



SALON 94

# IN THE MEANTIME | MARINA ADAMS

INTERVIEW BY ARTHUR PEÑA

It was November of last year when I sat behind Marina at a raucously intimate diner at Lee's on Canal. It was a celebration hosted by Anton Kern Gallery in honor of Chris Martin and Richard Hughes whose shows had just opened. A tightly packed, shared dinner with tequila bottles seemingly manifesting from thin air. It was a life time ago. It was a reality ago. It was where Marina and I met.

I reached out to Marina in May because I knew that her practice, her work, is rooted in a defiant stance - that it comes from a place of action and severe intent. It's clear that she steadfastly believes in answering the call of culture with an urgency through form. If anyone was finding a way to make work through our newly heightened collective anxiety, it was her.

A few days after our conversation, walking home from my studio in the South Bronx, I came across and found myself joining a few hundred protesters marching past 138th Street, heading south on Willis Avenue. Minutes later, as we marched through Mott Haven, I witnessed a large portion of the group get kettled by heavily-armored NYPD officers on bikes blocking the crowds path with a second line of officers charging from behind. The peaceful demonstration was surrounded and entrapped for several minutes until it reached 8PM at which point a recording played from a speaker informing the protestors they were violating the imposed curfew. It was then that the police rushed the crowd, led by clouds of pepper spray and batons swinging, a low flying NYPD helicopter hovering overhead. Single bodies covered in police. I ran, escaped, with a small crowd, rushing the half mile to my house. Later that night, I would read in The Times that dozens of people were arrested with at least one needing a stretcher. The next morning, Mayor De Blasio would say that the police were reacting to "violent protestors".

This conversation took place via phone call on May 31 4:01PM-5:02PM

**Within the last 72 hours, America has reached 100,000 COVID-19 related deaths, we witnessed the first launch of a privately owned shuttle into space and the murder of George Floyd has sparked an uprising. Yet we still go to the studio, right?**

Actually right now, getting to the studio has been very problematic. I was in the city under lockdown for over two months and I could not get to my studio in Brooklyn. So, I've been working in sketchbooks at home and reading a lot. With this new routine, I've fallen into another kind of rhythm. But, I think the idea of an artist going to the studio right now is important to be addressed, because I'm not sure that what artists do is fully understood. Especially during volatile times, like right now, when there is so much pent up frustration aided by the lockdown. This is especially true in neighborhoods that don't have access to space or resources. The blatant murder of George Floyd put everyone over the top. I think this has been a long time coming and I really thought that cities were going to explode this summer. Three years into having a white supremacist in the White House whose done nothing but fan the flames, it was bound to erupt.

**I saw an Instagram post of yours where you shared works on paper and drawings since you couldn't get to the studio. Were you prepared for the disruption that came to your practice? Did it realign what was happening in your mind regarding the work?**

For me, two things happened. First, I realized how exhausted I was. Not being able to go out allowed me to really rest and



Exhibition view, Marina Adams: 2020, Salon 94, New York, NY

recover: In a larger sense, the whole world has been running at an unsustainable pace. In the art world, you have people flying all over the place for fairs, etc.

In terms of the drawings, I've been thinking about allowing the line to enter the work in a much more chaotic way. For me, drawing is the first step in opening up the work and allowing it to change; it's fast, inexpensive, and very direct. This time out of the studio allowed me to move into a space that I had been thinking about, of chaos and the chaotic. It has to do with thinking about the world in a larger way, in terms of non-human life. We use the term "nature" and it's such a cover all but really what we're talking about is non-human life and we tend to forget about that. For example, trees are thought of as decoration, which is also about human control. My thinking was to go against that, and

give up control, allowing a kind of chaotic energy to enter into the work more forcefully. Even in the chaos of the cosmos there is pattern and structure; one could say that there is clarity. What I wanted to try and do is to allow chaos in, uncontrolled in the same way and find the clarity within that. How that is going to enter the paintings, I'm not quite sure.

**You're tuning into the constant chaos that not only comes from culture and society but also the unstoppable force of nature, non-human life, and these cosmic ideas. All of that is being packed into a line, through your hand and onto paper. It's a powerful image to think that's something that we as artists can do. This really speaks to seeing your work and art as a whole as something that is so much bigger than the studio- that ideas can transcend time and**

**the people who present them. Does this knowledge offer a sense of freedom in the studio, where you know that you're playing a part in a conversation that can potentially out live you?**

It's really about an issue of risk and the willingness to allow things to happen that you're not controlling, then finding your way through that. There are all of these protests happening now in the country and beyond. There is a kind of chaotic nature that is inherent in any kind of protest. Right now, we have so many young people getting beaten up, going to jail, risking everything for change. I think that's very important and it takes a lot of courage. In terms of what's happening in the world right now, there's not much hope for lots of people. Especially young people, they feel like they have nothing to lose. That's a real stance and an attitude. I think that you have to take that stance and attitude in the studio as well. That's why I think some artists are practiced in embracing risk and, to a certain extent, failure. I was just at lunch and the discussion turned to Occupy Wall Street. The general response to that movement was that it failed. Well, yes, it did fail, but also it didn't fail because it started something. The same thing is true with Black Lives Matter, it was thought of as a failure but now it has roared back stronger than ever.

I bring this up because as artists, we understand failure. When you start to try and make a painting, you often make a failed painting. And you make another because you have to risk failure to gain success. This is where the practice and training of artists could be seen as echoing this pattern. I think this gets back to your point of artists going to the studio right now. People are in the streets but we are going to the studio. It's misunderstood as to what that is about, what we're getting done through that practice.

**For the viewer, which we are, the experience that is offered when we stand in front of work has been diminished. What are we missing and what opportunities for self-discovery have been lost?**

Well you have to carry things with you. Just the way in which painting is a practice, you develop a strength and a knowledge throughout. The experience of the artist is not just about the finished painting but also the process of making it. Even what

you give up or destroy is in order to create and gain clarity. You keep that with you and so I think after a while you don't need to necessarily stand in front of a painting. But great Art does open that space you talked about and it's so necessary to society.

The other end of it are the institutions whether they be government, religious, or other powers that organize society and are constantly trying to close this space down. Even the idea of Black and White was a concept created by Thomas Jefferson to prevent cross-racial and cultural alliances that were based on class. Before that, people didn't see themselves in those terms. Now, that methodology seems inevitable. All of these ways of thinking about oneself are all really conceptual. So, how can we end racism? My feeling is that we really have to challenge these notions of who we are and how we identify. [James] Baldwin talks about how he's only seen as Black because other people identify as White. If one were to stop identifying as White, then he could cease being seen as Black. Whiteness was created in order for Blackness to be seen as the other.

The thing about what we do as artists, by creating a space for contemplation, is that we can disrupt the limited ways in which one might see themselves. It's healthy and you feel better. Right now, people aren't feeling good. So, how do we get out of our collective pain? Art offers that experience, which can be joyous. That's why color is so powerful, it really touches us in a visceral way. You don't have to explain it.

**The work is non-representational, so there isn't a narrative laid out through specific images. The story is in the process, the mark making, and it resides in the painted surface. Your titles are not descriptive but instead offer something of yourself to the work. This sets up a dichotomy between the non-representational and the personal space your titles invoke. Why is it important for you to use words that allow you to be present in the paintings?**

Language, which is really the realm of the poet, is there to be utilized. It's another way into the work. Without an image or a specific narrative, it could be difficult for certain individuals to allow themselves to relax enough to enjoy what they're looking at. They want to know what it means because if they don't know what something means, they fear it, which may be human nature.



Exhibition view, *Marina Adams: 2020*, Salon 94, New York, NY

I try to use language to allow another entry point. It's a common ground. Formal elements such as color and scale are common ground for painters but not necessarily everybody else.

**Something that you're getting at that I didn't really consider, is that you're offering a release valve...**

Yes, I'm offering another way in.

**Yes, but you're also offering another way out of the works. When you mentioned the fear factor of looking at something you don't understand, I thought of your titles as a relief from that pressure. They are another way out of what are actually forceful paintings. I saw the Salon 94 show "Anemone", and I have to tell you that standing in the middle of the gallery, I felt the work closing in on me. Surrounded by your works felt like a pressure cooker. The only way out was to go into my mind with the works or in the direction that you point me with the titles. There is so much attitude in the work. Do you think about them that way? Do you put that forcefulness in the work?**

Yes, clearly! Part of my agenda is to wake people up. How do you do that? Size, scale and color. When I choose colors, I try to make surprising choices because when you give people what they already know, you don't wake them up and they continue to sleep walk.

I actually do remember thinking to myself, "What color is this?" I remember that disruption happening. But scale is something I really left thinking about. I want to be clear that I think your work is always big no matter how large it may be. I don't just mean size; I mean scale in that it seems like that there are endless formal possibilities with the way you're working. This is a statement about your work ethic and being open to what can happen in the studio but, also, the scale of the project seems like a very long conversation that has endless words to be added. Does it ever feel unwieldy in your efforts to wrangle it in to make a painting or do you just go ahead and let it all out?

One thing you made me think about is how long it took me to get where I am. I look at the work now and it looks so simple. Why couldn't I do that when I was a graduate student? Why couldn't I get to this apparent simplicity and clarity earlier? But also I do remember through the years that anytime I felt that I was backing myself into a corner in terms of saying this is what the work is, I would turn around and move in the other direction. I was very aware of not backing myself into a corner and I did believe that in the long run I would gain that clarity. I'm in this for the long run. So, in my practice I've given myself a lot of time to develop and room to move. I allow myself to take in and love all kinds of things, which inform my language. It all comes from somewhere; I don't make it up. Everything already exists in the world. What artists do is assimilate information and digest it. That's why studying the past is key to gaining clarity about the present.

*Arthur Peña a Bronx based artist, writer, and curator. His curatorial project One Night Only has hosted solo celebrations for Nicole Eisenman, Carrie Moyer, and Ellen Berkenblit. His previous In the Meantime conversation was with New York based artist Dike Blair.*