in technique and I focused on intaglio printmaking and drawing. When it came time for me to apply to college, my grandfather suggested that I apply to his alma mater; I didn't know what this meant at the time and had to look it up! He had gone to The Cooper Union in New York City, and that was the only reason I applied there. He had gone for graphic design and painting in the 1940's. There are only three degrees you could obtain at Cooper Union; art, architecture or engineering. Cooper Union is a school that accepts people on merit, not the ability to pay and when both he and I attended, it still provided full tuition scholarships to all accepted students.



But it was a rude awakening! I explored in-depth how much you can actually give to a piece of art. I learned how to edit and revise my work. It became reasonable to spend 13-20 hours on a single drawing or project. It pushed me to think about my projects and creative process, and changed my perspective about what was possible. It was both fascinating and frustrating.

The most challenging part at this stage in my life of being an artist is the discipline. So many components of life to balance and trying to carve out the time; I may be willing to give a piece thirteen hours, but I am not always able. I've found myself changing the type of work I do to suit the time available and even so, it is always worth it. Even if it's a quiet watercolor sketch, a doodle or a painting that I work at for an hour every week for a year; it is a rewarding process to engage creatively, tap into imagination and put my observations onto paper. It's important too, because I no longer exist in the protective, blissful place where art is my only commitment (like in a high school classroom) where I could feel myself grow as an artist. These days, this feeling is often lost, forgotten and set aside easily. Making time for (art/creative process) helps me stay awake and stay excited.

What is the medium you most like to work with/in? What draws you to this medium? What do you like about your materials?

Right now I am working with watercolor, crayons and colored pencils on sketchbook size paper. These are very basic tools with very specific limitations. Watercolor is transparent, crayons are blunt/textured and colored pencils take diligence to keep them sharp so you get the lines you want. I absolutely love the challenge of trying to make them not appear juvenile, to try to give them an advanced application with sophistication. I also

appreciate that they behave in ways that you don't expect. It's a fun game; in how you let it dance and play to retain the essence of the material, but still demonstrate that you have command over how you explore with it. Sometimes it's successful and sometimes it's not.

What most inspires your work - Has there been anything that has been life changing or that has influenced your practice?

I think the things that have consistently inspired me most are plants. I love that they look weird in springtime. I love the incredible range of color and different shapes depending on where they originate (whether it be Australia or Vermont, the mountains or the desert). Not just looking at the foliage, stems and roots, but understanding that they exist and coexist in the larger network of other plants. I appreciate how they thrive and persevere in settings that are not always ideal or best for them and how they change through the different seasons (even in dormancy). Then there's the whole *blossom* situation! It completely transforms the plant's identity. I was fascinated with seedpods for a while; how plants hold onto and then distribute them. I love the patterns that occur with their shadows, their shape, color, texture and movement. If you dig and look deeper you can become obsessed and I've definitely reached that level!



Throughout my career, I've always consistently returned to plants. You would think that I would love drawing them (and

sometimes I do), but I don't typically do botanical portraits. I try to zone in on the personality of the plant; its essence and movement. Then I rework and blend it with my imagination and create a visual representation of my experience with the plant. I started photographing them as a way for me to take visual notes. My all-time favorite aspect of plants is that they eventually become earth. It then makes me like dirt, rocks and compost and I end up falling for all of it!



In terms of something life changing that has influenced my practice; I have to say it was when I got glasses for the first time. Until I was thirteen, I thought my vision was A-OK. I perceived the world as it was. The day I came home with glasses (for distance vision), I sat in the field near my house and was stunned at the detail I could see, even at a distance. It was wild and transformative to the way that I observed and interpreted the world. I had always had the sense that detail existed everywhere, but now I could see it; and feeling it in this new way was different than simply knowing it was there. I had the sense that I could now choose to acknowledge it or not. With my glasses on, the detail was there, without my glasses, I could remove it and it was like a weird magical power. It was selective determination of my observation experience and I loved playing with it. Even now, when I build a piece of artwork, I can choose to see the detail or be swept by the sense that you are looking at the piece through a larger perspective. It's a push/pull and I can include both the immediate and distant in a single piece. It still fascinates me and is pretty cool!

This experience was also overwhelming as the world immediately became a much bigger place. I always understood that there were individual leaves on the trees, but to see every single one gave me the realization that there is *so much* we are not seeing even when we are intently observing. It prods me to keep looking and keep exploring.

What blogs or books are you reading or would recommend?

Admittedly, I don't read a lot and when I do, it is mostly poetry. My favorite book is "*Red Suitcase*" by Naomi Shihab Nye. I love this poet and this particular collection. I read it the same way I look at plants. It was a gift from my mom in high school and I re-read it all the time. Sometimes I have difficulty or lose patience with linear narratives, so I will flip through the book and select one to read based on whether or not I like the title. I like the short format so that I can read, reflect, absorb and re-read as I like. I read the whole book at least once per year and keep it in my studio at my art desk. Her imagery is specific – there is a clear understanding of her observations and experiences. Yet it is also open-ended and there's room for your own imagination. It often wakes me up creatively.

I've also been reading "*Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain*" by Oliver Saks. I like it for the same reason. It has a short format with episodes and sections that highlight patients he has worked with over the years. The book is broken down by issue/dysfunction type and how the brain processes music and sound around each issue. He includes stories of progressive hearing loss to total deafness (and everything in between), to people with perfect pitch. It reminds me of the link between my vision and my art/visual interpretation of the world, and gets me to think about how there is so much variation in how we absorb and interpret what is around us, even through just one of our senses.

One more book I keep in my studio, which is both sentimental and practical, is Shel Silverstein's "*A Light in the Attic*". I've spent my life trying to perfect my craft and it can sometimes be challenging to be loose and playful, to find enjoyment in the process and in sharing it with others. His poetry and drawings are so free and so ridiculous; they just are what they are and there is no need to color in the doodles or be overly intellectual. Just having it on the shelf near me reminds me to play.

