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Denise Gale on Painting: Complete Chaos, Layer by Layer

Denise Gale had an early encounter with abstract painting at a de Kooning show at the Kemper Art Museum, at the age of 10

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There are some who may only know Denise Gale from her five-year stint as host of “Drinks With Denise” on LTV, where she mixed it up with local chefs and personalities over cocktails and wine. They might not realize that lurking under the tipsy banter and awkward conversational transitions was a serious abstract painter, who pursued her metier first under the tutelage of Peter Plagens in California, and then in New York City before settling in Springs in 2001. Mr. Plagens, well known for his criticism in The Wall Street Journal and other publications, is also a painter, and an admirer of Ms. Gale, who appeared on a short list of painters he respects in ARTPULSE magazine.



Denise Gale's studio opens onto her garden, which offers a tranquil escape from the chaos of her works-in-progress. *Mark Segal*

Growing up in St. Louis, Ms. Gale had an early encounter with abstract painting at a de Kooning show at the Kemper Art Museum, at the age of 10. “I thought they were the most magnificent things I had ever seen. It’s not like I was precocious. I really believe it was something in my makeup, something genetic.”

As a child she was always drawing or painting, but her focus on art intensified when her parents separated and she moved with her father to Los Angeles. She took art classes at Los Angeles Valley Junior College, then earned a B.F.A. at California State University at Northridge. One of her teachers was Mr. Plagens. “I asked him where people were making art, and he took me on a studio tour of downtown Pasadena.” Before long, she found a vacant space and connected with the Los Angeles art scene that was flourishing in Pasadena at the time.

Her first solo show came at the age of 26, at the Newspace Gallery in Los Angeles. “I was into smearing paint in layers on canvas on the floor. I would use a squeegee or a piece of wood. My first paintings were just stapled to the walls, but later I had to stretch them because they had so much paint on them.”

Her approach to art hasn’t changed much over the years. “I start with a thin coat of paint. Then I stain it and keep layering, making complete chaos. From that I try to pull out some semblance of what I consider a painting by more layering, changing the value of the color, the shape, the width of the brush. I create the chaos to make it provocative to me, and then I try to make sense out of it. If I’m not absolutely crazy about a painting, I either fix it or ruin it and start over.”

After 13 years on the West Coast she was ready to move east, to New York City, “where the history of painting was.” Richard Armstrong, a friend and curator who is now director of the Guggenheim Museum, told her about a sublet in Little Italy.

Ms. Gale found a tenant for her Los Angeles studio and took off. Mr. Plagens came to visit, bringing his wife, Laurie Fendrich, also a painter, who suggested she meet a friend of hers from art school, Jim Merrill. They began dating, but when Ms. Gale’s tenant moved out unexpectedly, she had to return to L.A. “Jim came to visit me and I went to visit him, it was back and forth, and finally he asked me to come to New York and live with him.”

In 1990, they got married and traveled to Romania to adopt their son, Sam. Mr. Merrill, Ms. Gale recalled, was adept at finding and renovating lofts, and found a good one for the family on Greene Street in SoHo.

They bought a house in Springs in 2001. “I needed to see some nature,” she said, “and Sam loved the freedom that you just don’t feel as a 12-year-old in the city. He was mugged twice by the same kid on the Upper West Side.” Sam, who attended the Springs School for a year and then East Hampton High School, now lives in Albany. His father often stayed in the city, and after several years of increasing separation, Mr. Merrill and Ms. Gale divorced.

“Drinks With Denise” evolved from early feelings of isolation while living here and having to use the house’s basement for a studio, which she found depressing. “I never wanted to go down there. But once the divorce went through, I started to renovate the garage into a studio, and that changed everything for me.”

She did the first show with three friends, Suzanne Bond, Sue Heatley, and Christa Maiwald. “I was really nervous, so we all got tipsy. It was sort of a spoof of ‘The View.’” When LTV built a kitchen, Seth Redlus, then the station’s executive director, asked her to use it. She invited chefs from local restaurants, among them Joe Realmuto of Nick and Toni’s and Jason Weiner of Almond, but it wasn’t a cooking show. “They cooked, but mostly we talked.”

Once her studio was finished Ms. Gale gave up the show, after some 100 episodes, to concentrate on painting. Several years ago she became increasingly beset by back pain, which led to two surgeries and changes in her work routine. She used to paint with the canvas on the floor, like Jackson Pollock, but as that became impossible she found she could create large works by making diptychs and triptychs, whose components could be moved more easily and painted while hanging on the wall.

Before the second operation, her friend Geoffrey Nimmer, a landscape designer and yoga instructor, recommended what he called the yogi speedball. “It was strong coffee and three Advil,” she said. “It only worked in the morning, but it gave me three hours without pain.”

Over the last few years, Ms. Gale has exhibited regularly on the East End, including two solo shows at Ille Arts in Amagansett. That gallery recently mounted an exhibition of Cuban artists, which in turn led to an invitation to Ms. Gale to have a show in Havana next year.

At different points in her career, she became deeply involved with the art communities of Los Angeles and New York, and she has done the same on the East End. It took a few years, but now she has a community and a space she’s almost happy with. “I’d really like to double it,” she said, “just push it out into my front yard.”



Since her spinal surgery, Ms. Gale has turned to diptychs, such as “Just Pink,” the parts of which can be moved more easily than large canvases.



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