

Interview with Lauren Clay

By Christina Nafziger

The work of Lauren Clay is part sculpture, part painting and part window into another realm. Mix these elements together with a bit of vivid pigments, and the result is a mesmerizing body of work that envelops its viewers. Clay uses architectural elements that push and pull, shortening and lengthening depth, like that of an optical illusion. Flights of stairs and ledges of windows pull you into a space where beautifully colored, twisting forms threaten to enclose themselves around you. The Brooklyn-based artist is a master at creating a space that is both utterly surreal and eerily stunning.

The shape of a window appears often in Clay's body of work--a familiar structure to us all during quarantine. A window is an escape hatch, a portal for us to look out into the world. However, it also keeps us in, creating a barrier when closed. The artist cleverly plays with this notion, creating a portal to another universe, but also sharing part of that universe with us by way of her elaborate and impressive installations. In her recent solo exhibition, *Trellis*, she extends the reach of her wall reliefs by covering the gallery walls with marble-patterned vinyl. Here, the viewer can stand within Clay's whimsical world, surrounded by portals within portals, a window in a window.

Join me, as the artist and I discuss her ambitious installation for *Trellis*, the intricate ways in which she creates her work, and her creative upbringing.





You are undoubtedly highly skilled in both three-dimensional sculpture as well as two-dimensional drawing. What is your artistic background? Which medium was your first love?

I grew up in a very creative family and drawing and painting has always been a big part of my life. I was constantly drawing when I was a kid and I painted murals in my bedroom. My father was a photographer and my mother was an art teacher, so they were very encouraging. After high school, I

went to Savannah College of Art and Design where I received a BFA in Painting in 2004. Then I went to Virginia Commonwealth University, where I received an MFA in Painting and Printmaking in 2007. While I was in grad school, my work slowly became more and more sculptural. Even though I began making sculpture, the work has primarily remained wall-based and in dialogue with painting.

Your wall sculptures, or wall reliefs, appear as if they are windows to another world. In fact, architectural elements like windows and arches often show up throughout your body of work. Can you speak about these elements? Are you inspired by architecture?

Yes, I've always loved architecture and reference it in my work – even in the work I was making in college. In my current sculptures and installations, I'm often pointing to the realm of the unconscious or transcendent space. I find myself wanting to reference this approach to a liminal space by constructing thresholds. Sometimes these "thresholds" manifest as windows or literal doorways and archways.

I'm also interested in the way architectural forms can mimic the internal or psychological inner world of an individual. Carl Jung spoke about this in reference to dreams. You may have had a dream that takes place in a specific house—maybe the house you grew up in, or an apartment you've never been in before. Jung interpreted the house in a dream to be a symbol of the psyche or the individual's psychology. The house and its architecture symbolically become an extension of the psychic body. I'm very interested in this idea and it has become a big part of my work over the past couple of years.

What are your sculptures made out of and how do you achieve the elaborate, marble-like affect on the surfaces?

My sculptures are on panel with layers of modelling paste, plaster, paper pulp and carved foam. I build up layers of modelling paste and sand them until

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the surface is very smooth. All of the sculptures are painted with oil paint, so all of the marble patterns you see on the sculptures are hand painted.

These fantastical, whimsical forms in your works bring to mind the work of the surrealists, more specifically the dream-like shapes that are often seen in the paintings of Yves Tanguy. Does this movement influence you? Which artists have influenced your style?

I love the surrealists and while I've never focused on them specifically, I do feel some affinity for them. For example, I really appreciate Giorgio de Chirico and his ideas about a metaphysical relationship to architecture. I also love Richard Artschwager, Louise Bourgeois, Elizabeth Murray, and Franz West.

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Congratulations on your solo show Trellis at Anderson Gallery at Virginia Commonwealth University! The installation is absolutely incredible. Tell us a bit about this show and the complex wall installations in which your sculptures hang upon.

Thank you! For this show, I wanted to create a room that felt simultaneously enclosed and open. I think this installation mimicked how I felt in my studio during the COVID lockdown. In many ways, I was isolated and enclosed, but also had a feeling of being inside a room with many windows—many points of observation and different vantage points to view the world. There are accordion-like walls with corners that bend inward and outward, which confuse perception of the space, and repetitive arched windows, which give a feeling of looking outward.

The wallpaper installation began as a small collage. The original artwork for this installation is a paper collage about six inches tall, cut from hand-marbled paper, which I made in my studio. The collage was scanned at a high resolution, enlarged, and printed on vinyl. Because the collage is enlarged so much, many details emerge in the final printing, such as the grain and texture of the paper and the layered elements of the collage. The final result does not look like vinyl, but has a very physical, tactile quality—almost a faux relief.

You can view installation images of Trellis here: <https://www.laurenclay.com/trellis>.

What does art making mean to you and has this changed during the time of COVID-19?

Maybe it's selfish, but for me, art making has always been a personal inward journey. In the best moments, there's a feeling of reaching inward and seeing what I can find there. If anything, that feeling has only intensified during this time. I've had so much more time to think and read and study things I'm interested in.

If you could have a two-person show with any artist (contemporary or from history), who would it be and why?

Wow, that's a hard question! This wouldn't be a traditional two-person show, but I love the idea of collaborating on some kind of crazy architectural installation or space with Antoni Gaudi.

Do you have anything coming up that you would like to tell us about?

Currently, I'm focusing on making new work. I also have a solo show with Bosse & Baum gallery in London opening in the spring.



Work by Monica Ikegwu

