

MARBLEHEAD

WEEKLY NEWS

Rebecca Ness: "From acorn's to artist"

By Sophia Harris

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Rebecca Ness sitting to the side of her painting "Back of the Bar," which is in the collection of the speed art museum in Louisville Kentucky. (Becca Farsace)

Rebecca Ness, a painter now exhibiting in major galleries across the globe, traces her artistic roots back to Marblehead, where a childhood spent at Acorn Gallery planted the seeds of what would become an internationally acclaimed art career.

From painting with Debra Freeman Highberger as a first grader to exhibiting at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Ness's path is equal parts discipline, inspiration, and deep community connection.

"I started at Acorn when I was about six years old," Ness said. "It was such a special place, where I learned the classical foundations of art, from figure drawing to oil painting, way before most kids even know what a still life is."

Debra Freeman Highberger, who co-founded the Acorn Gallery with her husband Jack Highberger, remembers Ness fondly. "Becca's amazing. She was with me, maybe since first or second grade, and she stayed with us through college. We helped her get scholarships. She went to Boston University and then Yale. Now she's exploding across the globe."

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The Highberger teaching philosophy is grounded in adapting adult-level foundational art instruction to the learning style of each child. "We show them the science of light, color, perspective, even measuring, but in a way they can grasp at any age," Freeman Highberger said. "We teach them all the same principles, but in different ways depending on how they learn. That's what makes the kids feel safe and successful."

That environment allowed Ness to grow into herself both artistically and personally. After high school, she earned a BFA in Painting from Boston University in 2015, followed by an MFA in Painting/Printmaking from Yale School of Art in 2019.

While Acorn nurtured her technique, it was at BU and later Yale where Ness solidified her identity as both an artist and a person. "That's where I came into my own," she said. "I came out, I figured out what I cared about, and my art became a reflection of that — really gay and personal. It was liberating."

Her work, which explores themes of identity, belonging, and queer community through intimate, colorful tableaux, has since been exhibited in major cities around the world. Her paintings are part of the permanent collections of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Yale University Art Gallery, the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, and the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, among many others.

One of her most acclaimed pieces, "Wild Side West," was inspired by a visit to a lesbian bar in San Francisco. Ness said she was moved by a quiet moment she witnessed there between a "younger dyke and an older dyke" which Ness said reflected a passing of knowledge and a surrogate family connection. The painting now hangs in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

"There are only around 30 lesbian bars left in the United States," Ness said. "I thought it was important to preserve those spaces — to paint them while they still exist. These are places where queer history has happened. Painting them is like archiving stories that matter."

Ness said she doesn't invent scenes — she curates real life, turning everyday moments into monumental works of oil on canvas. "I like painting what I see around me," she said. "It can be the way light hits a bar glass, or a color I notice on my bike ride to the studio. The world is already so interesting. I just want to document it."

Her solo shows have taken her everywhere from London to Los Angeles to Seoul. Her upcoming exhibitions include "Memories of Daydreams" at Morgan Presents in New York, and "Portraits of Place" at Jessica Silverman Gallery in San Francisco. She's represented by multiple galleries and works closely with a dedicated art dealer who manages her relationships and exhibition schedule.

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But no matter how global her career becomes, Ness continues to feel deeply rooted in her hometown.

"I'm bringing my girlfriend to Marblehead this week for the first time," she said. "Even though my parents don't live there anymore, it's still such a huge part of who I am. I love the ocean."

That connection to Marblehead is woven through her artistic story. While many Marbleheaders remember submitting their artwork to the Marblehead Festival of Arts, Ness points to the Acorn Gallery as the spark that lit her creative path. "I remember telling Debra when I was a kid, 'Wouldn't it be great if I could paint all day and get paid for it?' And she said, 'You can.' That moment stuck with me."

Ness also credits her supportive parents, her mother a psychologist, her father an architect, for never flinching when she chose art as a career. "They never told me I couldn't do it," she said. "They just signed me up for the next class."

After undergrad, Ness worked in BU's College of Fine Arts while assembling her graduate portfolio. "I'd go talk to old professors on my lunch break and show them my work," she said. "That was really the time I started engaging with the Boston art scene and understanding what it meant to be an artist outside of school."

Now based in Brooklyn, Ness is preparing for a new show in London while continuing to explore the stories of queer spaces in America. Her work remains deeply personal and culturally relevant, giving voice and visibility to these communities.

Though her work hangs in museums such as the Institute of Contemporary Art in Miami, the Moderna Museet in Sweden, and the Albertina Museum in Vienna, Ness says she still carries Marblehead with her.

Freeman Highberger said, "Every year she donates to Acorn to fund a student who can't afford classes. She doesn't have to do that. But she does."

Today, Ness identifies proudly as a painter. "Sometimes people think I paint houses," she laughs. "But no — I'm an oil painter. This is the one thing I'm good at. It's who I am."

For aspiring painters, she offers simple advice: "Get a good arts education. Set your life up in a way that supports making art. And don't be afraid. If you love it enough, you'll find a way to keep doing it."

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