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# INTERLOCUTOR

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## CHERYL MOLNAR

Interview by Isabel Hou  
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"Birds in Flight," 2020, archival digital print and gouache painted paper on wood panel, 36 × 48 in, 91.4 × 121.9 cm

Cheryl Molnar is a collage artist living and working in New York. In this interview, she discusses her work currently on display for her solo show "Sites Unseen" at New York's C24 Gallery, up through March 25, 2021. C24 writes of the show, "Molnar's multilayered collage-paintings embody the precarious balance between modern society's enmeshed relationship with technology, our primal connection to nature, and the unchecked interplay between the two."



"The 405," 2020, gouache and mixed media collage on wood panel, 30 × 24 in, 76.2 × 61 cm

**You currently have a show at C24 Gallery in Chelsea displaying the “Sites Unseen” collection. The collection is at once both transcendental and collected: the patterns in “The 405” imply structure, for example, while its backdrop seems to be in another dimension. What do you hope to convey between this contrast? Or rather, do you view these elements as complementary?**

Much of my work — if not all — puts the friction between man-made “progress” and nature into stark relief.

The patterns in my work are derived from modern design and architecture. The pattern in “The 405,” for instance, references the Sunkist Corporate Headquarters, which is a low-rise, corporate office building in Los Angeles built in the 1970s. While these modern structures are nostalgic for me having grown up in New York and Los Angeles, they’re also evocative of a time when the idea of modernism represented progress — especially in the western hemisphere.

In my work, I abstract the patterns and shapes to evoke the feeling of these structures without direct representation. I also use the patterns and lines as a compositional, directional element to evoke growth and upward movement. This creates a path for the viewer to navigate the work while noticing small details along the way.

I juxtapose these structures with natural elements — native fauna, geological details, and topographical changes—to recall what once existed before these structures came about. Whether an office park, a cookie-cutter suburban development, or a modern house cut into the hills, all of these structures have altered the original natural landscape in some sort of way.



"Town of the Future #1," 2020, gouache paper and archival inkjet print, 24 × 26 1/4 in, 61 × 66.7 cm

The colors in "Sites Unseen" are bright and bold, yet reminiscent of an earlier time. The C24 Gallery describes the pieces as "embody[ing] the precarious balance between modern society's enmeshed relationship with technology, our primal connection to nature, and the unchecked interplay between the two." How does your use of color contribute to the aforementioned commentary?

The color palette is reminiscent of both the saturated 70's color palette in architecture and design that I grew up with, but also colors found in nature and the scenes I see around me.

Light and shadow — the golden light of sunrise or sunsets cast washes of warmth on the otherwise flat colors. In the larger wood panel works, woodgrain textures themselves "yellow" the colors as they wash over the natural wood color. The works on paper tend to be brighter and bolder as the natural white of the paper shines through the layers of collaged painted gouache paper and archival digital prints.

Color in my work is both structured and gestural, in a process that starts on the computer and ends with tactile collage. I have a background in graphic design, and I am very comfortable using programs such as Illustrator and Photoshop as tools to draw the compositions in my work, often starting as computer sketches using Hex and CMYK colors in early processes. I juxtapose this computer stage with a more tactile handmade process. I make my own colored sheets of paper by painting bold brush strokes in washes on the page — collecting piles of colored paper to use in the collage work at a later date. When the color is needed, I cut the sheets into shapes and strips and collage them onto the wood panel. The tactile painting and cutting is a meditative complement to the computer portion of the process.



"A-frame House, Climbing," 2020, archival digital print and gouache painted paper on wood panel, 48 × 36 in, 121.9 × 91.4 cm

**Of your work involving nature, you've posed questions to your viewers, including "How does man alter nature to get our houses and to get our structures into these things?" and "What is our footprint on nature?" (Riverdale Press, 2017) Is this consciousness towards the relationship between humans and the environment something that drives your work?**

Yes it is, and with the goal of making us more conscious of how our achievements are often due to the need to be closer to nature, regardless of our negative impact. For example, in LA, my grandmother lives on a hillside where houses are literally cut into the side of the Santa Monica mountains or precariously propped up on stilts — an architectural feature that dots the bluffs on the east and west coasts alike. They are almost like pins that puncture otherwise pristine landscapes. However, the irony is that I am most drawn to these places for their breathtaking vistas, warm sunlight, fresh air breezes and sweet smells of plants.





"Ascending Church," archival digital print and gouache painted paper on wood panel, 36 × 48 in, 91.4 × 121.9 cm

**I noticed that there are three pieces in "Sites Unseen" having to do with religious buildings: "Church," "Ascending Church," and "Cathedral." Each piece is individual in composition and color, but it is hard to ignore the correlation in name. Do you find religious buildings to be a source of inspiration?**

I am not religious, but modern churches and spiritual structures are interesting to me. It is eye catching to cross paths with one of these buildings amidst an expanse of suburban or urban sprawl. In my hometown on Long Island, they were the most unique architecture — monumental and sculptural compared to strip malls and office parks.

Much like the architecture of old European churches, details such as vaulted ceilings and arches are rich with symbolism. In a practical architectural context, they are strong supports essential to holding up buildings. In mythology, arches and transoms are a metaphor for entering into another kind of time and space. Arches visually lead the eye upward and conceptually allude to "reaching new heights." For the piece, "Ascending Church," I loosely reference the architecture of the TWA building at JFK airport, which is a quintessential modern structure that looks like a bird about to take off.

**The press release for "Sites Unseen" writes that you "came of age in the wake of the prototype for American suburbia known as Levittown...featuring row upon row of identical houses, laid out in reproducible grid patterns." (C24 Gallery) Can you expound on how this aspect of your background came to be an inspiration for your work?**

Growing up on Long Island, I have seen sprawling, cookie-cutter suburban developments pop up over farm land — a phenomenon I jokingly refer to as "house farms." I grew up in a neighborhood where every house was the same, including the curated landscaping. Whatever nature had been on the site was demolished to make a fabricated experience. I don't want to cast suburbanization in a completely negative light — there were benefits to communities like this for families — but I do want to encourage people to understand the tension behind this development.



"Arches," 2020, gouache and archival inkjet photo on paper, 37 1/4 x 30 in, 94.6 x 76.2 cm

**What really draws me into "Sites Unseen" is the geometry of the paper collages. "Arches" and "Cathedral" in particular have a distinct sense of symmetry. What is the purpose of the clean lines and sharp angles, the layers that give way to patterns, particularly within those pieces?**

I love creating space using a traditional one or two-point perspective. I start just about every piece drawing a horizon line in Illustrator and plotting out my vanishing points, then filling up the space with clippings from my photographs. Taking cues from Italian Renaissance painting, I can create spaces with great distance and expansive vistas that can take one "far away" and have lots of room to explore.

In some other life, I would have been a draftsman or an architect, but the spaces I create in my art are distorted and can never actually, physically exist. I think these spaces benefit from the distortion — it is more enjoyable to not be limited by practicality.



"Cathedral," 2020, archival digital print and gouache painted paper on wood panel, 48 × 36 in, 121.9 × 91.4 cm

### **Who, or what, inspires you?**

I definitely have a warm feeling of nostalgia for my personal past and a connection to family history, and it mostly comes to fruition for me in a sense of place. I recall the details of the house I grew up in as well the homes of friends and family, such as colors and patterns of the decoration. In my hometown, I remember the layout of the most interesting buildings, such as the modern cantilevered design of the public library or the mid-century modern bank that had a koi pond connecting the inside to the outside in an interesting way. There weren't a lot of visually interesting things on Long Island, but I will remember the ones I saw forever.

Nature and landscape are also inspiring to me. Being a Long Islander, the beach and the bluffs have always been a source of inspiration. The beach offers a place for solitude, long walks and quiet reflection — an antidote to the busy city days. Los Angeles also has a special place in my world, as the landscape offers vistas with deep horizons and golden light, which is hard to come by in Long Island or Manhattan. I also love in LA how there has been a movement to return to native landscaping in homes, rather than artificial unnatural landscaping. In my walks there, I enjoy succulent gardens with the most unique shapes created in their natural growth patterns.



"Desert Spring," 2020, archival digital print and gouache painted paper on wood panel, 72 × 48 in, 182.9 × 121.9 cm

**You have exhibited in several different locales: The Islip Art Museum (LI, NY), Smack Mellon (NY), and the General Electric Headquarters (CT), to name a few. How do you feel you have changed, as an artist as well as a person, from your first show?**

Personally, it's been interesting to see that the conflict between progress and nature manifests itself in new ways, as I've continued my work. It's allowed me to be more expansive with how I approach the same subject, without feeling like I'm going over old ground.

As my exhibitions have changed, so has my exposure to other audiences and artists. As you would expect, there's a huge difference between regional exhibitions, multi-artist residencies, and corporate collections. Each opportunity has been valuable, and I recognize the value that these opportunities continue to afford.

Travel and process have been the biggest impacts on the progression of my work. Several of my exhibitions are reflective of where I was located while creating these works — whether residencies in Brooklyn, New England, or Fire Island — or trips to the Southwest and the Pacific.

At the same time, I've continued to refine my process, as I become more comfortable experimenting with how I create these pieces. I've moved from creating them solely by hand, to adding more digital production aspects that, while remaining true to my subject matter, have given me more freedom to push my work forward.





"Town and Country," 2020, archival digital print and gouache painted paper on wood panel, 48 × 72 in, 121.9 × 182.9 cm

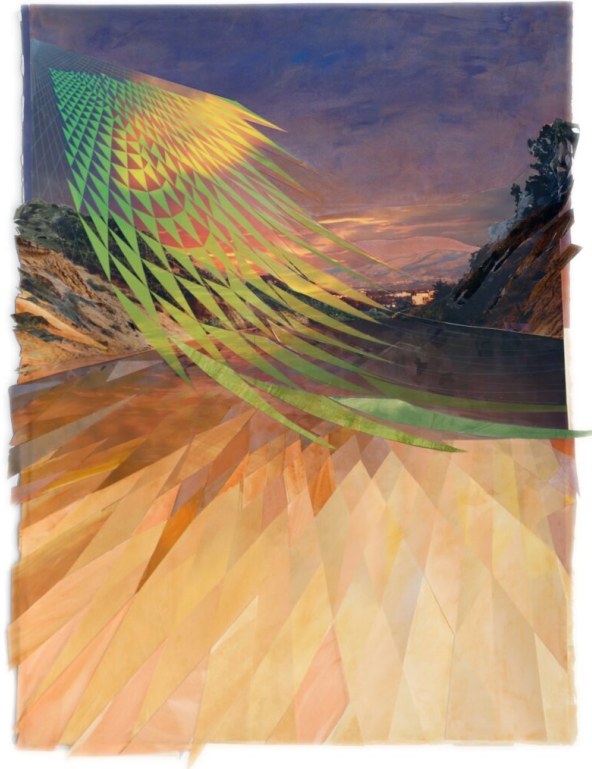
**You've produced other collections, including "Unnatural Settings" and "The Architecture of Memory." How do you know when a series is finished?**

Generally, before I start a series, I have a strong idea of the themes I want to focus on and the development process I want to explore. Due to the investment in time and process needed to create each piece, I also need to plan in advance, as there is little margin for error. At the end of each series, I like to walk away with the knowledge that I've explored a new aspect of my work and am comfortable with a new technique and/or approach to making my art.

Each series leads into the next, and themes from one series can appear in others. All of my work is based on places that I have been and things that I have seen. In some cases, I have started drawings or plans that don't get realized into a final piece until years later, as technical issues are resolved.

My current exhibition, "Sites Unseen" is very much an evolution of all the concepts that I have been playing with over the years. For instance, the collage titled, "Town and Country" is an expansion of a work I made a decade ago titled, "Mulholland Drive." By creating the older work, I was able to hone in on the specific inspirations and techniques that make my current work more personal and precise to what I want to execute.

"Sites Unseen" is also a breakthrough for me, as the production process has evolved. In this series, my photography is more apparent in the final product, whereas in the earlier work, the photos were referenced but not apparent in the final piece. I have always been comfortable using the computer as a tool, but in this series in particular, it was natural to use wood prints in the final work, as I have developed and tested a method in which I have confidence. I also think that changing attitudes towards incorporating digital elements in art production have allowed me to leverage my skills for the better.



"Desert Flight," 2020, gouache paper and archival inkjet print, 37 1/4 × 30 in, 94.6 × 76.2 cm

**As we live through a pandemic, have you thought about how the art world will change in the years to come? Do you foresee your work changing in response to this crisis?**

The pandemic has made me and other artists think about our audience and how we reach them. For the art world in particular, I think there needs to be an expansion beyond the white walls of a gallery or the walls in our homes and office spaces. Art should be more accessible — it can be part of our everyday lives, either virtually or in the products we consume, providing more opportunities to connect the artist with art appreciators.

In my own work, the immediate effect of the pandemic was on how and where I create work. My process is much more integrated with my everyday life than it has ever been, adapting to how I live, and what I can produce at the moment. Now that I am older, have a family and multiple jobs, I have adapted my process to be able to create art anywhere. I wish I could be at my studio all day every day, but that is just not an option. There are different activities which I can do at different times. Now, since I have a toddler, I use my computer as a tool more than I ever have. It's easy for me to sit on the sofa after my daughter goes to bed and sketch out some ideas in Illustrator or edit photos in Photoshop. Hopefully, she'll be willing to accept a position as my studio assistant.

<https://interlocutorinterviews.com/new-blog/2021/3/9/cheryl-molnar-interview-sites-unseen-c24-gallery>