

Repetitive loops and endless possibilities: the virtual cartoon dream-world of Bridget Mullen's paintings

For New York-based artist Bridget Mullen, the most important aspect of making art is the making itself. Painting, as Bridget sees it, takes place as a mixture of intuition, inventiveness and random occurrence. Her paintings are built up, layered and worked at over long periods of time, employing a vast array of mediums and techniques. She does not want her works to exist as singular, self-contained objects that refer only to themselves, but as spaces which contain that entire temporality of their making. As such, her paintings are not ends in themselves, but rather a means towards inhabiting the process by which they were brought into being, as well as the consciousness of the maker. The viewer is invited not only to experience that process of artistic creation via the painted surface, but to conceptually take part in the making process; for Bridget, the encounter between viewer and painting is what ultimately allows for the work's coming-into-being. As she puts it, the painting "requires your standing before it to complete it."

To inhabit the world of Bridget's paintings is to step into a dreamlike, cartoonish reality brushed by unsettling elements of the surreal. It is a world in which half-formed shapes and figures whirl in a constant state of emerging or dissolving, where the characters you meet spawn uncanny replicas of themselves, where colours roll endlessly into what looks like the distance, but which becomes flat and solid when you stretch out your hand towards it. The figures in Bridget's paintings are imbued with her own cartoon-induced anxiety when confronted with an imagined, dreamed or virtual reality in which there are no apparent boundaries around what might happen. In some paintings, the same figure is repeated over and over with slight variations that imply movement, gesture, a series of moments or metaphysical potentialities all existing concurrently. Her characters are attached to no specific moment, transcending the time and space of the painting by virtue of the multiplicity of their presence.

Although Bridget experiments with sculptural modes and mediums, such as ceramics, she has found the actual process of shaping clay and three-dimensional forms to be far more significant within her work than the completed sculptural object. Working in three dimensions has, in this way, functioned as a vehicle for reconceptualising space in her paintings as an interplay of object and air, solid matter and open space. Certainly, there is an implied density to Bridget's figures in her shadows and highlights, the suggestion of convexity in her subtle shading. Yet this is consistently undercut by bold blocks and stripes of uniform colour, stark outlines and more cartoonish, cut-out shapes, suggesting a kind of flimsy unreality to the figures being projected before us. What prevails in Bridget's paintings is a sense of flatness, the overlapping layers converging to create what Bridget refers to as a "build-your-own-reality situation" in which depth is both a shallow illusion and a vast, unrolling endlessness, where figures are both solid volumes and paper-thin, two-dimensional shapes.

Bridget has participated in multiple artistic residencies across the United States, as well as countless group shows. Having displayed her work in national and international solo exhibitions as far as Amsterdam, she is now working towards a solo show that will open in Madrid next year.

interview by Rebecca Irvin

Featured image:

Bridget Mullen
Angle Grinder
flashe, spray paint, and monoprint on linen
20 x 16 inches





AMM: Hi Bridget, was there a particular, formative moment that led you to pursue art, specifically painting and sculpture?

BM: I've always had very vivid dreams. As a kid I remember being fascinated that I could whole-heartedly believe the impossible situations experienced in a dream then wake up to another reality that I also whole-heartedly believed was real. Dreaming made me wonder where my thoughts came from and what I could do with them. The thing that felt closest to the power and fantasy I experienced in dreams was the mental space I occupied when I was making art. I hope that some part of me can be communicated through art, but occupying the state of being that comes with making art is what I find most meaningful.

AMM: Can you tell us about the different mediums you work with and your processes when it comes to manipulating three-dimensions and two-dimensions? How does the choice of medium alter the ways in which you visualise your concepts and work with space?

BM: I use Flashe (an ultra matte, water-based, vinyl paint), spray paint, and printmaking techniques on linen and canvas. I build a painting slowly in layers, using different techniques and mediums, usually over the course of a whole year. Using a variety of mediums and layers in one painting pushes my inventiveness during process and in seeing the painting once finished. The repetitive elements make the painting unfold quickly, but the variety of mediums and layers slows the viewing. Painting is my preferred medium, but I also (infrequently) make sculpture using found objects, clay, glaze, and paint. Any concepts that emerge from my painting and 3D work are discovered in the process of their making, not consciously pre-planned.

I started working with ceramics because I had a year-long residency in New Mexico that had an exceptional clay facility. I wasn't comfortable having the kiln be the thing that finished a sculpture, and using one material in a work felt too much about the material itself, so I ended up combining found objects with ceramics.

AMM: Where do your sculptures and your paintings overlap and intersect? Does one ever directly influence or enter into the other?

BM: I don't have a huge habit of making ceramics, though I'd love to. It'd be great to work with clay in my painting studio, but it just can't accommodate a kiln. I think I enjoy the process of making sculpture more than I enjoy the finished work. It ends up feeling too obvious. Or maybe it's that moulding clay is so great that any end product would pale in comparison to that experience.

Making 3D work has probably heightened my awareness of the space of my paintings. It's encouraged gravity as active subject

matter. It's also made me question what in my paintings is air, what's object, and to explore the threshold between the two.

AMM: Within those mediums, are there specific materials you prefer to work with? When it comes to the texture and graininess of your clay, for example, or the thickness and drying-speed of your paint, or even the ground on which you work.

BM: I use Flashe because it's very matte and seems to absorb light. You can look at my paintings from any angle without getting light glare, which I like to think makes the paintings more conceptually absorbent. Also, Flashe is self-levelling and dries quickly so I can work as fast as my choices demand. It looks thin when dry, like a veneer, projection, or screen, which is in line with the plasticity of my imagery—imagery that feels like a mirage, frozen in a moment, about to morph into something else. I prefer to work on linen because of the color, though I also appreciate the texture. I use clear gesso so the linen can set the tone for the colors that follow.

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When I was at a residency in the Netherlands I was able to get locally harvested black clay. It looked like metal when fired; the deception of the material was what compelled me to work with it. At another residency on Fishers Island I dug up clay from a pond bed, tapping into a deposit that years ago was the source for a brick factory. In this instance, playing a part in the physical transformation of a material (pliable sludge to brick) informed what was made from it—a wall sculpture composed of links and hooks, built on-the-spot, in the place of exhibition.

AMM: Congratulations on your solo show at Helena Anrather last year! When planning for an exhibition, do you seek to create an overall narrative, with the pieces working in correlation towards a central theme, or do you prefer to see the pieces as standalone works? And how do you approach a solo exhibition differently from a group show?

BM: Thanks! I begin each painting randomly, without pre-sketching or consciously deciding a concept, so that my consciousness is the unifier. Any group of paintings made in a time span of three to four years could be a body of work. I like a spectrum of ideas; I don't want to tie things up too tightly with an overt thread. Over the course of a few years, I circle certain ideas, and beliefs are formed by things I'm reading, conversations, and culture. Also, by not choosing a personal narrative I can allow for the possibility of communal or larger narratives.

I prefer to think of my paintings as possessing the possibility of oscillating between polarities—in content and concept. Paintings can become more narrative or abstract, playful or menacing, melodic or dissonant when in proximity to other paintings—my own or others.

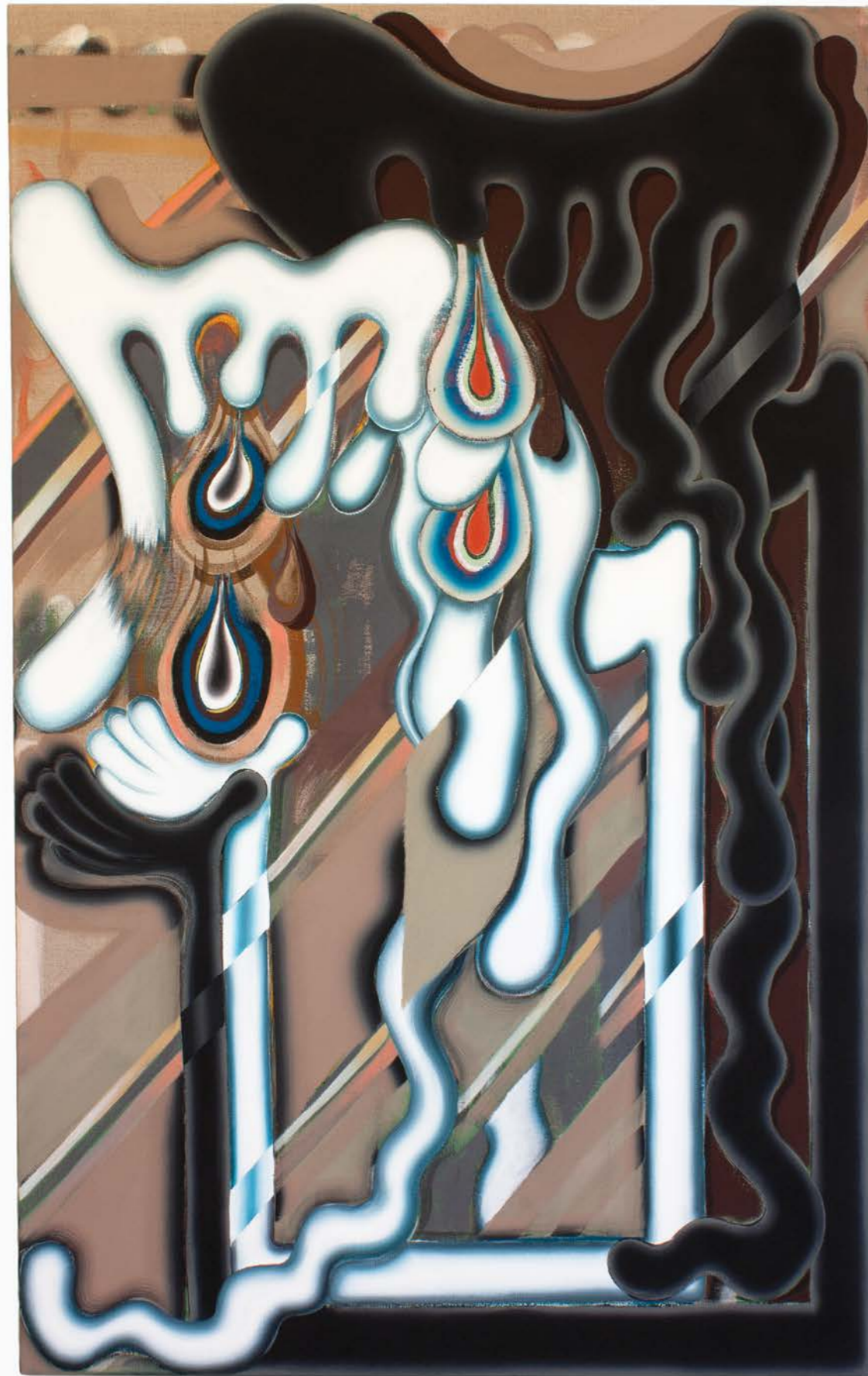
I appreciate the opportunities for solo shows for a number of reasons, but lately group shows or two person shows have tended to be more illuminating. I can almost get an objective point of view if I see my work next to someone else's. It can also be revealing just to see someone standing in front of a painting and looking; empathy is a way towards objectivity. Like any artist, I'm curious to see how you see.

AMM: Your paintings seem to play a lot with the conventions of flatness. Can you talk about your use of layering and perspective to subvert the viewer's encounter with the flat surface?

BM: My tendency for flatness has to do with my experience drawing from imagination and not life. I tend to propose imagined, virtual, or conceptual situations rather than describe an existing one that's possible in the physical world. The decision to give an image volume or show how it is an object doesn't often occur to me in a painting. I have a sense of the space as I'm working, but it isn't until I'm nearly finished that I see how a unifying gesture, like a gradation or background to suggest depth or space, is necessary for the painting to unfold with a certain speed and order. Flat, overlapping layers encourage a build-your-own-reality situation. You decide where there's object and where there's air, what's in front and what's behind. I don't want to present the viewer with something already fleshed out. I want to suggest a workable space that feels as if it's still coming into being and requires your standing before it to complete it.

AMM: Where do the characters in your paintings come from?

BM: Psychologically? Probably cartoons mostly. I can see the influence of cartoons not only in my shapes but in the open-endedness, the overall provisional quality of the reality I describe. I've always found cartoons unnerving; Looney Tunes especially makes me anxious. They suggest an infinite world where nothing gets resolved and we have to constantly contend with an unknown future.



Sound familiar? It makes sense that I choose the platform of the cartoon reality (a world I first met as a child, introducing me to the concept of infinity) to engage with my anxiety. I prefer to reframe anxiety not as debilitating but as the natural 'resting' state of having to constantly contend with the future moment.

I think of my studio practice like a phenomenological structure; my consciousness itself is the subject of my work. My paintings are spaces in which my memories, perceptions, imagination, emotions, desires, bodily awareness, embodied actions, and social and verbal activities can become meaningful. The way in which I experience making a painting is equally as important as what is created. The kind of trust, patience, and freedom I have with my art practice is the kind of trust, patience, and freedom I strive to have outside of the studio with myself and others.

Lately, I've been thinking about the concept of freedom as attachment or attention. Maybe freedom is not simply having the will to make unlimited, off-the-cuff choices, but it could presuppose a foundation of attachment and constant attention to a certain ground. It is essential to their making that my paintings interact with someone. Even if my process is prioritised, the viewer is as necessary as I am in completing the circle.

Basically, I make an abstract painting, working on it for months as such, then repurpose the abstractions as figures. That's the short answer for where my characters come from.

AMM: We notice that certain shapes, characters and motifs are repeated across your paintings, or included multiple times in the same image almost like a repeated stamp. What's the concept behind this form of recurrence? Do you find yourself drawn again and again to particular figures of expression as vehicles for conveying moods or ideas?

BM: When I lived in Athens, Georgia there was a guy in town that wore all one color outfits: one day it was an emerald green shirt and navy green pants, another day ruby red shirt and maroon pants. To him there were like seven colors and as long as they were in the same range, they worked. I asked him about it once at a party and he said, "Red matches red." It was more functional for him, less a style. Sometimes when I don't know what to paint next, I don't overthink it, I paint what I just painted. This decision does many things: it lets me sketch out the full nuance of a character in the sum of many, and it suggests movement, rhythm, and a logic. It's impossible to paint the same thing twice and that slight difference is what creates movement and rhythm. Repetition is an attempt to undermine the stillness of painting and to encourage animation: to transcend the borders. Repetition feels like a form of resistance against the painting itself. It reminds me that what I am seeing in a painting are images—suggestions, mutable—stand-ins for something else. At the same time, repetitive imagery hypnotizes with the illusion

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of momentum. It makes plain relative degrees of difference and zooms in on relationship as a potential concept.

In many of my paintings I see paint-drip or tear-drop shapes as sideways or crying eyes, spheres as sight-lines or eyes themselves, toe-like paint brushes, arm-like flowers, and unpainted voids, flat and defiant in their blankness amidst hustling clones. Perhaps repeating them is an effort to better understand them and to see if they are malleable. I'm playing the long game. I know that I gravitate towards certain forms,

but I don't know, and don't need to know, why. I will be able to see over many, many paintings, over many, many years, more clearly what I am after.

AMM: There is an animated, dynamic quality to your paintings which seems in keeping with the cartoon-like figures that feature in them. How do you conceive of movement in your work? Do you imagine the characters to be in a stilled moment of continuous motion?

BM: Depending on the space in a painting or the shape of a figure, a painting could occupy either polarity. The relative difference in the shape of a foot, for example, from one figure to the next, could suggest the figure is one moving through time with memory trails in tow. Or, if the feet feel closer to identical, it could be an army marching in unison. The repetition amounts to a presence that overpowers the painting regardless of your seeing the figure as one or many.

AMM: Can you tell us about the illustrative elements in your work? Are you influenced by the techniques and narratives present in illustration?

BM: I do like some illustration techniques and some illustrative paintings, but in my own work I'm less interested in converting ideas to images. I prefer a more abstract, intertwined, and reverse method of courting imagery; often it feels as if image precedes idea. I focus on the type of process that produces paintings that can elude specific meaning yet still have figuration. I allow the sensual and physical properties of my materials to navigate and the incidental overlapping of open layers to create content. The flatness of a painting (both physically and conceptually,) the use of repetition, and my history with painting, play vital roles. In process, a painting is less a transcript of myself and more, a constantly circulating loop—me painting the painting, the painting painting me. I think the same can be true for what happens when you see a painting.

AMM: What function and importance does colour have in your paintings?

BM: Color is a mysterious, erratic, ghostly, parasitic collaborator. Color reminds me that I have no control over anything. Colors duck under or pivot off each other and refuse to only be about my emotions. I cannot rely on intuition alone with color—it's too elusive for that! I can use mauve all day and feel like I've got a good thing going, but certain colors seem to evade collaboration. It took me ten years to get the nerve to use blues. I sometimes don't trust reds. I'm in awe of greens.

Restraint seems important with color. Towards the end of working on a painting I often paint over half the opposing colors with tones that align with the ground, which is usually linen. When I start a painting, linen gets gessoed clear so that I can respond to its beige-ness.

AMM: It's a well-worn idea that no artist can create anything entirely separate from themselves, or divorce



their art from their own experiences and perceptions of the world. With that in mind, where, if at all, do you think you appear in your work?

BM: Sometimes I think that if anybody really saw my feelings communicated through the marks and colors of my paintings I'd be embarrassed. I've always been, and am still slightly, self-conscious about people seeing me sweep. There's something about the full body movement and intention that feels performative and sentimental. Too much sympathy gets bodily revealed in the task. How I start a brush stroke heavily or lightly, how I pull a stroke away from the canvas quickly or trail off until the brush is dry, when I punctuate a quick thought with a short jab, and when I make a mark that feels ugly or discordant—in painting (and sweeping) my sincerity and intention feel exposed and obvious, perhaps even excessive.

There isn't one feeling I'm after when I paint. I don't have to be in a good mood or feel inspired. Often the act of painting makes me feel hyper-aware of myself, like the painting and I are the only things in existence, but painting can also be alienating. I can become confused by what I've painted—asking myself, "Is this ugly, bad, boring or just unfamiliar?" It can show me some part of myself I haven't seen before or don't want to see. Confusion and displacement are just as desirable as hyper-awareness. Alienation can be described as a kind of presence, a way towards empathy, of seeing yourself as "other."

AMM: When creating a piece, do you plan it out beforehand and work methodically or do you opt for a more spontaneous approach?

BM: I don't plan what I'm going to paint. I don't plan because it doesn't make my paintings any better and I don't enjoy it. I don't want my paintings to feel like I'm presenting to you my good idea. I'd rather discover the content while I'm making it so the energy and traces of discovery are in the painting. Sometimes I start a painting by "cleaning" out my brushes on it, or stopping by and making a mark on my way back to my palette from working on another painting. This inventive and chaotic approach often reveals to me how random colors interact, instead of my choosing them based on intuition. The more I paint, the more I see how much muscle memory and subversive, latent, or potential subconscious content I could be communicating in my work. I have a feeling there are a lot of good ideas hidden in paintings. The problem is that the things I'm hung up on consciously believing are important, to my life or to painting, are also in the painting. I think maybe by the time I'm 80 I will have stored in my body some kind of painting history that'll come out naturally when painting by the sheer fact that I've clocked the hours. And then, I'll have a slightly better understanding of what I'm doing. At this point painting is way too mysterious to know what's really going on.

All said, I'm not opposed to changing my

process. In fact, sometimes halfway through a painting I'll sketch it out to see what I feel is the synthesis. It isn't all self-excitation and chaos. There has to be an ordering of that self-excitation in order for it to land somewhere. I want to relate and for my paintings to feel like openings, meant to be experienced by another.

AMM: Your titles are so inventive! I like "Mediocre Graffiti Just Breaks My Heart (II)", "It's Gravy to Carry a Bone" and "Reel Registers Register Real". How do you go about titling your work?

BM: Thank you! Each painting finds its title differently. I inconsistently write poetry. I'll have a weekend where I feel like I've tapped into something and all I do is write, and then months will go by without knowing how to be nimble with language. Usually titles are lines from poems I write that I 'collage' with a painting. Sometimes the title pops into my head while I'm painting. I want my titles to be like a painting—to have rhythm and the possibility of reference and metaphor without being too on-the-nose or didactic. Titles can present a polarity, either to the content of the painting or the idea of art itself. A title can be pessimistic if the painting seems too cheery, crass if the painting feels overly sentimental, refer to formal or abstract characteristics if the painting is more pictorial, or be about the futility of making art in a world that always feels near apocalypse.

AMM: How have artistic residencies helped you to develop your practice? How did you find working in different artistic communities, and in different places?

BM: Attending residencies upended my life. For three years I moved cities, changed my studio, and found new friends. I was forced to adapt, which was uncomfortable but generative. Through each body of work from each residency, I can chart the changes and speculate on the influences. I remember the conversation that pushed me to start working within a rectangle (I had been making free-form paper collage works for ten years). I can see how that first rectangular painting was the impetus for repetitive imagery, and I can call friends the other artists I worked alongside who introduced me to Frisket, dry brush, Belgian linen, the paintings of Charline von Heyl, and the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

AMM: Where do you turn to when looking for ideas? Do you find more artistic stimulation in visual art or in other artistic disciplines? Or, in fact, do you find inspiration in things not directly related to art at all?

BM: Other paintings are my main inspiration, tied with conversations with, and writings by or about, creative and unusual thinkers. Inspiration comes from movies, philosophy, and poetry too. Also, when I'm in my studio and the sun is going down, I feel an urgency that can be described as inspiration.

AMM: What are some pieces of work by other artists (historical or contemporary) that you find yourself

coming back to again and again, either for inspiration in your own work or just for personal appreciation? What is it that you find compelling about those pieces?

BM: A professor at college gave me a book of Philip Guston's work. I remember seeing "Source, 1976" and "The Ladder" and being confused and thinking, "Why would he think I'd like this? It's so simple and not cool." Months later in person I saw "Friend—To M.F.": a massive, fleshy, raw pink head in profile with a central obvious ear, each stubble of hair punctuated with a surrounding aura of space, and a cheek pushing out a cigarette. This time I was amused. I was honestly surprised the museum considered it art! I didn't know if I liked it, but the pitch of my response made me pay attention. Guston's audacity gave me permission to do what I wanted. It was the first time I really thought that I could be a part of the world as I am and not have to escape it in order to be myself.

AMM: What is your studio setup and way of working like? Do you prefer neatness or chaos? Do you listen to anything while you work or do you need silence?

BM: I paint on stretched paintings hung on the wall or flat on the floor. I mix my paint on plastic plates so thick with dried paint they are fifty times heavier than a plastic plate. I like seeing the history of my color choices. I can work in neatness or chaos, I don't have a preference. I listen to Sasquatch Chronicles, Bieber, Anadol, Philosophize This!, Rachel Maddow, The Daily, artist interviews, The Office, or The New Yorker Fiction Hour half the time and then half the time I listen to the ambient noise of the other people working in the building.

AMM: What's next for you? Anything exciting coming up that you can share with us?

BM: In my studio I'll be working on a couple dozen 20 x 16 inch paintings simultaneously. I'm hoping the sheer number of them will make them less precious and make me more reckless and inventive.

Outside of the studio I have some group shows coming up this summer in New York and a solo show coming up next year at Fahrenheit Madrid in Spain.

Featured image (p.48):

Before Shakers
flashe on canvas
21 1/2 x 14 inches

Featured image (p.50):

It's Gravy To Carry A Bone
flashe and spray paint on linen
48 x 30 inches

Featured image (p.52):

I've No Choice But To Find It Poetic
flashe on linen
68 x 48 inches



Bridget Mullen
Visible Dims
flashe on linen
20 x 16 inches



Bridget Mullen
Hard Rocks
flashe on canvas
20 x 16 inches



Bridget Mullen
To Dissolving The New Classics
flashe and spray paint on canvas
50 x 42 inches



Bridget Mullen
Waterfalls You See, Waterfalls You Don't
flashe on linen
57 x 46 inches



Bridget Mullen
About Face
acrylic, flashe, and spray paint on canvas
20 x 16 inches



Bridget Mullen
Hot Coal Goals
flashe, spray paint, and collagraph on canvas
20 x 16 inches



Bridget Mullen
Live Wires
acrylic on panel
48 x 36 inches



Bridget Mullen
A Thought Is Dynamite
flashe and silkscreen on linen
31 x 22 inches