

## Interview with Polina Barskaya

Questions by Emily Burns



Polina Barskaya, "The Couple", 2017, acrylic on panel, 16 in x 20 in

### Polina Barskaya

Polina Barskaya (b. 1984, Cherkassy, Ukraine) received a BA from Hunter College, NY and an MFA from Pratt Institute, Brooklyn. Recent exhibitions include Adam Baumgold Gallery, Honey Ramka, and Monya Rowe Gallery.

#### Hi Polina! Can you tell us a bit about your background and what motivated you to become an artist?

Hi! I was born in Cherkassy, Ukraine and immigrated to the US in 1989 with my family. We came as political refugees and had to go through Austria and Italy before arriving in NYC. I went to Hunter College for Undergrad and Pratt for my M.F.A. I called myself an artist since childhood but when I decided half way through college that I would change my major to art I committed to it in what felt like a most serious way.

#### Have you always worked figuratively?

Yes, I have been painting and drawing figuratively since high school. I used to have family members and friends sit for me when I was a teenager. In college I started to work from family photos which I continued until about a year ago when I started taking my own photos to work from. Once I started using my own photos everything opened up. I moved away from my past and started to focus on the present.

#### Can you tell us more about the subject matter in your current series?

They are autobiographical paintings. The recent paintings are all of moments in interiors that my husband and I live or have spent time in.

#### Have there ever been any challenges with opening up your life through your work?

Painting myself in the nude was difficult at first. I really wanted to make the painting but was nervous when I knew it would be shown. I got over it because it felt like the right thing to do.

#### In some of the paintings there is a phone present, glimpsed in a mirror as you take a picture. Do you normally work from photographs or just in these instances?

I always work from photos. If the phone is present then I took the photo in a mirror. I like keeping the phone in those paintings.

#### Can you walk us through the stages of planning and making a painting?

The first stage is taking photos. Sometimes I'll take an image and paint it right away other times I can have 20 images and then I choose which one I am in the mood to paint. Then I choose the right size panel to work on and then I paint. I

# MONICA DE CARDENAS

don't draw anything first, I just start painting. I paint pretty quickly and what I consider my strongest paintings are done the fastest. If the painting feels dead and uninteresting after a days work I usually cover it and start over the next day. Every time I've tried fixing a painting I didn't like I failed. I usually know if it will work after a day of working on it and if it doesn't work I move on instead of torturing myself.

## **What is your medium? Are you using oil?**

I work in acrylic. My studio is my bedroom and oil would be impossible. When I was working in oil in college it always made me light headed. Before acrylic I was working only in watercolors and I think that helped make my acrylic paintings look less stiff.

## **Is drawing a part of your practice?**

I don't draw. I do make watercolors when I am traveling. When I sit down to work I always want to start on the next painting.

## **Can you tell us more about the scale of your paintings?**

I work small. The largest painting I made is 3'x4'. I don't see myself going bigger than that in the near future. My favorite sizes are 16x20 and 18x24.

## **What have been some of the biggest influences on your life and your work thus far?**

Traveling has been a huge influence. Especially traveling to Italy. My husband and I have been taking long trips to Italy once a year and staying in a different region each time. Last summer we were in Tuscany and Lazio. We saw The Madonna Del Parto by Piero Della Francesca then tried to see as much of his work as possible. When I come back from these trips all those paintings are with me when I get to work.

## **What is a typical day like for you?**

I wake up around 10:30-11. Drink lemon water and have breakfast and coffee. I do my internet stuff. I answer emails and do all the stupid things I won't mention. Then I will make food and go outside for a walk or to the gym, if I am good. Some days, I will work for about 2 hours during the day but most days I'll only start painting after dinner. From about 9 P.M-1:45 A.M. I work. I can do it during the day but I feel most productive at night. Part of it is knowing I have nothing else I have to do and I know I won't have to stop once I start. I like to get everything out of the way so that I can focus.

## **What are you reading right now?**

Right now I am reading Tropic of Cancer. I just finished the first volume of Anais Nins diary and Hunger by Knut Hamsun. Cassavetes was one of the biggest film influences for me. He and Gena Rowland's created some of the strongest women in film.

From painters Alice Neel, Giorgio Morandi, Fra Angelico, Piero Della Francesca, Matisse, Vermeer, Vuillard, Fairfield

Porter are all big influences. Recently I've been looking at Paula Modershon Becker and Paula Rego.

## **What do you listen to while you work? Is this an important part of being in the studio?**

Until recently I preferred silence while working. Now I listen to music at least part of the time that I paint. When I have to really focus on a detail I turn it off. I have a station on Spotify with a lot of Joan Baez, Sade, Bob Dylan, and Patsy Cline.

## **Can you tell us a bit about your workspace? What are absolute necessities in the studio?**

My space is a small table with an easel and a chair. For me the most important thing is to have everything ready when I sit down. I leave my brushes and palette in the same place from session to session so all I have to do when I sit is start painting.

## **How do you navigate distraction or lack of motivation while working?**

When I lack motivation to even start painting I'll watch a good movie. Going to The Met helps a lot too. If I get bored or distracted while I am painting I go get a snack or some tea. Sometimes I just need a break for a day to clear my head.

## **How important is the place where you live to your studio practice? This could include geographic location, city, neighborhood, community...**

Being on Brighton beach is a big part of my work. I believe that it is in my paintings. The light in my apartment is different then if I lived in Manhattan because I have the sand and ocean right outside my window. There is also a very different mood in the air here then anywhere else.

The travel paintings are very different in mood and color palette from my home paintings as well.

## **Any advice from your past that has stuck with you or helped you?**

My professor at Pratt told me not to get good at something that I don't like to do. I might have taken it too far but I think it was really good advice.

## **What are you working on right now?**

Right now I am in Mexico. We will be traveling to Puebla, Oaxaca, and Mexico City so I am hoping to come home with images I can use for future paintings.

## **Do you have any other news, shows, residencies or projects coming up?**

I have a solo show opening on February 3 at John Davis Gallery in Hudson NY and a solo coming up this Winter with with Monya Rowe in NYC.

## **Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us!**

Thank you!