

Donna Isham has two principal ways of making her paintings. Her first is to plunge into the mainstream of Abstract Expressionism and working within this tradition, she has made pieces that owe nothing to earlier pairs of eyes, except a gestural ambitiousness, a willingness to go for it. Another distinct body of Isham's work is rooted in figuration, and growing out of this is work, in which the figuration and the abstraction co-exist.

Individual artists can have and give very different reasons for making their work. Just what is it that drives Donna Isham to paint? *"That's a very interesting question. There is a responsibility to be honest with myself and allow others that same honesty and respect in a very cynical environment. My work is a representation of struggle, hope, sincerity, individuality, strength and courage, amidst the tides of uncertainty."*

Isham's abstract works include such strikingly different canvases as *Black Swans* and *Angry Sad Mad*, and *Separated from Families During Lockdown*. These embody an urgently felt need. *"For me, I paint to create emotion, a historical context or whatever is going on with the pandemic now. It's really important for me that people have another viewpoint other than the Internet, other than social media. There's a tactile sense, there's a feeling one gets from pigments on canvas, that is indescribable. When I listen to music, I cry, it's very emotional for me, and it's the same when I see a beautiful painting."*

Accidents can be crucial in making a piece, but so can pursuing a specific line of inquiry. One canvas was born from the attention Isham had been focusing on a not uncommon, but always slightly jarring experience, typically in the heart of a big city,

which is to have your “*attention caught by a face in the crowd, a face you half think you know, whose eye you catch, with whom you can have a short, wordless connection.*” Isham was resolved that this uncanny feeling would be something she would capture without recourse to images, just shapes, colors, lines. And *Strangers Passing by Seem Familiar*, the end product, delivers precisely that sense of uncertainty. The title plays into that, of course. Many artists are given to calling their work *Untitled*, meaning nothing needs to be added here. Others though see titling as an opportunity, such as Marcel Duchamp’s tongue-in-cheek drollery with *Fountain* and *LHOOQ*. Very occasionally, as with Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ*, a title will define a piece, furnish meaning. The title of *Strangers Passing by Seem Familiar* has such input. Isham has a gift for titles.

Isham’s figurative work is a painterly interpretation of womanhood, and here she has Abstract Expressionist precursors, primarily de Kooning. Her pictorial raw materials include photographs and drawing from the figure but sometimes in the work product the figuration will have become an elusive partner. *Moondance*, for instance, may initially strike one as a pure abstraction, but then you will pick up on the undulant graphic outlines, and, whoops, a woman dominates. And *Restless*, a particularly effective canvas, combines flame-shaped scarlet slashes with an elongated bone-white form that I take to be the back of a naked woman. It is at once elegant and powerful. In such canvases she is also clearly playing with our in-born human predilection for finding faces and forms in such naturally occurring abstractions as shadows, clouds, stained walls.

Isham’s double tracking had been on my mind since I began to work on this project. Not all artists have worked in very different styles but many have. Picasso being the

reigning deity of metamorphosis, and a list of artists who worked in very different manners would include Philip Guston, who abandoned the Abstract Expressionism for a comic-bookish brutalism; and John Baldessari, who burned his early expressionist paintings, making this action his launch-pad into Conceptual art. These artists, however, did not work in different styles at the same time, as Isham does, so when I sat down just two Zooms away from her, I opened with a question about this practice.

*“I am really interested in both of them and find that each informs the other in so many ways- in tension, materials and concept.”* Isham said of figuration and abstraction, *“A lot of my abstract work has lyrical gestures. One can become pigeonholed and marginalized in so many different aspects in one’s life. The regimentation, compartmentalization and digitization are stiling. So, I made a conscious effort not to limit myself in one way or another and allow myself the vulnerability to explore each. I have as a result, been able to examine complexities of dignity, success, failure, resilience, courage, sexuality and control.”*

Isham’s journey into art-making began during her childhood in Studio City, Los Angeles. *“When the other kids were out playing softball, I was drawing,”* she says. She continued to make art during her adolescence. Young adulthood happened, but the thought of showing her work to win her way in an over-populated art world dismayed her. After graduating from UC Berkeley, she began her Masters study in museum work at University of San Francisco while working at the Asian Art Museum there. That seemed the *“safer route,”* as she was still struggling with her voice as an artist and her ability to be vulnerable enough to risk getting her work seen. A move back to Los Angeles led her to the entertainment industry, as both a

costume designer and stylist, and a productive career in both fashion and movies. Life included marriage to Mark Isham, award winning musician, who plays the trumpet and synthesizer, and whose music is featured on a dauntingly long list of movies, including *River Runs Through It*, *Crash*, *Point Break* and *Blade*, and TV shows, including the Emmy nominated *Little Fires Everywhere*- to which Isham holds the position of Executive Director of Mark Isham Music. They have four children. Life is full and good. But Isham's unsatisfied desire to create art became ever more urgent.

Isham did return to painting and drawing, but it was for her eyes only, in a studio set up in their house and she was no more eager to subject her work to a family critique than she had been to confront the art world generally. *"I kept it hidden from them,"* she said. Why? *"Honestly at that point it was terrifying for me to be vulnerable as an artist. But at a certain point it became too painful not to put it out, rid myself from myself inflicted shackles."*

So, show time! *"You're not to say a word! No looks on your face, nothing!"* she told her family. *"I took out portfolios that I had of drawings and pictures I had done over the years. And they are like what? What the #\*%^? How did we not know about this? For whatever reason it had been very terrifying. But once I shifted that paradigm, I realized I needed to honor my passion to create art and risk the idea of failure. It was like a window barricaded up was now opened up and the characters, sounds, smells and texture of the world became tools to use for expression. I want to capture the courage and fear, triumph and journey, and divergent themes in our turbulent society today."*

Her work went up around their home. Visitors were enthusiastic, word got around swiftly and Isham had her first gallery show just two years ago. Her work is collected and exhibited around the world. Currently, Donna Isham has work up at the DAC Gallery in Miami, Steiner Gallery in Vienna, and a show at the Hostetler Gallery in Nantucket, entitled SHE: unDaunted, a name which lets us know some of the things that Donna Isham feels she needs to say.

The strength of Isham's abstraction/figurations owes a great deal to the flexibility of her procedure. This openness, an appetite for risk, is fundamental to Isham's practice. *"For me it's a dialog with the canvas"* she says. *"The canvas interacts with me. And the stories and personalities that come out of the canvas. While I have certain ideas formulated or I'll have a color palette planned, or I'm going to do oils on this, at the end it's always like, oh, wow! It really is a collaboration, a dialogue between me and the canvas."*

The figurative paintings are painted with what Donna Isham calls 'the Female Gaze,' giving the finger to The Male Gaze, a phrase coined by the Brit film scholar, Laura Mulvey, and commonly used to denote the instinctual eye of the predator with which a man is likely to check out at any attractive woman he doesn't know. So, what does the Female Gaze mean for Donna Isham? *"Working from a female gaze often means that the characters in my paintings, these women, have as much to say to us as we do to them. They have the ability to look straight at us head on, or quiet in their own world, and be very proud about who they are and what they represent. For me the work is always about honoring that diversity, what it means to be a woman today. My work transcends being a woman, and hopefully what it*

*means to be a human person today. It's quite a unique time-period that we're all in."*

Isham is delighted by the growing presence of women in the art world. Artists like Jenny Saville, Marlene Dumas, and Cecily Brown are getting respect. Both critically and financially. *"And I think that that's fantastic," she says, "I come from the film world.*

*When you make a series, you have a variety of writers on a show so that it's not all done from a one voice perspective. And I think that the art world is following that; there's a lot more respect for multiple viewpoints and perspectives."*

Do woman artists portray women differently? Well, of course they do. But these differences are themselves different. Frida Kahlo's self-portraits do not ignore the monobrow, the vestigial mustache, but they are unflinching rather than self-pitying and have enthroned Kahlo alongside Warhol as one of the most highly reproduced self-portraitists of the period. I cannot think of a male photographer, even the inventive Richard Avedon, who could have/would have taken Annie Leibovitz's shot of the pregnant Demi Moore for *Rolling Stone*. Which brings me to Donna Isham's figurative abstracts. They are not depicted as soliciting our attention though, being unsmiling, but contained rather than indifferent, and absolutely not out to charm the viewer. One gets the sense that this is indeed the Female Gaze, and that these women are dispassionately taking the measure of the onlooker - Yes, us - which, I feel, is pretty much what Donna Isham intends.

-Anthony Haden Guest