

Art : Interview  
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# Shara Hughes by Rachel Reese

*Shara Hughes on painting with her fingers,  
dismembered bodies, and making work about love.*



Shara Hughes, *It's Safe Because We Make The Rules*, 2013, 50 x 56 inches, oil, enamel, acrylic, spray paint on canvas, courtesy of the artist.

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In 2008, Shara Hughes returned to her hometown of Atlanta after graduating from RISD in 2004 and living in New York and Denmark. Not only has she embraced the extra studio space to make her work—or mental space to process it—but Hughes has also actively asserted herself into the Atlanta art community while remaining internationally connected and actively exhibiting in New York at American Contemporary (her most recent solo exhibition, *See Me Seeing Me*, was in Fall 2012). In Atlanta, Hughes operates SEEK ATL—a studio visit group that meets monthly in an artists' studio for conversation and critique—along with founding partner Ben Steele. Hughes opens her first Atlanta solo exhibition, *Don't Tell Anyone But . . .*, at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center this month (April 19–June 15, 2013) and will also have a solo exhibition next spring 2014 at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Georgia as she is the recipient of the 2012/2013 MOCA GA Working Artist Project fellowship.

I spent a day with Shara to visit both her home studio—where she consistently produces her paintings—and her sculpture studio—a temporary space at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center's Studios provided to produce new sculptural works specifically for this exhibition. The conversation that follows weaves a thread between the dualities that are at play in Hughes's practice: Balancing abstraction and representation, labor and spontaneity, difficulty and ease through two-dimensional and three-dimensional forms exemplifies the 'flip' she consistently refers to as a necessary and dynamic part of her visual practice.

**Rachel Reese** Maybe a good place to start talking about your work would be to back up. What did your work look like coming out of RISD?

**Shara Hughes** I was making like a lot of minimal paintings about dead animals, but used as furniture. So, for example, bear skin rugs and heads on walls and stuff, which then I think turned into some larger kind of weird trend. Generally you don't see much of anymore. But I remember a while people were making that kind of work.

And those were based on my parents getting divorced and how I felt. There were all these 'dead' things at home so I latched onto the idea of interiors because I was always trying to create some other kind of home, in a way. Whereas my space—the one that I've always known—has been broken.

**RR** So the interior has carried throughout your work over the past several years? Specifically, using the *idea* of the interior as maybe a rubric that you could lay your either your style or your imagery on top of?

**SH** Yea, so I think that's when I first started doing interiors—it always felt like the best resolution to everything for me. Within an interior, you can make a landscape through a window or you can make another person's painting within the painting, or you can paint figures or not. I never really started doing figures until now. And they're still broken up and pieces of things.

I remember in college I made a painting that looked exactly like a Joan Mitchell painting, because I really loved her. My professor said, "This is nice to look at, but what's the difference? Besides . . . she did it, and she was way better." And I realized why it's so important to make my own work. I wanted to paint like everybody. Interiors became the foundation where I could lay all different artists who have come before me into and onto the painting. So I could paint a really detailed Renaissance painting inside of, on top of, a Bridgette Riley-esque type wallpaper thing. It opened up access for me to flow between everything I wanted to do, that I couldn't do, because "that looks like this" or "that looks like that."

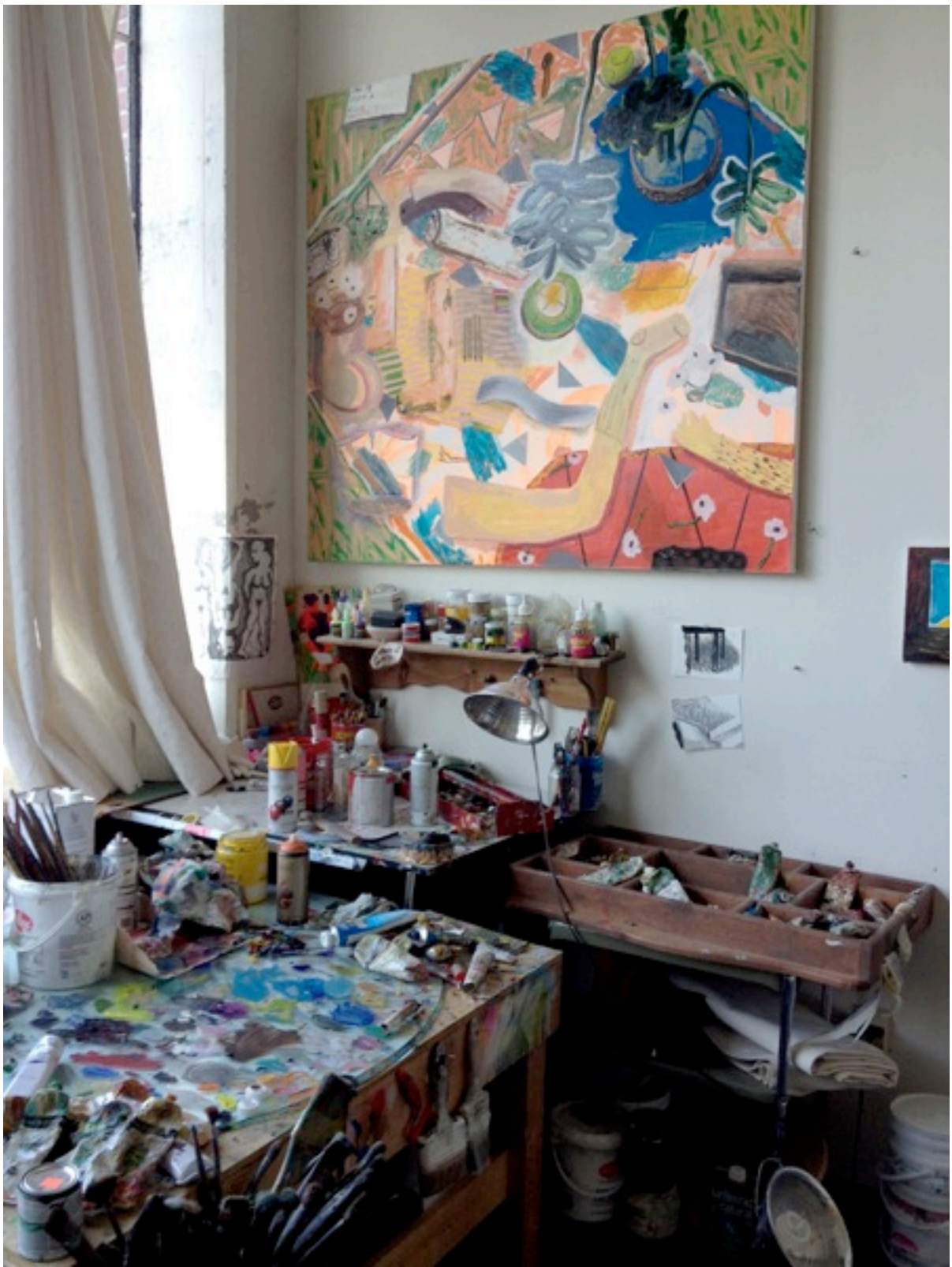
**RR** Creating this "formula" or visual language shifted your work from adoringly appropriating to purposely referencing those things in the paintings?

**SH** I would also look back in art history and see what kind of symbolism artists were using. For example, dogs are a symbol of protection. So, I would put a dog in my painting to talk about protection of myself, or some birds, or several other traditional symbols. And then I began to remove them, and I would bring in my own symbolism—broken trees or rocks that have been cut halfway. I continually create my own alphabet from my own symbols as my work progresses.

**RR** Ultimately your own individual visual language developed out of it. Is there a symbol that's carried you throughout your work? I see a lot of socks.

**SH** Socks have started to come in, and lots of bodily limbs, arms and legs. I don't think I'm so heavy on it as much now as I used to be. Now I'll begin painting one object and then it will transform into something else.





Detail of Shara's painting studio. Photo by Rachel Reese.

RR So you're allowing more chance or evolution to happen organically than before?

SH And that way I can be more connected with the piece. But it eventually does turn into something that is going on in my life. Like my painting here called *Boo Hoo I'm In Love*. I just got in this relationship and it's terrifying because I'm in love with this person like I've never been with anyone before! My fears manifest on the outside. And, if you see here, there is a girl who is eating her face and there's a naked little thing on the side and this person who is sort-of chair-like, holding the girl down like everything will be ok. So this painting is about gluttony and fears, but it's also a lusting—it's the beginning of the relationship, but it's terrifying and there's a way out.



Shara Hughes, *Boo Hoo! I'm In Love*, 2013, 62 x 58 inches, oil, enamel, acrylic, spray paint on canvas, courtesy of the artist.



RR I'm reminded of Dana Schutz's oversized painting, *How we cured the plague*, from her 2007 show *Stand By Earth Man* at Zach Feuer. That painting is epic—you seem to share similar sensibilities. Where do you find balance between abstraction and figuration/representation?

SH Well . . . I haven't—my work never involved figures at all until the past six months or so. I like the representational play between this *is* and *isn't* something at the same time. I can paint a glob and it can be just a glob, or, it can represent a vase; or it can flip between the two. And I like the play that the viewer can have at the same time.

RR Are you starting with a vague idea of how a painting is going to be laid out in your mind? And where do you start? By laying down background color and working from there, or—

SH Yes, somewhat. But it's different with each piece. I knew with *Get It, Got It, Good*, I wanted an aerial view, and that I wanted it square. But I didn't know what was going to be on it at all, and it went through different phases. It resolved itself as (sort of) a picnic made from a bunch of things that make up a person.

A lot of times when I see a blank canvas, I say, "Ok, where do I go with this?" Because I don't want my other work to influence it that much. I don't want it to be too heavy on *something* because then I feel like it gets too tight or cold. The process needs to remain somewhat open. So I give myself something to hold on *to*, but I don't need to hold on to *it*, if that makes sense. The process is just free enough for me to tell the paintings what to do.



Shara Hughes, *Get It Got It Good*, 2013, 58 x 52 inches, oil, enamel, acrylic, spray paint on canvas, courtesy of the artist.

**RR** So when do you know when a painting is finished? And do you feel satisfied when that happens?

**SH** Yes, I do. It's an intuitive thing. For instance, when I do something over and over, I get a sense of if the balance is good, and then there's nothing I feel awkward about. Or, if there is something off balance, then I wonder if it should be consciously awkward. Finishing is not as hard as starting.

**RR** Some of your works rely on all-over compositional devices, with heavy use of patterning. Can you talk about organized chaos, pattern and texture?

**SH** I think, for me, that's a conversation about painting and paint. And the love of painting.

**RR** The physicality and language of it?

**SH** Both—the language and where it's come from. It's also just really fun for me. It's a lot of formal things, and it's also about engaging the painting enough so that you don't have to rely on what it is. So you can look at a painting and respond to *how* it's painted or because of the imagery or formal qualities. And for me, the responses can flip, and I'm ok with that.

**RR** Are you the type of painter who sticks to a specific brand of oil paint? Are you a big paint mixer or do you like using the color from the bottle?

**SH** I use so many different things, but the process is done and layered properly. If there's a fancy oil bar that's really juicy, that's what I'll splurge on. But I don't mix my palette beforehand.

**RR** You mix as you go?

**SH** Yea, as I go. Or I just literally squeeze it out on the canvas. I use my fingers a lot to paint, too. I like the smoothness and I know that by using my finger I can pick up something from underneath and mix it.

**RR** So it wasn't because a brush couldn't resolve the situation . . . It's because you are making a choice to use your finger—

**SH** I want to do it!



Works in progress on a wall at Shara's painting studio. Photo by Rachel Reese.

RR Do you like working with really wet paint?

SH It's different with each painting. I know each surface and what would be good super wet. Like the background here—I knew I wanted the light to come from behind, within. So I knew I had to do something really washy and wet. But I knew I wanted something more opaque to sit on top of it, which needs to be super thick. I know the material so well that I know how to manipulate what I need.

RR This really feels like a Guston.

SH Yea, it does! It does!

RR Let's talk about the dismembered bodies, like the floating leg with the sock?

SH It's kind of how you see yourself. You can't see all of yourself at the same time. Or maybe it's my inability to think of myself as a whole without seeing everything around me.

RR Would you consider the figures to be self-portraits?

SH I guess they're all based on my life, so I guess—

—but I'm not going to sit down and make a self-portrait. I just want to make paintings. And I want to base them off of honesty and what's going on with me. And the best way to do that is by working from yourself.

RR What are your source materials or what are you looking at when you're painting? Or are you painting from total imagination with these interiors? That's the inside of a medicine cabinet—

SH Yea, the inside of a cabinet. I am painting from my imagination.

RR What's the significance of your titles?

SH A lot of them like start with a title first, but sometimes not. Like this one *Boo Hoo I'm In Love* started with a title.

I haven't been in a relationship in a while. And I was thinking, "This is hard." And then I said to myself, "Boo hoo, I'm in love!" So I wondered how to make a painting about it . . .

RR Looking forward—let's say 100 years from now—someone analyzing your work is going to say this was your *relationship period* . . .

SH It's funny because I've never made any work about love before! But something that has always been evident in my work is both a darkness and happiness at the same time. I made this painting called *The Sweets Are Too Sweet*. This guy had a crush on me, but he was way too nice. So I made this fluffy, frilly party painting of piñatas throwing up candy—kind of too gross. There's a fine line between the good and the bad.

RR They're a little bit difficult for someone to come in and read them. Your paintings are not a window for us to escape someplace else; you definitely have to bring other things to them. We need to figure out and place ourselves in relation to them. I might read these completely different from you or from someone else, and maybe that's because the palette is really dark or maybe it's because they do feel really emotionally tense. My really strong reaction is to feel that difficulty.

SH I agree, especially with the new work. Projecting my feelings and emotions in them is different than how I worked before. Going back to my previous use of symbols—like "this is the symbol of stability, this is the symbol of protection . . ." I would paint that way previously but not now.

RR Well, maybe you don't have an answer anymore.

SH I feel like now I'm now painting my insides. In a lot of these, you'll see the inside of people, of bones. I'm literally painting my insides and like painting how I feel inside.

RR Let's talk about your sculptures, which are new to your practice. Do you see them as your paintings coming to three-dimensional form?

SH It took me a while to realize that my sculpture studio became a physical manifestation of my paintings. I'll work on one sculpture for a while, and then I'll turn around and work on another. Whereas in a painting, I'm working up, down, side to side, on the same work.

RR Each painting is within its own physical frame. So all of these sculptural elements might exist in the same frame for you?

SH Yes, somewhat.

RR So these aren't completely autonomous? Do they feel interdependent?

SH No, I don't think that. . . I think that my ideas are somewhat formed holistically. I'm shifting and moving things constantly until they're in the right places. Sometimes that's fast—yesterday something happened in ten minutes. And you wonder how you can work and work on something for four weeks and it still not feel as resolved. So that spontaneity is just as important as something that is really labored over. And that applies in painting as well. It doesn't have to be so hard, but it's nice that things are hard also.





Shara Hughes's sculpture studio at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center. Photo by Rachel Reese.

**RR** Maybe it takes both of those moments, something feeling really difficult and something that just happens quickly and resolves itself. They need to be there together.

**SH** Yes, completely.

**RR** With the sculptures are you getting back to more of the symbolism from your earlier painting?

**SH** Somewhat—but a lot of the things are just pure invention of material. That grilled cheese-like form can be its own thing; those columns can be on their own, and so on . . .

As with my paintings, I'll start with an idea, but then it won't necessarily work out, so I keep myself open enough to see the invention within itself. I don't hold close to something that I have already decided is fixed, because the execution is completely different.

**RR** Are you working with the idea of prop?

**SH** Because I work with interiors and these are all furniture-like and within human scale, it's understandable that they're going to read as prop. I don't really want them to be stage-like; I don't want it feel I'm in some person's house. I do want them to be able to slip in and out of its being something and not being something, sort of how the paintings are.

**RR** And there's something with this sculptural work that relates to tension. There are tense moments where the parts are coming into or out of one another, or, for example, this element being held up by a thin cord—

**SH** Weight is something I have been thinking about. How to balance a really skinny column, or how to navigate the heaviness of this punching bag thing. It is something I am conscious of because it's physically tricky. I've never done sculpture—

**RR** Do you think that's coming from working with space and gravity for the first time in this way?



SH A lot this is myself literally just trying to figure out how to make it. But I also think that allows myself to be really playful.

RR It's very playful.

SH These rocks are made out of tin foil. So this creates the same flip that I like in the paintings. Where a brushstroke can be just a brushstroke and also a light bulb. Having the viewer also be able to think that they could read its form or create its story, like a choose-your-own adventure novel.

RR You're not really talking much about the language of appropriation or the language of the ready-made. Most everything is handmade—very obviously touched and formed by you. I'm connecting this to painting with your fingers. You are the medium.

SH That makes sense!

RR You could have easily balanced a real banana here, so why didn't you?

SH I think that's too easy. If I'm taking actual elements, I am turning them into something else. This is a blow-up mattress.

RR Inside the basketball hoop? Where do you find these materials?

SH I literally find these every day in the building where I live—they have these give away piles. I go 'shopping' every day before I leave for the studio! I don't know what I'm going to do with most of the stuff, but I bring it here and it answers itself. Like, "Of course, it's a moon." I'm enjoying reinventing.

I'm literally painting everything too, so I still feel like a painter. Because I still have to maintain control over how it looks.

RR That's definitely an important connection to the rest of your work. Continuing that visual language. The ones that are installed really closely remind me of Keith Tyson's *Large Field Array* from 2007.

Each sculpture related to everything that was directly around it, but one removed. The installation went from the floor all the way up on the walls. It was chaotic, but you were in this world. When I walked over to this corner of your studio and had to maneuver between yours, his exhibition came to mind.

SH I like how they are human scale. As if you walk up to this *thing* that you can talk to. To me, these are people. And a lot of those are friends. How sad does that sound? That these are my friends?

RR It's a good connection to the figure. They become stand-ins. But they're really playful; they're not difficult like the paintings can be.

SH In a recent frustration, I told someone that my paintings were hard; working on them in the painting studio was becoming hard. And I said, "I just want to go to my sculpture studio, because I don't care." But I do care, and I'll laugh because it's also funny, how dumb this can be sometimes. I'm picking up trash and turning it into stuff. It's awesome.

RR That's a nice balance. Both of your separate, but simultaneous, practices working together in tandem. Where do you see your sculptural practice moving forward?

SH I started making the sculptures with this [ACAC] exhibition in mind, but I feel like this makes sense for me. And it's really fun, and it's just another avenue that I've found I can do. But if I do continue, I have to do it somewhere that has a purpose. Because I can't do these in my apartment!

*Shara Hughes's exhibition Don't Tell Anyone But . . . runs April 19–June 15 at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center.*

*Rachel Reese is an independent curator and arts writer. With her husband she produces Possible Press, a curated quarterly newsprint publication of artists' writings, as well as Possible Projects, a storefront exhibition space. She is the Senior Editor of BURNAWAY magazine*