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Silver, Emily, "Lily Stockman," Curate Joshua Tree, March 14, 2016

Curate Joshua Tree



Perched on a hill hovering in Flamingo Heights sits Lily Stockman's pink homestead cabin. This is where Lily, her husband, and pooch, Dolly, escape for solitude, inspiration, and space to breath. This pink cabin with it's twinkly lights is breathtaking and heartbreaking as the electric pink sunsets surround it. We caught up with Lily in the center of her bustling studio outside downtown LA in Boyle Heights.

Tell us how you ended up here in the high desert?

I came out to the hi-dez as a Marine partner in 2007. My husband was stationed in 29 Palms, and shortly before his second deployment to Iraq I left New York and moved into a sweet little house up in the rocks in Monument Manor we found on Craigslist. When Pete got out of the Marines we moved to India and missed the desert landscape and family we made in a profound way. We used to go down to the internet cafe in the village and search tax sales on a dial-up connection.

We bought our cabin on five acres in 2012 while we were back east finishing up grad school and fellowships. We bought it from the original family who homesteaded it under the Small Tract Act in 1949 (the cabin was built in 1952).

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What has surprised you most about the area? Have you noticed a change in yourself since moving here?

We were surprised to see so many young people had moved out here in the intervening years we left the dez. Most of our friends were in their 50's and 60's when we lived in JT, and now there's a whole new generation of desert rats carving out a life out here.



How has the desert influenced/changed your work?

Living in the desert makes me a better listener, a more detailed observer. As a painter you're always looking at color, value, shape, same as a naturalist noticing the details of the landscape- the way creosote branches look violet-grey in the morning and black in the rain, the subtle shift in value from flat, midday light to the exaggerated shadows of the golden hour. Looking for tracks in the wash after the rain, scanning the boulders for bighorns...it's all a matter of noticing.

My paintings are exercises in noticing, too. In good even natural light you'll see the layers of underpainting, and subtle chromatic harmonies- paynes grey with a little cremintz white and a lot of medium painted over linen gives you this earthy, subtle herbaceous color, for instance. Same as sagebrush in winter light. Each aspect of the painting shifts depending on your perspective, the light, your willingness to look a little longer.

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I made this series of work over the past six months while working on my desert garden, so the botanical and structural shapes – cactus pads, rock perimeters of garden beds, etc.– come through subconsciously, not because I set out to paint plants but because that’s the shape language I’ve immersed myself in.

What do you appreciate the most about your life in the desert?

The absolute privilege of solitude when you need it, societal engagement when you want it.

You have a great column you write; it is about your time in the desert. Can you talk a little about that project?

I write about the paradox of people living in the Mojave Desert. Crystal meth, murders, flash floods, the morale drain-circling of going WalMart at 2am (which everyone should do every so often to keep a finger on the pulse of America). There is a pervading Urban Outfitters billboard dreamscape idea of Joshua Tree in the popular culture, but the truth is this section of the Mojave Desert is the poorest section of the poorest county in the state. It’s hard to make a living here. It’s just hard living in general. I wanted to write about the conflicting idea people have of the desert idyll and the reality of living there. To my surprise and utter delight they publish these essays. Lily's Column

You also have a textile company Block Shop, can you tell us a bit about that, how it started what you are up to with it today? Does this company have any relationship to the desert (do you have workshops or facilities here?)

My sister Hopie and I started a block printing company www.blockshoptextiles.com when I lived in Jaipur. It started as an art project with our friend Viju and now it’s a thriving business. We employ about 20 people in our co-op, from block carvers to printers and indigo dyers and dhobiwalas. We spend two months out of the year in India working with our team, and do all our designing on graph paper, no computer programs. The whole process is completely manual and collaborative in every step. We’ve been working closely with these families for six years now, and it’s been a natural progression for Block Shop to function in the community as something more than just job-provider. Hopie runs our annual health clinic in the village and are now focusing on a women’s empowerment SHG, or “self help group,” a self-governed loan system common throughout rural India.

We spend a sixth of the year in the Thar Desert in Rajasthan (northeast India near Pakistan) so there is this wonderful desert parallelism not just in the landscape but in certain plants, too. The brilliant yellow coreopsis that blooms all over the Indian desert is very similar to the desert gold we have here in the Mojave. Both excellent dye plants in the history of their respective native textile traditions.

Hopie and I hosted a block printing and natural dye workshop last fall using the skills we’ve learned in Rajasthan and the materials we have here in Southern California. We

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printed with wooden blocks from Raju, Block Shop's head woodcarver, did a marigold vat and indigo vat over the fire outside. We'll be hosting our next block printing and dyeing workshop this April.

Your work is beautiful, the colors, composition and scale are incredible. Can you talk a little bit about your influences, your conceptual framework and your work in context to the larger painting dialogue today?

During the shortest days of the year you can stand out on Pipes Wash and face east. Behind you is Black Lava Butte, before you is the chasm of the wash and then the flat horizon line of the desert. So as the sun sets the perfect trapezoidal shadow moves over your body and down into the wash, then stretches out over the horizon, and you as a body experience the very salient transition from light to dark, day to night, warm to cool. The creosote shift from apricot to davey's grey. The Joshua Trees go from Chinese paper cutouts to soft smudges of charcoal. It is an ecstatic shift in light, color, and shape.

That experience is what I'm trying to do with my paintings.

You have a show that is opening! How has the prep for the show been? When and where is it?

The opening reception is Friday March 11th, 6-8pm. Gavlak Gallery in Hollywood. Up through May 7th. More images available here www.gavklakgallery.com
press release