

THE WORLD OF INTERIORS

"Koak's Studio in San Francisco Channels Her Inner World"

By Holly E J Black

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The artist Koak is on the rise. Her richly pigmented canvases centre on sinuous figures, cast in heavy shadow or warm lamplight amid everyday domestic settings. Off the canvas, her psyche spills directly into the vast surroundings of her San Francisco studio.



For the artist Koak (known solely by her mononym), the female form acts as a physiological vessel. Her sinuous figures are the focal point of richly pigmented canvases, often appearing drenched in shadow or else illuminated by lamplight, and surrounded by the trappings of domesticity, be it a vase of flowers, a curtain, an armchair or a dresser.

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These lithe, surreal and often erotically proportioned bodies are informed by the language of cartoons, particularly the slippery animation cells of Disney's heyday. Koak has an MFA in comics, and her clarity of line, coupled with an acute understanding of the narrative symbolism locked within everyday objects, were honed in the course of this graphic training. In her drawings, works on canvas (and more recently sculpture too), every swagged textile, florid wallpaper and bare floorboard has a story to tell.



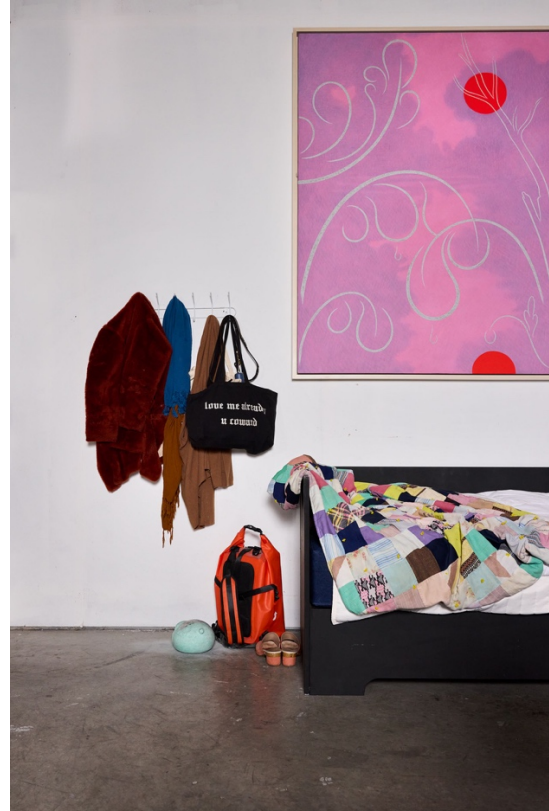
For the past four years Koak has inhabited a behemoth of a studio in the Dogpatch neighbourhood of San Francisco. The area is known for its industrial property stock, and the expansive space she has acquired befits an artist whose star is on the ascent. She had a solo exhibition at Charleston in Lewes last year, featured in recent presentations at fairs such as Frieze, the Armory and Art Basel, and is working on an upcoming show at Jessica Silverman, opening in March 2027.

'I rarely paint actual portraits,' she says, speaking from a zoned-off area of the studio designated for drawing – which is how all her work begins. 'The body is the container that feels most effective to talk about emotional interiority and therefore connect with other people. The interior space also represents the worlds we build inside ourselves, and how they connect to something bigger.'

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Koak's own inner psyche spills on to the surrounding walls by way of a dense montage of sketches, which seem to cocoon her from the larger space given over to painting. Beyond, canvases lean against the walls under various forms of spotlighting, surrounded by similar assemblages born from digital, full-colour drafting. 'Every time I finish a show and go back to drawing, it is like I've forgotten how to do it,' she explains. 'Having the drawings around me all the time is a way of calming me, reminding me that I've been through this before, and it's going to be OK!'



Among these visual mosaics are motifs that Koak repeats over and over. Once she feels ready, she scales up each image using projectors, before working on 'amplifying the lines until they have the right emotional tone'. What follows are painstaking amendments that slowly nudge her towards a final composition.

Traces of her process can be found beyond the walls too. In a wooden cabinet sit lumps of chalk taken from a visit to the Seven Sisters cliffs close to Lewes, and she uses the material to build a textural static in some of her paintings. They are stored beneath several sculptures, including a piece made during a clay workshop in Santa Fe, and a maquette for a work in bronze.

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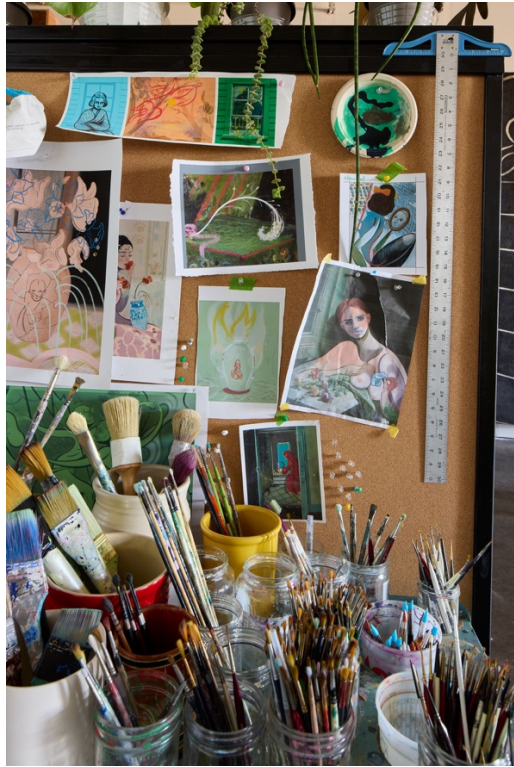


Beyond these wholly figurative works, she has also built three-dimensional pieces more akin to furniture. These include a stunning folding screen hewn from walnut, which features a range of drawings suspended within see-through panels. It sits in front of one of several enormous curtains used to delineate the space, shielding a print room of sorts, where Koak produces limited editions using a risograph – a high-speed digital machine that is popular in zine making and DIY culture.

'It was my dream to have one of these,' she explains, adding that it is through collaboration with her husband and studio manager, Kevin, and her assistants, that she can keep so many aspects of her creativity running simultaneously. They also offer an element of day-to-day discipline. 'There have been a few instances where I've got honey on a painting after eating toast, because I've forgotten to wash my hands,' she says, somewhat sheepishly. 'I'm like a child in that way, and it's very helpful to have people who know your naughty patterns and keep you in check.'

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Unsurprisingly, the artist works extremely long hours when preparing for a show, as it can take months to complete a single canvas. Her compulsion to draw, which she recalls taking hold as a child when she would doodle in her bed when sick, means that even after a 16-hour day she might take some sheets home to continue drafting, tweaking and amending compositions. Her dream is to have both home and studio in immediate proximity, but she has been equally happy working from her bed, or using a suitcase to stash her drawings so that she can be entirely itinerant. 'That is one of my favourite set-ups,' she says. 'I can just pop up anywhere and work. But to paint? That's an entirely different thing – to paint I'll always need space.'

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