

Interview

with Maria Kreyn by Alexander Cohane

Alexander: I'm fascinated by the fact that you were educated as a mathematician and philosopher, and went to the University of Chicago, which is recognized for being academically brilliant in those scientific fields, and yet, you made this transition to the visual arts and painting. How did that come about?

Maria: I was drawing all my life and my mother is absolutely obsessed with art. She's a classical pianist. My dad is also very musical. So I come from this tradition of valuing art and music almost above anything else, and yet a lot of my schooling actually leaned towards STEM. Drawing all my life, I had this vision of myself as a painter, but I was actually quite intimidated by painting, and so I put it off for as long as I could possibly put it off. And when I decided to go to college I chose U of C frankly for that reason, that it was a very strong academic school where I could study something that I wasn't necessarily good at. I knew that I wasn't going to have a career in any kind of STEM field.

It just so happened that after two years of studying, not only did I figure out that I don't like sitting in classrooms, but I also figured out that going to a fancy school in America is very expensive. And if I was to become an artist, I needed to start absolutely right away because I was 20 years old and had a big vision of myself being a painter. I left school and started painting, and I knew it was going to take some time to learn the craft. It was a big leap of faith. Yet from the culture I'm from, it's not so unusual. There was something about the way that I grew up that made me not want to silo myself into one way of thinking. And that's probably because when we lived in Texas, my mom got a PhD in cognitive science. And so she studies music perception along with being a classical pianist.

Alexander: Well, it's interesting because from looking at your paintings, you can sense there's a musical element to them, and you can sense there's a great love of music in the background of your life.

Maria: I love that you say that. It's all very true. And I'm happy that it's revealed in the work and that it feels resonant. It's very real for me.

Alexander: So you made this commitment as a twenty year old to become a painter. Can you talk us through this process of really mastering the art of painting, which is not an easy thing to do and your transformation to where you are today?

Maria: You know, in many ways, I'm very much the same person. And I think that because I studied things that I wasn't good at, it taught me how to just work really hard. And I brought that into something that I was much better at than science, because I'd always been fairly proficient at drawing. The thing that's changed a lot for me since I was twenty is this: My art education really consisted of going to museums and because I saw so many old master paintings, and was just moved and taken by the life in them—with their wonderful energy and illusionistic space, and this feeling that you're looking at something that really feels alive. That's what I wanted to capture in my work. And so I focused almost entirely on the figure for a solid decade. My aim was to create paintings where the focus was very much on the portrait, and on the hands, and on the gesture of the body, and this use of the body to say something that felt beautiful and meaningful about the human condition in an indirect way.

The thing that's really changed for me is that if you told me when I was twenty that I would be painting semi abstract landscapes, I'd be a little bit confused and ask, well, what would that look like? That's not something I'm really interested in at all. And I can tell you how that all came about. But it really has been a big transition thematically.

Alexander: Wow, can you talk us through how that came about?

Maria: I had a very beautiful opportunity a few years ago that felt like a gift from the universe. Andrew Lloyd Webber reached out to me very spontaneously, and I didn't at first understand that the request was real because we're in such different fields. He calls me very spontaneously. And he says, 'Maria, I love your work. I'm refurbishing London's oldest theatre, and I want you to make me eight paintings. When can you come to see the building?'

And so we have this beautiful conversation and ultimately he comes to my studio, and I had a few paintings that I wanted to show him because I knew that he was a prodigious collector of Pre-Raphaelites.

And he was like, hmm, ok, not that, not that. And then the last painting that I pulled out of my stacks, which I felt was much more contemporary I didn't think that he would like... He looks at it and says: 'this is a contemporary Ophelia.' And thought, wow. What a what a powerful reading that I didn't even see. And then he turns to me and looks at me and says, 'OK, Maria, let's do Shakespeare. I want you to make this work dangerous and apocalyptic and with your soul on the line.'

And then the world completely shut down for Covid. And I ended up painting these portraits of eight of the plays. I call them portraits of the plays because they're relaying, I hope, the emotional thrust of each play without necessarily illustrating scenes from the plays. And Shakespeare wrote several of his plays during a pandemic. So here I am processing all this literature and poetry and trying to understand how to bring this human gesture to life in resonance with the language of the plays and create something that speaks to the Old Master tradition that I'm interested in, but also gives this really beautiful and strange and intense contemporary vision on Shakespeare — particularly for the UK.

It was a wild year for many reasons. I think it was a very challenging year for a lot of people in quarantine. The last painting in that series was 'The Tempest.' And it probably took me longer to paint that one than any other picture because it had this tricky combination of abstraction and figuration, which, quite frankly, oftentimes when you mix those two things in that way, can just go so badly. I mean, I can't tell you how terrible that painting looked for so long. And then once I finally found the confluence of those two directions, it was so wonderful and felt so interesting. It really launched this next phase of my work where I started experimenting and asked myself well, what happens in the work if I just zoom out of the figure to the point where it's not there? And the painting becomes resonant with the way that nature and the planet and weather moves... A kind of turbulent visual representation of the way the emotions work, or the mind works, or the human being works. There was a kind of macro experience that felt like painting weather is just another version of the internal micro experience.

And so that's how all the storms came about. I realized just how much fun I was having painting them, and how much play I could bring into it, and how much abstraction painting weather already has inscribed inside of it. So then I gave myself a visual puzzle: what happens if I take a collection of flat shapes that are actually turning the plane into a completely flat environment, but then blending it with everything that I've always loved about painting, which is deep illusionistic space. And can I keep those two things moving between each other for the viewer in a way where you're constantly dancing between the flatness of the surface and the depth of the image that it's giving you.

Alexander: It's amazing how inspirational that statement "Put your soul on the line" has brought about so much! Do you think of that now when you begin a painting...when you're thinking about where you should go next?

Maria: That prompt was so wonderful for me, because I think, for better or for worse, and maybe this is my nature... that I've always kind of felt like my soul was on the line in my work. Maybe that's why when Andrew found me it was also so resonant, because he was the one person who wanted that project made. And then he found the one person who would go to the far ends of the universe to make it happen. That prompt just made me feel so connected to his mind. And yes, I think I've always been running with that feeling. It's kind of wild, right? It's such an intense prompt.

Alexander: I'm looking at you wearing this beautiful violet sweater. And right behind you is this most magical violet cloud. I can see this love of colour, just in the fact that you have it in your sweater as well as on canvas. Can you talk about colour in your work?

Maria: I don't know, actually, even how premeditated I am with colour. I kind of just let it do its thing. I have never considered myself someone who actually has mastered colour. I just let myself paint and create form and atmosphere and see where it goes.

Alexander: I have this impression of you moving fast with the brush, and of you really letting go of yourself on the canvas. Could you talk to us about how your paintings come about?

Maria: Yes, it does start pretty quickly and then it slows down and creeps towards the end. And the last 10 percent of the work is probably 50 percent of the painting. But I think even with the figurative work, I've noticed that when people have watched me paint, they're sort of confused as to why the process isn't super systematic. It's very chaotic and then it forms itself into something very coherent for the most part. And I think it's probably because I didn't study painting formally. I studied drawing quite formally, but I just watched other people work. And I think when I was watching other people work, I often watched people who were much older.

And so they had decades of experience of moving paint around. They just had this foresight like in a chess game where they see twenty, fifty moves in advance.

But my process is actually very playful. And particularly with this work, with the storms, it's really an interface between the natural movement of paint as it flows down a canvas and almost dissolves, and the intersection between that and the control you have as an artist to actually form it into something coherent. And so I'm trying to leave these passages where you can see that the paint kind of has a mind of its own, in the same way that nature has a flow of its own, and where the mind meets nature is where I feel I'm meeting the paint, where I can create some kind of semblance of order—but really the paint is in charge.

Alexander: I wanted to talk about Venice because when you go to Venice, you see all these painted ceilings, murals and paintings with all this amazing passion... How has the thought of Venice influenced you when preparing these works?

Maria: I've been dreaming of doing this show for over two years now. And I specifically wanted to bring this work to Venice because of the city's iconic beauty. And also because of its profound interface with water, and the phase shift between water and the sky and the clouds. So there's this cyclical motion constantly in nature between the way that water gathers. And in Venice, it's so profound because you're walking around and suddenly you come out of a church and an hour ago, there was no water there. But then you're wading through water as you're going to your next spot. And there's a bridge that just got built so that people don't get their shoes wet. And there's this constant negotiation and conversation between the city and the water. I feel that's very resonant in this work, where there's also a conversation and negotiation between how water moves in our world.

Alexander: I like that you are holding the exhibition in a church in Venice particularly since they were the big patrons of the arts in old time Venice. There's also the scale of your paintings which are very much in the Venetian manner too!

Maria: Yes, thank you. That's resonant. I actually have somewhat of a tradition of exhibiting in churches and chapels. And the other day I even wrote the overseer of the church to make them feel better about my intentions. I really enjoy exhibiting in churches because there is this spiritual component. And although my work doesn't have any explicit religious meaning, I still enjoy those spaces.

Alexander: I was wondering what your painting practice consists of in relation to your daily life?

Maria: It really often just depends on the deadlines. And so sometimes it's fourteen hour days consistently for months. And then sometimes it's much more relaxed. But to be fair, I do basically only paint during daylight unless it's the winter and I'm under a lot of time pressure, in which case I end up turning on artificial light. But I'm really fortunate to have a studio where there is a massive amount of north light. Being in the same flow as the sun feels very good to me. I try not to be a crazy night owl, though it does happen.

Alexander: When you look back now, did you love clouds as a child, and were you mesmerized by storms and nature? Can you see connections from that period to where you are now?

Maria: I'm trying to think of the extreme weather that I may have experienced, and I don't think I've ever chased extreme weather, but I do really love to be out in nature, particularly in the mountains and on the ocean. And so being on the sea feels very essential to me. I always like living near water. Where I live in Brooklyn, I'm a block away from the water, which also is great for me because I like to see it.

Chicago was great in that way as well. But I think for me, it has a lot to do with the metaphor and the analogy between the macro and the micro, like the external and the internal connection with nature, where the patterns that you see in nature might actually give you a sense of the way that your mind operates. Because it seems natural for me to think that, like the dynamical systems of the mind, and of our emotions, that they are resonant with the dynamical systems of the currents on the planet. I find it comforting to think of that analogy, and to think of myself and all of us human beings as a micro instantiation of the whole working of the planet.

Alexander: What's interesting about what you just said is that you're capturing on canvas your feelings too. You're kind of letting them out, I suppose, in a very painterly way.

Maria: Perhaps. I can't remember if it was Elizabeth Gilbert or Ann Patchett who said this, but someone asked them, how do you choose what to write about and why do you write about it? And one of them said "it's when I can't get it out by any other means."

I think that's interesting. But, at the same time, painting is actually quite a lot like acting, and I learned this when I was working on the Shakespeare series. Because I was so deeply steeped in the plays. And for so long I was just wandering around my studio reciting some of the soliloquies that I was memorizing so I could really feel the play. And I thought, oh God, this is probably what an actor does when they get into the role to try and just fully immerse themselves in that being.

You also realize that you don't necessarily have to be having a wild and turbulent and terrible time, or even a complex time to be able to speak to a complex moment. It's really just about developing a sense of empathy in yourself that can extend beyond whatever it is that you're thinking to tell a story in the same way that an actor would tell a story. However, the last several years have been quite intense.

And COVID also upped the ante on that intensity. So whatever was happening in the Shakespearean plays had almost deranged resonance with what was happening in the world at that time. And painting storms for me ended up feeling like an outlet for the collective experience we were having... a sense of being completely out of control and having to come to peaceful terms with that. So maybe it's the relegation of the turbulence to the canvas itself that can create the offset for a peaceful personal experience.

Alexander: And these paintings you're bringing to Venice, how do you feel about them?

Maria: I want to dazzle and I want to move you! And I really just want to give people as wondrous and exceptional an experience that I could possibly create.

The word for me that is profound in this type of work of Old Master romantic landscapes is the notion of the sublime. Exploring the sublime at its core, and its range has been so interesting. It's the same prompt of "having your soul on the line" because it's an ecstatic experience; It's a terrifying experience; You're in awe; And you are almost repelled. And so there is there's a kind of fear in it. But then it also wants you to come closer, and it draws you in because there's a fascination. And then there's also this beautiful kind of clearing and release. But then you realize that you're in the tumble, and all of these contradictory forces can somehow be true. So exhibiting in a church, in a place that is, generally speaking, reverent, contemplative, quiet... I like the idea of creating an offset that brings an enormous amount of energy into a single space and creates a really charged situation. I love the idea of a tunnel like that. I love the idea of this work in what is otherwise a sort of peaceful and contemplative space. I like that contrast.

Alexander: That's amazing. I love what you just said. Does a spiritual practice inform your work?

Maria: I would say that my spiritual practice actually is the painting. It's all kind of revealed in the physicality of the work and one of the things I love most about painting is the actual physical nature of it — the standing, the walking, the doing, the making, the working with the hands. I'm not a gardener and I also don't cook much but the thing that I feel really ties me to the world — apart from genuinely connecting with other human beings — is this working with my hands, and that for me is the spiritual practice.

Alexander: The thing I struggle with now is the fact that man just wants to exploit and dominate nature as opposed to admiring and living with it — and realizing that the world is our friend, not our enemy.

Maria: I fully agree with you in that relation to nature, and in the feeling that we are not actually at odds with it. There are so many ways that we can live our life in appreciation of nature, and feel this internal baseline of wanting to be stewards in some way, and just focusing our attention and our consciousness on connection and stewardship. Because the more that we focus our attention towards something, the more it actually manifests in real action. The more we feel that we aren't just meant to be creatures living inside boxes, particularly for people in cities, the more rich I think our life will be.

In one of the most recent David Attenborough documentaries, he talks about his own experience of doing his work over many decades, and how sad it's been that since the Sixties, when he would return to a place some ten, twenty, thirty years later, that it was a fraction of what it was

Nature is becoming our most valuable luxury resource in a very strange way. It's becoming such a luxury to be able to be in a place that is pristine with clean water... particularly knowing that anywhere that it rains it's not clean but toxic. That's alarming and disturbing and it's very sad. And I feel it in my core, moved and actually very hurt by it. And I think maybe one of the reasons that I'm so focused on water is that I do have that fixation and that desire for the thing that flows freely to also be something that we can swim in and drink. Because it seems to me to be the correct way to interface with water—to really be in it and with it.