

HI+FRUCTOSE

"A Return To Feeling: The Dynamic & Emotion-Infused Art of KOAK"

By Clayton Schuster

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Color for me is very much about that initial emotional impact; it is almost like a precursor to the mood of a painting," says Koak. She says this while reflecting on her latest set of works for a show called *The Driver*, which will be on view between May 21 and July 9 at Perrotin Hong Kong. "It was important," she continues, "that the colors for those works felt like too much, like the volume was up too loud on too many different thoughts, but at the same time all this incongruity managed to create a new sort of strange harmony."

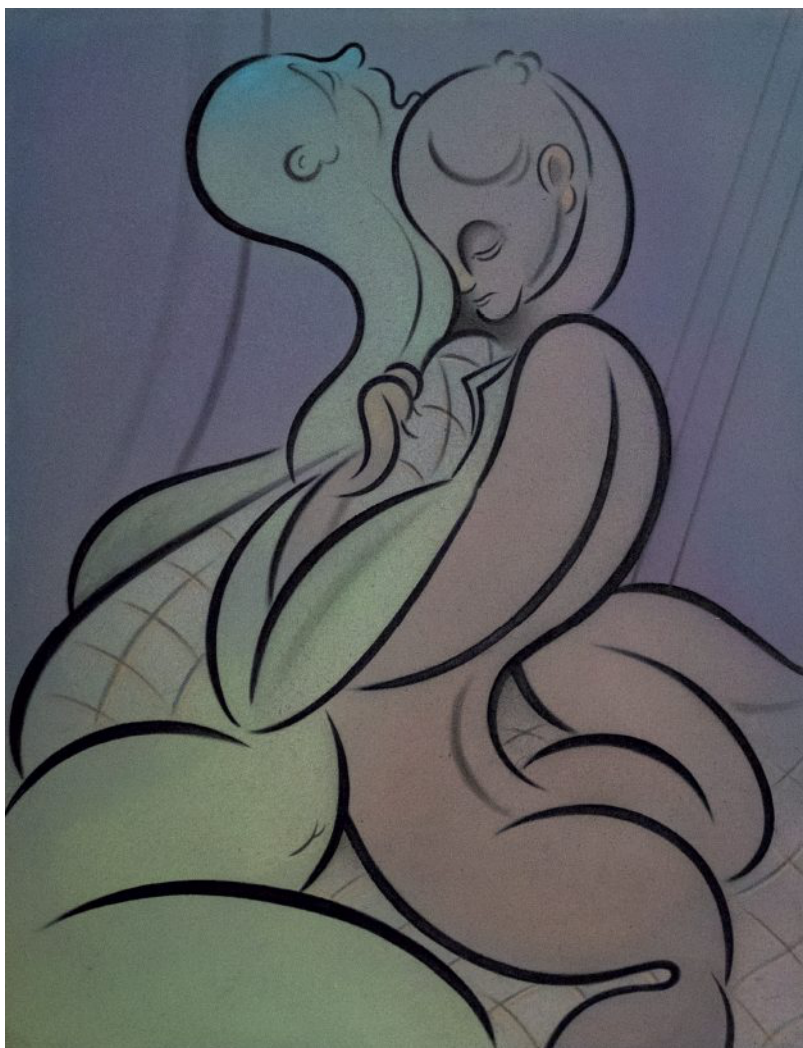
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The colors in question mix neons with jewel tones in a way that evokes something partway between an acid flashback of '80s graphics and haute couture jewel tones—the meeting point of high fashion and trashy fun. “I wanted to see if there was a way to push the color beyond that, into something almost calming,” Koak says.

This pursuit began after Koak’s first post-lockdown forays into the outside world, driving up and down the California coast. It was a re-discovering. Koak was born and raised in Michigan, but California has been her home for more than two decades. Yet, after “cocooning” for nearly a year due to COVID; after seeing the sky bloom a Mars-grade orange due to wildfires; after seeing our social fabric teased by the gut check of civic unrest—there was something new again about experiencing the brightness of the coast she chooses to call home.

The colors of her latest works (which will debut in person at Perrotin) are all the distrustful characters that have burrowed into our collective psyche over the last year and refuse to be evicted. And that color is also the pink of the flowers on the ice plants that line the purlieu between highway and beach—that stare worshipping and hopeful to the sun.



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"I have always thought color feels like the closest thing visual artists have to sound, because it creates an immediate emotional resonance," says Koak. "It is often important to me to put things together that wouldn't initially feel harmonious, or of the same tonality." Her thinking surrounding harmony, tonality, dissonance, and sound alludes to the vital role of music in her process.

Music is first a sweet reminder of home. Koak's family is highly musical, but she counts herself uniquely tone deaf among her parents and cousins and aunts and grandmother. So keeping the speakers in her studio blasting with the likes of Brian Eno, PJ Harvey, and more recent troubadours like Billie Eilish, helps her get out of her head as a painter and sculptor. It is a way to tune into the vibration of creating instead of getting stuck in the rote act of making one mark, then another, and filling in some color between the two.

"Since so much of my work centers on these sort of heightened emotional moments," she says, "it is often necessary to channel feelings or emotions while I am painting, in hopes that I pass it into the work. There are times when it is difficult to get there, and music helps."

In addition to music, improvisation is another key to Koak's process. Small works and drawings are generally completed immediately on the canvas or paper or wherever she is working. Often they will start as loose scribbles that eventually coalesce into an unforeseen whole. Something in the volutes and whorls reveals itself and she pursues, as an augur draws the future from the flight path of an eagle or a vulture.

Essentially, we're these little feedback loops with the world around us, magpie-ing the bits of life that suit us, until we are us."

Larger pieces are explored through drafts and meticulous notetaking before Koak finds their final form. This process can be seen on her Instagram, where she not-infrequently posts images of her works with annotations for more colors in one spot, or her thought for how to create contrast between one area of the image and another.

The results in either case—whether wholly extemporaneous or more planned—are always a mix of surprises, challenges, and failures.

"And I am thankful for them, even when they're frustrating," she says. "I tend to like to work with techniques that I haven't tried before, and there's a lot of experimenting and testing, and regrouping that happens along the way. Many of the experiments, when they go well, get adopted into my practice and then snowball into new experiments and applications down the line."

The works that Koak puts through drafts can be redrawn twenty times or more. Her lifecycle of drafting can include drawing, scanning, projecting, and digitally editing the image projected at scale. That last is one of the most important steps for her larger works, since the impact of changes reads so much differently at the intended size.

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Then she might start some digital color studies, adjusting the whole image to a non-photo blue that will allow her to print out the work, draw over it, and rescan the new draft. The non-photo blue technique comes from Koak's background in comics (she received her MFA in the medium from the California College of the Arts) and allows for annotations in a pale shade of blue that scanners and printers can be set to ignore.

"I don't entirely believe that there's a single state of finished. It's usually more of a series of waves peaking," says Koak. "If the tension of striving after perfection is a sort of holding of your breath, then it's important to include a loose moment of exhale—a shaky pattern, a splatter of drips, something that my initial instinct wants to write off as lazy. It's important to me not to push things so far that they are infallible because they never could be, it's a sort of therapy to an anxious brain that wants to control everything."

This question of control is major theme underlying the recent work that will go on display at The Driver. Some of the work is downright menacing. One shows a female figure in the foreground with her hair combed by a looming, dark, anonymous, figure in the background. The tension in the hair, the discomfort in the foregrounded figure's eyes. The stark ruby and sapphire color palette. And whose hand is it that caresses the foregrounded figure's forearm?

Koak has a penchant—she is well known even—for the playful way she addresses the human body. Limbs stretch and collide and curl and appear immense and weightless at the same time. It is just as believable in her world, as in the painting referenced above, that this hand on the forearm is the foregrounded figure's own, in an act of self-love, of that it belongs to someone outside the frame, belongs to us, belongs to someone that makes treats this wide-eyed person so full of distrust and disquiet and distress, as less a person with agency than an object to be fondled at whim.

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"In a lot of ways, it's part of the same conversations of my earlier works. I have noticed that almost all of my exhibitions tend toward centering on ideas of duality, both in conscious and unconscious ways—and that duality very often has to do with the distinction between ourselves and others," says Koak. "But for this show it is more about merging that duality, looking at the places where those parts get muddled, where we subtly absorb one another only to become more of ourselves."

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In another painting, a woman lays restfully reposed along the floor while a cigarette burns in an ashtray and a cat watches her from a chair. Cats play an interesting role in her work: as gargoyles protecting, as sources of comfort and play. "Sometimes I think I've mythicized them a bit, turned them into dragons, or warped them into something that feels like a translation of a cat," she says. They watch and interact and play tricks.

In Koak's works, cats are the record of our daily lives that bears witness but cannot understand. They are a stone tablet in the desert. A record only that a record was made—of what? Unknown. There is no knowledge left in all the world that can teach us how to read their minds. And our inability to read the cats only casts starker relief on our inability to read other human figures, let alone read ourselves.

Below the cat's gaze and beside the reclined figure, there are sundry pieces of paper clipped and snipped next to a pair of scissors. Her hands are clasped, and she looks off-frame. Are the hands held in longing? Are they held in fear? Does she stare at the past? At the future? At someone who has just entered the door?

Koak says, "I've been thinking a lot about the self—or, more specifically, how the self isn't really this lone single thing that we idealize it to be. To be a person often feels like being a conglomeration of different identities that get tangled together. And those identities are often constructed through internalizing aspects or personas of the surrounding world—a fiction, a part of a friend or loved one, a stand-in for broader societal role, a historical trope, or an archetype reimagined. Essentially, we're these little feedback loops with the world around us, magpie-ing the bits of life that suit us, until we are us."

While *The Driver* is set to premier in just a few weeks, Koak has many other projects at the ready to take its place. She is, for instance, learning how to flocculate the acrylic from her post-painting wastewater, which will be good for the environment and reward her with a bunch of acrylic paint that can be dried out and used on sculpture. Another project will span multiple galleries and center on the idea of heat and nature, which will include new paintings as well as bronzes and furniture.

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More immediately, there's her residency at the Tamarind Institute in New Mexico, as well as large paintings to finish for upcoming shows in San Francisco and London. And, of course, her publication project Penalty Club.

"I think the most interesting projects to me are always the ones that present a puzzle," Koak reflects. "I like being challenged and I get incredibly bored if I'm not learning something new, so areas where different mediums clash together tend to be the places that I'm most interested in working."*

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