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Interview

Francesca DiMattio's Instable Stability by Emily McDermott



FRANCESCA DIMATTIO IN LONDON, OCTOBER 2015. COAT: MARQUES'ALMEIDA. HAIR AND MAKEUP: ROSE ANGUS USING MAC COSMETICS AND BUMBLE AND BUMBLE.

Despite growing up in Chelsea, artist Francesca DiMattio didn't encounter contemporary art until later in life. As a child, she did, however; frequent museums. "I would go home and make fake Jasper Johns's when the Jasper Johns show happened, and I loved the Degas show at the Met," she says over breakfast on a Sunday morning. "I just ate it all up, and whatever it was, I made versions of it." Now, DiMattio creates ceramic sculptures that range from two to 10-feet tall and large-scale oil paintings, while dividing her time between the same Chelsea building in which she grew up, a studio space in Brooklyn, and a newly built home and studio in upstate New York.

Currently on view at Pippy Holdsworth gallery in London is "Confection," the second show of works DiMattio made entirely in her new studio. The show expands upon the 34-year-old's first sculpture-only show at Salon 94 in New York earlier this year through its presentation of whimsical and playful, yet hauntingly dark sculptures and paintings. One ceramic sculpture appears like a vibrant and elaborate cake with jarring juxtapositions of rough, guttural forms acting as icing. Similarly, *Bloemenhouder II* plays on the Dutch translation ("flower holder") by directly referencing the forms of vases and their histories, while simultaneously carrying miniature porcelain flowers and steel nails on its exterior surface.

"I look at so many different histories but was really inspired by the absurdity of Dutch tulip holders," DiMattio says. "The pieces called *Bloemenhouder* normally have a double meaning, in that they can hold flowers and are inspired by vase shapes, but the structures also hold hundreds of flowers because of the way they're encrusted."

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Her interest in Dutch vases and their transformation reflects the artist's practice as a whole. As a Cooper Union (BFA) and Columbia (MFA) graduate, DiMattio largely deals with the intersection of femininity, craft, and materiality—what can be done to change perceptions of the commonplace? Like Bloemenhouder has a dual meaning, so does "Confection:" a dish made with sweet ingredients, and alternatively, the action of mixing or compounding. Through combining various clays, presenting sculpture in conversation with painting, and compounding materials, DiMattio reimagines the mundane and reconfigures historical movements, ranging from Ming Dynasty ceramic engravings to Rococo floral patterns.

Late last month, we met the artist in New York, not far from the building she lived with her parents (who both immigrated to the U.S. at age six), where she still lives with her husband and soon-to-be-born son.

EMILY MCDERMOTT: In previous interviews, you've talked about the instability expressed in your work. Now, you just built a new home and studio, and you're about to have a baby. Have you seen your life and work become more stable?

FRANCESCA DIMATTIO: My work hasn't become more stable yet. I think adding the upstate thing—having two studios, two houses—has actually kind of thrown up our routine a bit. But once our neuro pathways adjust to this new rhythm, I think we'll find a new sense of stability. Upstate is wonderful and I love the ruggedness it's brought to my life—I'm really different up there. I work on the land and grow vegetables; there's a lot of dirt and there's a lot of physical behavior, but there isn't enough range, culturally. I would never be happy up there full-time.

MCDERMOTT: You were born and raised in New York. What keeps you here?

DIMATTIO: I grew up in Chelsea and I never really left; I live on the fourth floor and grew up in the basement [of the same building]. The range that you see everyday in terms of cleanliness and filth, high and low and cultures—I couldn't imagine living anywhere else. Even London was too clean. I love taking the subway to go to the studio and seeing a huge mix. You look up and the ceiling is falling down with layers of dirt. There are parts that almost take the filth to a sculptural place. I'm really uncomfortable in places that don't have [the range]. From growing up here, I get really uneasy when it's not there.

MCDERMOTT: Were your parents artistic?

DIMATTIO: They were. If they had parents that made them think it was possible—even if they didn't know how—they definitely would have been artists. My mom made ceramics her entire life. She worked in this building you could see from the West Side Highway that looked like a castle. At Cooper Union, she took classes. She always made stuff on the side even though she had a job and raised a family. My dad wrote poetry and took painting classes and was always really creative too.

When I was little, my parents had a place in the country and they could never get me outside. They had this attic and I would stay up there drawing and painting. I spent a lot of time alone. I always wanted to be an artist, I just didn't know that you could be, or how you could be. I went to an art high school but they never even took me to a gallery. I remember applying to colleges and I thought you should get a really good education and then be an artist. I was looking at the University of Pennsylvania, Columbia, and the University of Chicago, and then I went to the Cooper [Union] shop and saw people working. It was so much more intimidating and inspiring. I was like, "That's what I want to be, I don't want to be walking alone with khaki pants on and a backpack." My mom was always academically inclined, really well-read, and believed that education was important, but at that point she was like, "There's nothing at the end of academia. You have to jump at some point. If you want to jump now, you should."

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MCDERMOTT: Can you tell me about your experience at Cooper Union? Because I remember reading that you've never taken a formal oil painting class.

DIMATTIO: Cooper Union taught you how to think and communicate visually. It was critique based, not based on technique. I remember someone set up a palette once; it was so minimal, 10 minutes out of the whole four-year experience. I think that's the way it should be. If the shops in universities were further developed, if different experts did different things, that would be a good place to have technique isolated. That way school is about thinking and communicating, but if you wanted to learn to cast something you could.

I don't think I took a sculpture class the whole time I was at Cooper. The sculptures really developed out of the paintings, out of the thinking I had already developed. I definitely had to figure out how to make stuff, and I still do. When I was at school nobody could teach me ceramics. I was lucky enough to have that in my family.

MCDERMOTT: I've done ceramics and learned the techniques. I can't imagine making sculptures of your scale and nature, having not formally learned. What was the initial learning process like for you?

DIMATTIO: There were a few things that led to making sculptures. There was a group show where works were being fabricated in Mexico and they asked artists to make proposals. I came up with a proposal and they were like, "There's no way we can make it, it's way too complicated." I was sort of bitching about it to my father-in-law and he was like, "That's ridiculous, come out to Arizona and make it. It'll be easy." It obviously was not, but he made it seem really possible.

I was also always thinking about what I would want to do sculpturally. For me, the fact that this was tied to craft really mattered. The way I made the paintings referenced craft, but delivered it in a much more aggressive, tougher scale. The clay also has the elasticity of painting; you can morph it to take on a range of surfaces and textures. That was another thing I really cared about: having this stark shift in materiality.

MCDERMOTT: When did you become interested in the idea of femininity and craft and kind of subverting stereotypical ideas?

DIMATTIO: In the paintings, even in my first show, I was always interested in taking elements of space and the reality that we know and dissolving it into patterns. A lot of early paintings dissolved tile into quilts and space into flatness. It's become clearer and clearer over the years—and some of the sculptures are more reductive; you have two different things opposing one another—but I was always interested in finding ways of meeting the familiar very differently, specifically the feminine familiar.

The idea is trying to find different uses of materials that have extreme associations and through making them differently, or through making them next to something, you don't have a fixed sense anymore. In terms of instability, I look for ways to make it difficult to dismiss delicate flowers as being sweet. It doesn't feel sweet; they feel dangerous when they're taller than you.

MCDERMOTT: There are also nails on the back of one sculpture.

DIMATTIO: That one has hundreds of tiny porcelain flowers on one side, and protrusions of cannibalized remnants—all the stuff that falls on the floor—and steel nails on the other. The pairing makes you change your feelings about flowers—the scale, the quantity feels like its going to fall on you, the stance of the form is kind of warrior- or soldier-like, definitely masculine. It's this feminine surface on one side and an aggressive surface on the other.

When you spend time with the sculpture, you end up seeing the formal relationship and connection between the seemingly opposite flowers and nails. Both have this untouchable porcupine surface. What seems so



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different becomes its own new material, and that's the motivation. When everyone's like, "Oh, you found them and stuck them together," I correct them because materially, it's important that they go through something together. When they go in the kiln, a very delicate floral pattern and some rough pinch pot will slump together and there's a settling. It's not about collage; it's more about something being grafted, like when you graft two apples and make a new species. I'm more interested in making a new whole out of conflicting parts.

MCDERMOTT: Do you typically make paintings before the sculptures? Is there any rhyme or reason to the order in which things happen?

DIMATTIO: While initially the sculptures were coming out of the paintings, now I can see the effects of working sculpturally on the paintings. Initially it was definitely paintings first and then sculpture, but the last show, in the spring, I wanted to show the sculptures on their own. They don't have to be in relation to painting. Scale is also really important because I want you to meet them sculpturally and materially first, and have the associations with ceramic be secondary. When they're small and there's a pedestal, they fall into that language no matter what.

MCDERMOTT: Going to your process, do you paint with underglaze for the details?

DIMATTIO: Yeah, I use a lot of underglaze just as they would in the Ming Dynasty. A lot of the processes are exactly as they would've been done—and a lot of them are totally wrong. Like in the paintings, there has to be moments that are completely right to be able to feel how wrong it is when the space gets flattened or the space collapses. It's the same with the technique in the sculptures: for some to feel really wrong, you have to have parts be really right.

MCDERMOTT: Do you ever throw on a wheel? I find throwing on a wheel so therapeutic.

DIMATTIO: Yeah, I'm getting better! I wasn't that great at it. [laughs] I barely need it because I found all these other ways of getting there, but I got a wheel and did a lot of thrown bits for the big chandelier. I think that when people say ceramics is therapeutic and seductive, I think it's really about the wheel. Nothing I've done has that feeling; I feel like I'm fighting with the material the whole time. It doesn't want to be vague. It doesn't want to be asymmetrical. It doesn't want to have different clays combined. It doesn't want to do any of the things I make it do. In order to make one work, sometimes I have to make two right before in order to find the balance. For the cake-icing confection, I dyed a bunch of slip, extruded it, and put it on as you would cake, with palette knives and plastic bags with different tips. If it's not strong enough underneath, it will implode—but not when you think it will. It'll implode the next day, after you've done everything. You have to get the timing just right, which comes from a hands-on connection with the material.

I don't know how you can teach a lot of it. It's about a sensitivity to experience and seeing what you can get away with. If you're taught it, I'm sure the teacher says, "You can't combine two different drynesses." It is harder, but there's no should or shouldn't; it's just you might experience some failure and teachers are trying to navigate away from that. I'm much more interested in pushing the clay to do things it doesn't want to do. You have to learn in action and record and remember. I don't write anything down, but I hold onto it in my head. I should probably start keeping a record...

MCDERMOTT: You've said you watch a lot of movies and listen to audio books. Do you listen to them while working?

DIMATTIO: I've been listening to baby books, like *Bringing Up Bebe*—there's an American woman living in Paris and it's her analysis of what the difference is between upbringings. She saw huge differences in that their kids go to sleep regularly very early, they're patient, and they eat all the food. But if you asked a French woman what they did, they would say they do nothing because it's so different and culturally ingrained; they don't have

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objectivity about what they're actually doing.

My favorite book I listened to this year was Patti Smith's *Just Kids*—it came out five years ago, but as an audio book, she reads it. Even if you've read it, you should listen because it's so intimate. She was describing a lot of it exactly like when I was a little kid. It was eerie; I was different than she, but I was there, walking around. When I was little, I would get the feathery stuff and fishing line for beading from the same store. Some of my friends growing up lived in the Chelsea Hotel; that's where some of my play dates were. I remembered every place in Chelsea that she mentioned, but from a kid's perspective.

To be able to withstand the elements necessary to be an artist at that time—it would've weeded out a lot of delicate souls. She may have had a huge loft, but she was freezing. The lettuce soup? That's where I might fall apart. I have to eat. That time, I know it from my parents, because they were here too. It's rough to be mugged all the time, to have your place broken into all the time. You can buy a building for very little, but then the building has a fire and you have no money, so you have to fix it all yourself. I think it's so important to remember the complexity of things.

"CONFECTIONS" WILL BE ON VIEW AT PIPPY HOULDSWORTH THROUGH NOVEMBER 14.



Francesca DiMattio, *Paisley*, 2015. Mixed media on canvas. 82 x 70 in. Photo: Courtesy of the artist, Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London, and Karen Pearson.



Francesca DiMattio, *Gingham*, 2015. Mixed media on canvas. 80 x 100 in. Photo: Courtesy of the artist, Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London, and Karen Pearson.

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Francesca DiMattio, *Confection*, 2015. Underglaze, glaze, gold and silver luster on porcelain and stoneware, epoxy, enamel. 58.5 x 29 x 27.5 in. Photo: Courtesy of the artist, Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London, and Karen Pearson.



Francesca DiMattio, *Black Confection*, 2015. Underglaze, glaze, and gold luster on porcelain and stoneware, enamel. 35 x 29 x 29 in. Photo: Courtesy of the artist, Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London, and Karen Pearson.

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Francesca DiMattio, *Bloemenhouder II*, 2015. Underglaze, glaze and gold luster on porcelain and stoneware, steel nails, epoxy, enamel. 92.5 x 31.5 x 22 in. Photo: Courtesy of the artist, Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London, and Karen Pearson.



Francesca DiMattio, *Bloemenhouder II* (detail), 2015. Underglaze, glaze and gold luster on porcelain and stoneware, steel nails, epoxy, enamel. 92.5 x 31.5 x 22 in. Photo: Courtesy of the artist, Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London, and Karen Pearson.

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Francesca DiMattio, *Tephra*, 2015. Underglaze, glaze and gold luster on porcelain and stoneware, epoxy. 68.5 x 31 x 23 in. Photo: Courtesy of the artist, Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London, and Karen Pearson.