



What it Takes to be a Professional Artist



Everyone has the ability to be an artist. Everyone, if they apply themselves, can create something creative. Then there are professional artists. Those are the ones who have realized their ability and work daily to perfect it, to be confident enough to barter their craft for living wages. It's an obsession. It takes discipline, planning and drive.

For as long as she can recall, Ali Silverstein has plotted and practiced her visual art. Her lines may look carefree and they are, but they are at the same time purposeful and with intent. It's her tireless desire to challenge herself, to create a perspective that is completely fresh and unique, to surprise herself with what she is capable of over and over again, that has earned her commissioned jobs for The Standard Hotel, an airport, and Paul Giamatti, as well as multiple solo and group shows like her current exhibition at LA's Wilding Cran.

If we had to guess, we'd attribute her success to her style. Ali has a technique that is wholly her own. She is selling a product that can be found no where else, but it is constantly evolving too. One show may be bursting with color, while another is a muted palette. One artwork in her Downtown LA studio is uninhibited and abstract, while its neighboring piece is a realistic portrait.

Kozin, Ariela. "What it Takes to be a Professional Artist," *Westwood Westood*. July 19, 2017.

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We sat down with Ali to talk about her accomplishments, how she's accomplished them, and where her craft will take her next:

I've never seen art that is layered like yours before.

People ask where it comes from. First of all, it's just sort of a gesture, I don't even really think of myself as a painter so much; some painters really love the material, and the mixing, and the pushing paint around on a surface, and working with paint and mediums. I feel like I'm more of a draftsman, I just draw shapes all the time, and then I stick things on top of each other, or layer things up. It's sort of tracing shapes with color and then it's arranging, rearranging, and layering those. I'm just making them up from my head. Then they just layer and layer and layer, so you can read it as abstract or you can zoom out.

Is this creative process something that you sort of created or is this something based off of someone else that you're inspired by?

No, not knowingly. I found this box of watercolors during my first year of art school and I had never used watercolors really, except in art class when I was a kid. No one ever taught me how to use them, except I knew you were supposed to go light to dark.

What made you start doing art as a profession?

It's just one of those things I did my entire life. When I was little it's just what I did. My parents were really encouraging. Actually, it was tricky because I think I would've loved to be a writer or a filmmaker, or even maybe a lawyer. I have this analytical, critical side of me that was always begging for an outlet. I was never really satisfied with painting for that reason, because it kind of gets in the way as a painter. I needed to figure out a way to satisfy both of those sides of me, otherwise I knew I would have to quit painting.

So I took this workshop that was for adults, but it was about how to have the freedom like a kid; it was teaching you how to have this process of how to improvise and be spontaneous. The teacher really hated me, and I was a complete failure in the class. It was hilarious. I went with my boyfriend at the time and she loved him. She was constantly walking up to him saying, "Tell me what you're thinking," and, "Wow, you're so good at this." And I was the one who was there like my life depended on it. I was full of angst and the stakes felt so high, and I think that's actually what she hated. For her, it was all about the process not the product, and the fact that I even showed intent in my work was against her whole philosophy.

That part of it wasn't fun, but I think I ended up being her best student ever because I

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turned my whole practice essentially into this spontaneous gesture that is outside of any preconceptions. I ended up loving painting, not because I found a way to bring my mind into it more, but more because I found a way to let my mind go when I do it. It's become this very physical, gestured thing.

Therapeutic almost?

Is it therapeutic? My teacher would say so. I don't know if I would say so because it definitely feels more fun to me. It's probably more neurotic, but it feels less neurotic. It feels very full bodied. A lot of the time I don't know what I'm doing, and that's kind of become what I love about it. I did this thing that I know I couldn't have thought of happening. That's amazing, it's almost like I get to be the audience of my work like everybody else does, and have that joy instead of that question of, "Is this is good enough?" Instead I'm thinking, "Something told me to put that red thing on there so this is right."



So you're letting go of control when you do your work?

That is the goal, I definitely think it's going to be a lifetime of work to get there.

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When you have a blank canvas, what happens? How do you start?

I kind of start anywhere. I might grab this thing and then, place it here, and then start with that. I'm trying this experiment now where I'm not allowed to go back. So if I put that there and I genuinely want it to be there not to second guess it. Which I'm not terribly successful at yet because I can't help myself. I don't have the discipline yet to say no to not adding something else and going forward only. A lot of times I will do something else, and then cut it up and use it elsewhere.

In general, I'm trying to figure out a way for the figurative work to come back into play because the last show I had in New York, the work was all very colorful.

You're referring to your recent BDSM-themed show, right?

Right. The BDSM theme for *To Put on the Edge, A Table* was all about letting go of control. I guess BDSM is also considered therapeutic. Continuing to allow, continuing to not restrain. In contrast the figurative work, I always felt very much in control of that work. I literally can take all the time I want, I'm looking at a photograph I can pick out the shapes I want to do, and I have a lot of control when I'm painting them. To some extent, I don't know what it's going to end up being like, but I can at least decide each step as it happens.



It seems like it's all about layering right now.

Yeah, exactly. I'm kinda into them. These works for the show at Wilding Cran are put together thinking about a face. It's still loose and chunky, and spontaneous, but with a guiding principle of, "How do I feel right now, or how does this face feel." Most people do not see faces when they see these new things. When I look at this piece I see eyes, a nose, and these lips. I don't think it matters that people don't see faces, I'm not sure if it does or not. How does something having content or meaning change it? Or does it?

The question you pose is, whether or not you need to give your work

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content?

Yes, "How does that change the experience?" or "At what point does it come in?" Most people look at it and they see something abstract and they like it, and they don't need to know it's a face. Does it actually matter that it's a face? Does it give it some meaning that's important or not? I'm just taking baby steps into those questions

Do you give yourself a timeline? Do you come back to it everyday? How does that work? Do you give yourself a month?

No, I don't make any rules about that. Maybe I should. Choices are complicated in here, because there seem to be an infinity of choices. I wonder if there are really an infinity of choices or whether actually each moment or each move, there's one real one, there's one that really wants to happen. The others could be fine, they would look good or be art or whatever, but what's like the real one, what's the true desire of the moment?

How did you go about creating The Standard installation in West Hollywood?

I wanted to remember that this is a space for a model. I'm a huge Matisse fan and I had been working with all these patterns and decorations, and what decoration does and how does it set things apart. These paintings from this last show with decoration taken to the extreme; what happens if pattern is everywhere? It kind of takes away the hierarchy of this is the object I'm saying is special because I've decorated it, and then everything is decorated.

I wanted the curtains and draperies and pillows to give the context of the model being Eastern or mythological or exotic. The fringe, like someone said, I had this show at Untitled Miami in 2015, and someone said, "Oh my god your work is really flirtatious," and I loved that. It has these skirts that you want to look behind, you can kind of see, but you kind can't and



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it's this kind of like teasing, flirty, seductive. So I thought perfect, I'm going to do this three dimensional odalisque painting with patterns, and veils, and draperies, and desire. It's perfect for this idea of a model in her underwear behind the front desk, that you can't touch, you can only look at. She's inaccessible, she's set apart behind these veils.

When it comes to the business side of art, do you just focus on the art and the commissions come? Or how does it work?

I focus on the work. I already have an amazing gallery in NYC, but I just trust that the right LA gallery will come. I honestly just feel like I'm going to just be in my studio here and make the work better and better, and I feel like that's the most important thing to do. I've had enough to keep me going. This year there's been a lot of shows; I have work up at the airport right now and this hotel thing. And the truth is really two things have helped me do it on my own: great relationships with my collectors and painting portraits for people.

For some artists, it can sometimes feel like the art becomes secondary to the business.

That can happen. When I look at my life and how quickly it is going by, I don't really care that I've had a show in Gagosian. What I really care about is whether or not I've made the work I feel like I needed to make. Because I'd be super excited if I had a show at the Gagosian. I'd be super excited for a week, and then what? It may sound idealistic, but I just love being in here and making work, so I feel like I've won already and everything else is just a bonus. If someone wants to buy my work, that's awesome. Of course I need to sell stuff, but luckily I don't make performances that are impossible to sell.



PHOTOS BY: ALI SILVERSTEIN



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