

Matrons & Mistresses

Clare Rojas: "Clare Rojas"

Conversation with Claire Rojas and Lizzie Cheatham McNairy

December 12, 2019



Clare Rojas: Shifted Horizons at Soho Gallery.

Photo: Olly Yung. © 2019 Matrons & Mistresses.

From September 18 to November 8, Charlotte, NC had the pleasure of enjoying the work of Clare Rojas for the second time. While I was out of town for the opening of *Shifted Horizons* and thus unable to meet Clare in person, I was delighted when my friend and SOCO gallery owner Chandra Johnson offered to walk me through the exhibition, and when Clare agreed to an interview. Thus began our long conversation... emails back and forth and back again... a lovely collaboration of words and ideas.

In these emails, Clare and I spoke of her exhibition at SOCO gallery, which by then had just ended, her creative path, and that which was currently inspiring her art. I was fascinated to learn that while many have tried to classify her within the Mission School, Clare does not consider herself a part of the movement. Clare explained that while the Mission School was growing in San Francisco, "simultaneously across the country [Clare] had come from a similar movement, one on the East Coast, with other artists that also shared this collective unconscious, lack of money and resourcefulness that can only be cultivated from DIY energy and creativity."

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Creativity seems to be something Clare has always had in abundance, and she holds her art sacred. Through her paintings, drawings and music—constantly in conversation with each other—Clare weaves the stories of life, of strength and of the common threads that connect us all.



Clare Rojas, *Untitled*, 2019

Lizzie Cheatham McNairy: *Shifted Horizons* was your second show with SOCO gallery. Was this your first to combine your narrative paintings with your abstract work? What was it about the space and where you are in your art practice that compelled you to do so?

Clare Rojas: I think in the past I found it all made more sense if I categorized the different bodies of work. The drawings go here, the abstracts go over there, the narrative goes here, etc... I don't feel the need to categorize anymore, but rather embrace how I work. Finding a balance and harmony out of my own chaos is what excites me the most. I feel as though if I make this "work" all together, then the "work" belong side by side when I share them in my exhibitions. In my studio I write music/lyrics constantly. Some are scribbled on the walls as I paint so I won't forget. These lyrics become songs or develop into complex short stories. Those short stories, in turn, influence my visuals. It's all the same momentum and symbiotic relationship for me. All of my practices are essential. Presently in my studio, I am working on a hard-edge three-color abstraction, an abstract painting of a bird, and a landscape with animals and the ocean. I am also working on a new song. The working title of the song is "Ghosts Are Not Angels." All of this energy is felt in all of my work. I am in heaven.

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LCM: I got to spend some time with your music this last week and really enjoyed it. I especially liked your songs "Peach and Yellow," "Humms," and "True Majesty." Now, I wouldn't have found you had I not known to look for you under a different name. I am so fascinated to know... What is the story behind Peggy Honeywell? What inspired you to take on a stage name?

CR: Peggy Honeywell was an alter ego I came up with while living in Philly and working as a secretary back in 1999.

Those songs you mentioned were released a long time ago, when I worked with a small label. Since then, I have written and recorded 20 or 30 songs—I don't really count them. I have them in a physical form, and sometimes that is good enough. The songs are like a sound diary.

In the early 2000's when Peggy performed more, she was an ephemeral part of the actual installations that were built as her stage. At that time, I was a new mom to a toddler in a very, very unique and mostly stressful situation. The idea of touring was not an option, especially since it felt like I was already "touring" with my art exhibitions and installations. Peggy Honeywell was a character in my work, representing the feminine spirit. She was the female characters in my paintings and the story teller. When I needed to gather the strength and courage to sing my heart out, usually solo, Peggy was that courageous part of myself that I could always count on. I always felt like if my visual work did not make sense, the music would always make emotional sense and tie it all together.

Maybe the next collection of songs I will release under Clare, via Instagram, or something simple. The lyrical poetry that I write I work tirelessly on.

I think about sharing this collection someday; it just has to feel right, and I don't feel pressure to do so. This brings me to a very important aspect about Peggy: she is free. She will never have to answer to anyone. Having her as a creative outlet is complete freedom and this is sacred.

I still don't like performing. I like to be in my studio working and being at home with my dogs as much as possible. (My incredible daughter whom I am very proud of is now in college.) I consider myself a hermit lyricist recording artist that never shares. I sometimes think of my songs as a very intricate, lifelong conceptual piece. I have this fantasy that when I am dead and gone, under my bed someone will find a shoe box, with "PEGGY HONEYWELL WAS HERE" written on the top. One thousand original songs that recorded my life story. These recordings will be in various forms of technology that no one will know what to do with years from now.

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LCM: How wonderful to have your art and your music and Peggy. I am terrified of public speaking...terrified in an *I-find-it-incredibly-exhilarating-and-I-can't-decide-if-I-love-it-or-hate-it* kind of way. Perhaps I can come up with a way to connect with that feminine spirit you speak of before I go on stage next. I think we all need a Peggy at times to remind us of our courageous strength and free natures, especially in challenging times.

Okay, back to *Shifted Horizons* :) Was there a favorite piece for you within the exhibition? If so, why? Was there a piece that challenged you the most or taught you something new and unexpected?

CR: Hard to pick a favorite, and I am challenged and learn so much from each body of work. Someone once asked me how I know when a painting is complete, and I answered kind of fast, "Of course I know when it's done!" But then I began to think about how each painting is actually the next sentence from the last, in an ongoing narrative, picking up from where the last thread or chapter left off. So in a sense, I am actually never done.

LCM: Can you speak a bit about your installation for SOCO? I was truly just blown away.

CR: There is something so intimate and familiar about that space. The size helped make it feel very similar to my studio, which for me is sacred. In my studio I feel very safe. It's safe to try different ideas and experiment; it's safe to fail and have fun and take time. This is what the installation at SOCO gave me freedom to do.

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LCM: There really is something so special about time in one's studio/creative space... "sacred" is exactly right. Can you tell us a bit about your creative practice? Do you find routines and schedules helpful or are you more of a "burst of inspiration" person?

CR: I do keep to a pretty tight schedule, and I work every day if I can help it.

When I go to bed at night, I am already looking forward to waking up at the break of dawn to drink my coffee and get to work. I love painting and writing songs, and if I can't do this daily, I feel as though I can't breathe.

LCM: Can you tell me about how art and music entered your life? Have you always created?

CR: I think so! I can't remember a time when I wasn't drawing. As for music, I grew up in a house of musicians. My mom played old hymnals on the piano, and my dad, Latin music like Pedro Infante (I am half Peruvian). I didn't pick up a guitar or write songs till after undergrad. My roommate at the time let me borrow his guitar and showed me a few chords. I was looking for a language that expressed the emotions I was feeling in a more immediate way than painting. I think music is in your bones when you grow up with it.



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LCM: Within your exhibition, there is a woman that holds a thread which connects all of your paintings. Can you speak more to her and who/what she represents? What about the thread? Is she the same woman that is in some of the other paintings?

CR: I like the symbology of a simple piece of thread. The thread has various meanings. The female figure at the beginning of the space is holding the beginning of the narrative within the

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installation. The story begins with her, and she is the meaning given to a horizon (a lyric in one of my songs!). Here, the thread connected the horizon line in the abstract body of work and connected to the figurative narrative that was illustrating the profound connectedness I feel to nature and the magic of animal intelligence. In the hands of this painted woman a simple line, thread, held in her hands can command the way the viewer reads the work. "A common thread" is also a common term, maybe taken for granted to explain basic human connective-ness.

LCM: Hmmmm...those lyrics are so beautiful... "The story begins with her, and she is the meaning given to a horizon." I love it. Please tell us more about the horizon line which moves through the exhibition.

CR: The horizon line is something that we all share all over the world throughout time. A common thread, one might say.



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LCM: On a broader note, women's issues have always been a focus of your work, be it gender roles, sexuality or acknowledgement of our strength. Can you speak more to that and how it is woven through your art?

CR: I like that, Lizzie, and I could not have said it better myself. I like to represent women in their times of strength, with grace and vulnerability that I believe is courageous.

LCM: Yes, you are so right. Grace and vulnerability are courageous. Looking forward...What are you most excited about within your art practice? What is inspiring your work and/or keeping you up at night?

CR: I have been inspired writing lyrics to songs lately, and I am painting images that are both intimate and miniature while being large scale. I am trying to articulate what it feels like to exist in a vast amount of space, and how that can make one feel small.

LCM: Are you referring to the smallness one can feel when in nature—a smallness that brings about a sense of awe and relief in knowing that there is something so much bigger? Or, are you more trying to capture how sometimes we can get lost in the world and feel alone? Or is it something else entirely?

CR: I'm not sure it's relief that I am feeling. I am feeling more the vastness. But, maybe you are articulating how I am feeling without me even knowing it.

LCM: Is there anything else you would like to share with us about your art or about your life as an artist?

CR: It is a very interesting life.

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