

Puzzling together paintings and stars with Debbi Kenote

By Nina Seidel

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Interviews

Through her abstract paintings, New York based artist Debbi Kenote communicates her inner moods and thoughts on surfaces that challenge the traditional rectangular canvas. At the moment, Debbi works on a series based on stars that brings together the artist's microcosmic and macrocosmic musings on what it means to be alive today, researching human histories and astronomical stars through vivid colours, starry canvases and the stories and forms of quilting blocks.

In our interview with Debbi, we spoke about her obsession with abstraction, the importance of the lens in the creative act and the fertile place for play that she has found in painting. Enjoy!



CRISTIN TIERNEY

Hello Debbi, thank you for taking the time to answer my questions. For those who don't know you: please shortly present yourself and tell us how you got into art in the first place, especially painting.

I grew up in the Pacific Northwest region of the U.S., very close to the Canadian border. I come from a family of makers and farmers, so I saw a lot of hands-on crafting. There was always a project in motion, things like sewing, drawing, cooking, and building. From an early age, I knew I wanted to be an artist, although I didn't know what that meant. I saw a lot of craft and local art, and I was very interested in it. The closest art museums to us were about an hour and a half away, either North to Vancouver, BC, or South to Seattle, WA. I visited my first art museum when I was 18 and traveled to Paris. I was part of a group of high school students and we fundraised to make the trip happen. We went to the Louvre and Musée d'Orsay and I was blown away. Later on, while studying art at University, I visited the closer Museums regularly.

I became serious about art in high school, with the help of a great teacher. When I applied for undergrad it seemed like a practical choice to study design. I quickly realized that I needed to be working physically with materials, and transferred to the art department after being accepted. I loved studying art. I went to Western Washington University and it had some outstanding faculty that challenged my craft and concepts. I was mostly working in painting and installation. After my BA, I continued for an additional post-baccalaureate BFA program, and while there I applied for an MFA in Sculpture at Brooklyn College. I wanted to learn more about working in three dimensions, and I also wanted to experience living and working in a vibrant art community. I moved to New York City to attend Brooklyn College in 2014. I worked primarily in sculpture and installation there, but I was always thinking about painting. When I graduated in 2016, I decided to return to painting. I wanted to incorporate some of the physical elements I had explored in Grad School. This is when I started experimenting with shaped paintings, which eventually led me to the work I'm making today.



Your paintings are abstract- what fascinates you about abstraction and what does it offer you from an artistic point of view? Have you always painted abstractly?

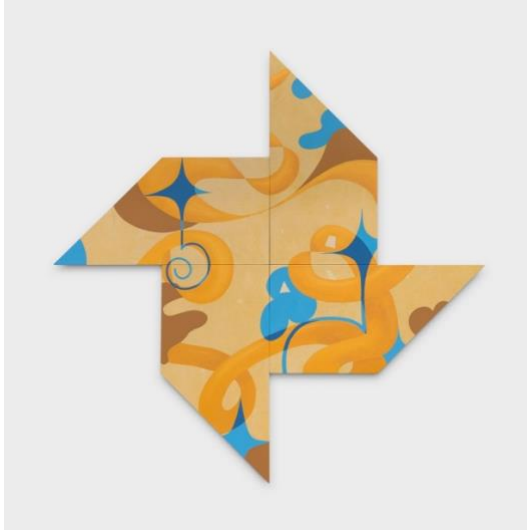
I used to think that I became interested in abstraction when I went to study art at the University, but when I look back now, I can see that it started when I was a kid. I remember drawing a lot of ribbon shapes and building forts and non-functional structures in the woods surrounding my parent's farm. When I went to high school, I started working with the figure and landscapes. This continued until halfway through my undergraduate degree. When working representationally, I always felt that I had more to say than what the picture I was painting allowed. I would offer the metaphor of a poet writing short stories and feeling like something was missing. I'm interested in working with negative space, something that poetry also actively uses.

Today I'm obsessed with non-objective painting, both from a craft and conceptual perspective. I often feel like I'm writing poems with shapes and paint. I still reference things from the natural world, including forms distilled from the figure and landscape. I like to think about body language and spatial communication in general. Working

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abstractly allows me to approach each composition intuitively. I spend a lot of time editing and pairing down.

“Each painting feels like a puzzle I’m slowly putting together.”



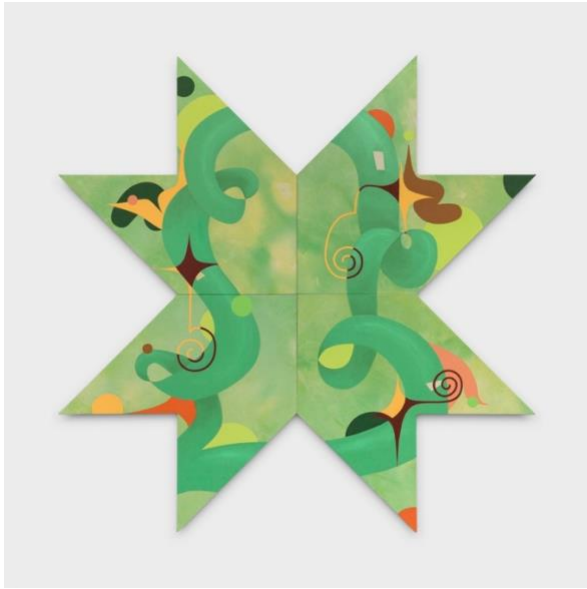
I read that you communicate your inner moods and thoughts through your paintings. Could you put into words how painting makes you feel?

I’m currently reading Rick Rubin’s book *The Creative Act*. He writes about how art is more about the lens we see through than the subject we’re working with. As an example, multiple artists may paint the same landscape, but it’s the view through their particular lens that separates their art from others. I think that’s what I mean when I’ve written before about inner moods and thoughts. Many aspects of how I paint, including colors I’m drawn to and shapes I conjure, reveal things about myself. Some things are more tangible, for example with this body of work I’ve been interested in quilting blocks, and I grew up looking at quilts, so it’s a direct interest tied to my history and identity. Other things can be more fluid, like a particular brushstroke that channels an emotion I felt the day I painted it. I often think of graphologists, or people who study handwriting for a living. The study of handwriting can reveal personality traits and

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emotional states and can also be used to authenticate a signature. Painting is incredibly difficult and exciting. I feel challenged mentally and physically when I'm working.

"I don't paint every hour of every day, but every second of my lived experience enters the studio with me when I sit down to paint. It's through the act of editing and meditating that I translate them onto canvas."



You're currently working on a new series based around stars and the question of what it means to be alive today. Please tell me more about it.

At the beginning of this year, I began an ambitious new series of shaped paintings. I wanted to work on a series of 12 paintings as a unit, and I began by building the stretcher bars. The shapes in this series are derived from quilting blocks, specifically quilting blocks shaped like stars. Some of the works are individual-shaped canvases, and others are composed of as many as eight canvases joined together. Every few months I go to the library and search for inspiration in the quilting section. I'm interested in the stories of quilting. Quilting has long been associated with women's work and craft. As someone who also sews I enjoy finding a purpose for my cloth scraps. I love that it's an act of "making something out of nothing." Additionally, the design aspects of quilts are some of humanity's oldest examples of abstraction. Growing up in a rural part of America, I feel a kinship to these geometric constructions I studied closely at an early age.

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For this particular series, I chose to work with star-shaped quilting blocks as my inspiration for my stretcher bars. Originally I was taken by the beauty and complexity of the pointed forms. After I began creating the shapes, I started researching astronomical stars and began naming each piece after a particular celestial body. So much of humanity's future on the planet is being decided right now, and this can feel pretty bleak at times. When I began researching stars in our universe, it was a helpful tool for me to zoom out a bit, and to see how small we all are in the grand scheme of the universe. This process has also connected me with the research of astronomers from past centuries, and it's been fascinating to see what they believed was above us and what they were concerned with during their lifetime. It's given me some hope that there's still time to change course and that no matter the outcome, what happens on our planet is only a small part of the universe.

“When I began researching stars in our universe, it was a helpful tool for me to zoom out a bit, and to see how small we all are in the grand scheme of the universe.”



One thing that I especially like about your paintings, is that they are not always painted on the common square frames. Sometimes, your paintings create shapes of their own. Could you please talk more about that/ how it started and what you like about it?

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I enjoy working with shaped canvases because it allows me to build each work exactly how I envision it. When I began studying sculpture, there was a shift in my relationship with how I use materials. As a painter, there's an expectation that one will work with paint on a flat surface and that it will vary in scale but maintain a rectangle or square format. With sculpture, the first question is what material you're using, followed by what shape it will command in space. When I graduated and began thinking of painting again, I saw the support of a painting as a fertile place for play.

Because I fell in love with painting before any other medium, I found this approach to making my own canvases deepened my relationship with the medium. I enjoy revisiting every aspect of painting. I also think of the history of Western painting and how, until this century, it was considered the domain of mostly white men. I'm not interested in joining a previously gate-kept history as much as I am interested in doing something new that celebrates the creative histories of a broader cross section of humanity. I think of other artists who have looked to the history of craft for inspiration, including Elizabeth Murray, Sam Gilliam, and Faith Ringgold, as examples.

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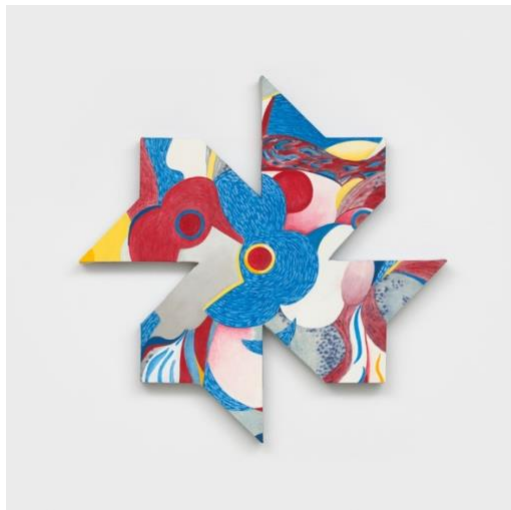


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Could you please share some of your creative process with me, from the starting point to a finished piece or series?

My work begins with the stretcher bars. After deciding on the shapes and how many canvases each piece requires, I begin fabricating. I work with wood to build my stretchers and I prefer to work on a series of shapes all at once. After the construction stage, I begin dyeing my canvases. I choose the dye colors intuitively based on the shapes of the finished stretchers. After the canvas is stretched and the paintings are assembled, I begin thinking about the surface.

I like to begin this stage with some loose sketching on paper. I often do five to ten sketches per piece, then I play with the sketches on my iPad. I try out different color options and slowly hone in on one particular idea. When I feel ready, I begin transferring the sketch to my canvas, and the work takes off from there. Often my sketch is just a jumping-off point, and I change many of the colors and adjust shapes as the work unfolds.



Do you have any advice for fellow emerging artists, especially at the beginning of their Career?

I think it's important to give yourself some rules or parameters to work within. I find that when I have an idea of the arena I'm working in, I make more creative choices. I also think

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it's important to be playful with the work. I often turn my canvases as I'm working, and I like to stay open to any new or unexpected ideas that might surface while I'm painting.

Any upcoming event or project that you'd like to give a shout out?

I'm currently in a 4-person show in Greenpoint, curated by Jacqueline Ceder of Good Naked. The exhibition is hosted by the Java Project and is open through May 31. I have a co-exhibition and some more group shows coming up in the Fall that I'm looking forward to. For emerging artist recommendations, I'm part of a group called the Watercolor Society, and it's made up of some really exciting painters that work in a variety of mediums. To see any of their work you can check out the group's instagram under the handle @watercoloursociety.

And last question: What are your hopes for the future?

Finding time to keep making work is always the priority for me I currently work non-exclusively with a variety of different galleries, in NYC and internationally. I'm grateful to have been showing my work frequently and am hoping to continue doing so.