



SALON 94

HIGHSNOBIETY

Alake Shilling's Artworks Are a Dose of Hardcore Happiness

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Alake Shilling

It's the eyes that draw you in: ranging from dinner plate-wide orbs to dime-sized dots, evoking awe, ambivalence, everything in between. They're surrounded by color; but it's the offset of white, around the pupils, that amplifies the effect — a conduit to an entirely different plane, where bears play instruments and shear flowers.

That's the magnetic pull cast by Alake Shilling, the Los Angeles-bred artist who depicts insects, animals, and pastoral scenes across both paintings and ceramics. A self-described "homebody," Shilling works at a deliberate, intentional pace from her in-abode studio, where sculptures can take a few months; canvases, up to a year.

The immediate analogue that springs to mind? Lisa Frank, the name that's washed countless school supplies and youthful ephemera in her unmistakable brand of harmless fantasia. When she was younger, Shilling was "obsessed" with the line.



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"It doesn't really have a lot of feeling. But when you look at the characters, they have big eyes. It's colorful," Shilling says. "It's got the gradient. It's got the music notes. You can understand it. I feel like the language is universal. I like to use that language in my work."

But whereas Frank's vernacular is one of commercialized precision, Shilling's is wilfully slipshod. Yokes of paint spill out of frame. Ceramics champion through-the-looking-glass proportion and pocked texture over polished sheen. Heavy-lidded critters, typically cute-as-a-button harbingers of joy, shed tears.

And while the urge to characterize her works as "surreal" is tempting, the word tells only part of the story. Yes, Shilling's creatures are unmoored from reality, but the opaque emotions into which she taps are inimitably authentic.

"It's all about duality, really. You've got to have sad, if you want to convey happy," Shilling explains. "I want people to look at them and not be able to put their finger on what the characters are feeling. Or looking at. I want the landscape to be beautiful, and the characters to be in intense thought of feeling. That makes it more realistic, in a sense."

The 27-year-old artist is a lifelong Californian, save for a stint studying at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. It was a formative experience; while there, Shilling was exposed to the work of the Chicago Imagists, a seminal wave of '60s and '70s-era artists known for their aberrant scenes and forceful hues.

"The Imagists are kind of like Pop artists, but their style is more warm, more wonky. More in touch with the human

experience, which really spoke to me,” Shilling says. “And when I first discovered their work, I was like, ‘Oh my god, this is me. This is who I am.’”

Traces of that DNA imbue Shilling’s oeuvre. Other influences include being raised on *Schoolhouse Rock!* (“I used to watch that all the time. It was my favorite cartoon as a kid,” she recalls), long-ago trips to summer camp (where she incubated instincts that manifests today), and, of course, Los Angeles itself.

Fittingly, the city was host to her first solo show, 2018’s “Monsoon Lagoon” at LA’s since-shuttered 356 Mission Gallery, where paintings surrounded the sculptural focal point: ceramics perched atop paper mache-styled rock formations harkening to the artificial-formations of the defunct waterpark from which the exhibition drew its name.

“I wanted it to be a door opening into the world I’m creating,” she explains. “I thought ‘Monsoon Lagoon’ would be my last show for a while. I wasn’t expecting to be able to show my work so consistently.”

Fortunately, institutions haven’t made it difficult to seek out her work. Shilling appeared in group exhibitions like “Happy!” at NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale and “Dirty Protest: Selections from the Hammer Contemporary Collection” at the Hammer Museum, among others showcases.

It hasn’t taken long for brands and designers to take notice, too. On the occasion of its iconic creation’s 90th anniversary, Disney tapped Shilling for “Mickey: The True Original” exhibition, to which she contributed a woolly rendition of Minnie Mouse. Maisie Wilen — the label by LA-based, Kanye West-co-signed designer Maisie Schloss — connected with Shilling for a paint-by-numbers style sweatshirt depicting Shilling’s trademark animal, Buggy Bear.



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It's not a leap to imagine Shilling's artwork finding its way on other labels, too. For one, psychedelia has enjoyed an extended moment in the market. What's more, design thrives on references to the past, and Shilling's subversions of nostalgia-inducing canon — anthropomorphized animals, sunshine-resplendent landscapes — aren't entirely out of step with the industry's evergreen what's-old-is-new-again ethos.

But what does the 27-year-old artist — who counts Kenny Scharf, Ken Price, Lauren Halsey, and Magdalena Suarez Frimkess among her favorite artists — envision for the future?

"I would like to be able to pursue art for my whole life," says Shilling, adding, "That's my goal for the future. How can I meet my everyday needs through fine art? Because I don't know what's going to be my Plan B if it doesn't work. I'm really focused on how to make it work."