

The Austin Artist Making Covetable Collages



Jackie Lee Young

By Allison Mcnearney
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On a hot and humid Monday morning in Austin, Tex., the artist Claire Oswalt is eager to give a tour of the Charles Moore Foundation, where she rents a studio. Unlike the riot of curiosities that is the late architect's estate, her secluded space (a small building on the edge of the property) is a simplified oasis of calm and introspection. In jeans and vintage yellow cowboy boots, with her hair tucked away in a headwrap of her own creation, she moves serenely through the bright space. Her paintings line the walls, and ivy grows up through the floor toward the skylight.

At her feet, scraps of paper — painted in her signature soft hues of blue, pink and yellow, with contrasting swaths of black and gray — have been swept into a tidy pile. While Oswald's only rule for herself in the studio is "to not have any rules," an edict illustrated by her body of work (drawing, painting, sculpture, textile, graphic design and more), her main passion these days is watercolor collage. Her pieces have garnered a particular following among young designers, including Sophie Buhai and Jesse Kamm.

Oswald returned to her hometown nearly two years ago after long stints in Los Angeles and New York City, and the effect of the relocation on her work has been profound. "I wasn't creating memories, and that's the best way I can explain it to anyone," she says. "I just needed space. I needed literal space, physical space, and I needed space in my head to reflect. And I needed life to get simpler." The focusing effect of motherhood — Oswald has two young sons, aged 2 and 5 — and paring down the demands of the outside world has allowed her to reclaim a sense of play and freedom.

Following in the footsteps of her family of surgeons, Oswald originally wanted to become a doctor. But after working in a hospital during college, she quickly learned that the "monotony of color and routine and uniform" was not for her. After trying her hand at children's book writing, she discovered that she was happiest when she was drawing.

Her early artistic work relied on her left-brain qualities — what she calls her "pragmatic, science-based side" — and consisted of nearly photorealistic graphite drawings that required a painstaking amount of time and detail. But that all changed in 2013 when the Line Hotel in Los Angeles commissioned her to create a drawing for each of their 389 rooms. Oswald had one small child and another on the way, and the thought of creating that many drawings was almost unimaginable. "So, I started piecing together little watercolors that I was making, and I was ripping up old watercolors and just putting something together," she says. The hotel's interior designer loved them. "It was almost like a little gift that was handed to me... I was forced to make these pieces and all of a sudden it was an entree into a new medium. It developed into somewhat of a new obsession."

If her graphite drawings were calculated and precise, Oswald's current watercolor collages are almost entirely visceral and nuanced. Between 9 a.m. and whenever her afternoon child-care duties resume each day, the artist can be found in her studio letting the pieces of ripped paper that are piled up on the floor speak to her. "Every piece really dictates itself, I don't have that much control over it," she says, adding that if she tries to come up with a plan for a new piece of art, everything falls apart. "I'm moving pieces, but in each one, I don't have a plan. It's its own discovery... it's me showing up just to be there with the work and seeing how it evolves organically on the paper." She's working on a show that opens this September in Berlin, and has upcoming collaborations with several hotels ranging in location from Brooklyn to Amsterdam.

In the studio, she continues to play with the design and harmony of her pieces, and has found that her collages are growing ever larger in scale, a welcome challenge — especially, she says, given that there aren't many large-scale collage artists. But no matter the size of the work, it's still the scraps of paper and the visceral feeling that a piece has reached perfect harmony that dictate where her art ends up. "I want it to seem almost as if the pieces landed in that way. And that's really, I think, the magic of it for me. This discovery that, all of a sudden, I have these torn, ripped pieces that have so much energy behind them and they just landed in this special way and that's where they held."