

An Interview with Katy Schneider

The Smith College Museum of Art acquired *Ninth Month* and *Family Portrait* through the Academy of Arts and Letters in 1996. Schneider discusses these works and her thoughts on painting with Lexie Casais Smith College '23'.



Ninth Month, 6" x 9" oil on canvas, 1995

This interview is part of a series of artist interviews conducted by Lexie Casais '23 during the spring 2021 semester. The goal of the project was to strengthen the information available in the Smith College museum of Art (SCMA)'s object files for contemporary works. This interview was conducted via email exchange.

I learned in your interview with Antrese Wood that one of your main influences while you were an undergraduate at Yale was Lisa Yuskavage.¹ I also read your interview with Elana Hagler that your art historical influences include Manet and Vuillard.² Can you tell me about how these artists' work—and any other influences you'd like to mention—has influenced your artistic practice?

We all need our heroes. The geometry, pattern, color, and light in Vuillard's interiors has always spoken to me. There is something about his images that feels familiar. I aspire to his work every time I begin a painting. I gravitated towards two Vuillards that were hung in the Yale Art Gallery during my under-

graduate years. One had a luncheon scene with a slice of cantaloupe that glowed out of the painting.³ The other was a small but long, checker patterned kitchen scene.⁴ It was representational but completely abstract at the same time. His images say so much with so little. The same is true of Manet's flower paintings which he did late in life. My friend, painter Alexi Worth, gave me a book of these paintings ("The Last Flowers of Manet").⁵ It's the one book that is always easily accessible in my very chaotic studio.

I'd like my work to look effortless. Of course this takes great effort. I try hard to simplify when I've gone overboard with details. Lisa Yuskavage also loves Vuillard and I could feel that when I saw her work at Yale. She was making intimate, moody interiors with figures. The clarity of the light and the sense of scale was intriguing. She could make something small feel very large- and she could do it with very few (but important) strokes. They felt like poems. I try to make my small canvases "grow" too.

Another big influence is my husband Dave Gloman. I've spent a lot of time watching him paint. He is a landscape painter, always thinking about the horizon and about light. When I paint still lifes, I think about him, but my horizon is the table edge. It divides wall and land. Many of my still lifes are panoramas. I think about Dave's large spaces and I think about that long skinny Vuillard kitchen.

Lastly, music has been a huge influence. I play several instruments and I write songs. Music affects us on a visceral level. Our bodies feel different. My favorite songs give me the chills. Great art has a similar effect on me. I want this from my paintings.

Moving into a more direct discussion of the two works in SCMA's collection, Ninth Month and Self-Portrait with Olive and Mae: I know that they're part of a much larger body of work of self-portraits depicting your pregnancies. What about this subject matter interested or excited you?

I was first inspired by Alice Neel's work. A show actually at the Smith College Museum had included some of her paintings of nude, pregnant women. Thank you Smith! They were so unpretentious, human and beautifully orchestrated. When I was pregnant, I found the belly shape helpful in my "compositional quest." Composing a painting is so hard. For me it boils down to a balancing act between flat shapes and volumes. Somehow, that big belly made composing easier. Maybe it was because I knew which volume needed the attention. Maybe since I knew the belly wasn't going to stick around forever, I got down to business quickly. I really have no idea. I just know I loved painting that orb. Peony buds (orbs) are similarly satisfying to paint. They open quickly so I have to stop thinking and just react. Deadlines are helpful.

Documenting my pregnancies, I felt more artistically inspired than any other time in my life. I'd look in the mirror and see tons of paintings. It was also the first time I felt my body looked perfect.

You've made a lot of self portraits over the years. What first inspired you to paint yourself? Is that something you always did?

No one is as patient a model as me. Yes, I've done self portraits since high school. Prior to that, I'd paint my family members. I could get a likeness from early on and portraiture quickly became a passion. Capturing a likeness was also a hindrance. It was hard



Self-Portrait with Olive and Mae, 10" x 12" oil on canvas, 1996

to know what to do in the painting once that was accomplished. I went on a "people diet" for several years so that I could figure out how to make a painting interesting. I created portraits of rooms. The light, color, and geometry became the subject. I was much more inventive. I only began including figures again to create a better interior. I put a tiny me in the back of an 8" x 10" bedroom interior. It suddenly made the painting feel much larger to have this scale change. Then the floodgates opened. The figures were back. They worked differently now, but I continue to make the same mistakes over and over. It's so challenging to get the figure to relate to the space. And it's so easy to get illustrative.

I read in your interview with Elana Hagler that you like to take subjects that are often considered sentimental—flowers, mothers and children, dogs—and depict them in a more honest, realistic way. Can you tell me more about why this is important to you? What specific formal choices did you make in these two pieces, Ninth Month and Self-Portrait with Olive and Mae, to avoid sentimentality?

I grew up with a lot of Kathe Kollwitz posters. There was actually one above my crib. I responded to the

“love -with -sadness” in her work. Like her, I want to capture the spectrum of human emotions. You can’t escape your emotions, even when child rearing. Her work is brutally honest. The lighting I use is similar to the lighting she often seemed to use- stark and overhead.

In those 2 paintings, I set a standing spot light on top of a chair and aimed it at the kids and me as we looked into a large, moveable mirror my husband had built me. In this way, I could capture the structure of our skulls (and other forms.) What’s poignant to me is the weight of the big heads on small bodies, and the relationship of Olive’s tiny head relative to my big, glowing belly. The juxtaposition made me look bigger and made her look more petit— practically able to fit back into that womb. Those aspects resonate more with me. No one smiles in my portraits. That seems too fleeting and too photograph. I’m interested in the more commonly held expressions. Motherhood, childhood, life is not always happy. I want to capture the whole world, all emotions, in one frame.

Paintings babies and puppies often gets a bad rap. Some people just don’t take their image far enough. It becomes illustration. I try to convey my LOVE for subjects. That’s very different than describing my subjects. It’s hard to put into words and it’s hard to make happen but I’m trying to paint something almost painful. To love something so deeply can be a very sad feeling. There’s longing. As Georgia O’Keefe said “I found I could say things with color and shapes that I couldn’t say any other way- thing I had no words for.” Can you put into words why you love a particular song? Pain and pleasure are so linked. In both these paintings I want you to feel my love for painting, my love for my children and the seriousness with which I treat both of these important aspects of my life. The easel is almost never hidden in my family portraits.

These two paintings depict the early years of your parenting experience, and your children’s first years of life. Does your own childhood impact the subjects you choose to paint? For example, do the physical spaces in which you grew up influence the spaces you’re drawn to now?

Yes. I am one of seven children who grew up in a cramped two bedroom apartment in midtown Manhattan. My father liked to collect a variety of things. Many of my paintings are about organizing chaos. *Self portrait with Olive and Mae* definitely feels like a pile of people and things. I find it easier to discover

the geometry of a painting by beginning with clutter.

One of the most striking things about these paintings is the warm, artificial light. Is this how you typically paint? Why are you drawn to lamp light?

The light is similar to my childhood home too. We had lamps and very little natural light. A large pump organ blocked the large window in the living room. My spot light is the most important art material I own. I use it to eliminate detail and to create drama. It reduces things to contrasty shapes which are easier to see so they’re easier to paint. The shadows such a light casts become some of the most interesting performers in the painting. They help me activate flat spaces, guide your eye and unite parts of the composition.

These two paintings, like most of your work, are quite small, which really adds to the personal and intimate feeling they give. Could you tell me about how you make decisions regarding scale?

I hate to be wasteful. I repurpose everything. The thought of overflowing landfills and garbage filled oceans sickens me. Space feels sacred to me and in some ways- off limits. I try to take up as little as possible and make the most of every situation. This may very well be a byproduct of sharing a womb with my twin sister, and sharing the apartment with eight others plus dog. I just wasn’t allowed to have big stuff. I developed a love for very small because I could have it then.

I don’t want to have to scream to be heard. I prefer to whisper. I like the psychology of a small painting—quietly inviting you to come really close.

I’d also like to spare my children the awful burden of having to deal with a bunch of stuff once I’m gone. My parents died before they retired and had not worked out a “plan.” The work of handling their many belonging continues decades later. My kids have two artists as parents. Yikes.

I know that you tend to work very quickly, perhaps thanks in part to the small scale of your work. Is that what you did with these two paintings? Or did either of them take longer than usual?

Ninth Month took two sittings (and a life time). The family portrait took many more sittings. A couple of months is my guess (and a life time).

These paintings are oil paintings. Is this the medium you typically paint in? If so, why is this your

preferred medium?

Yes, I only paint with oil paint. It's just delicious. I constantly make changes while I'm painting. This medium allows me to wipe away easily. The surfaces I paint on vary. I went from canvas to panel to paper and now to aluminum. I've been working during the pandemic on 3 x 4" pieces of aluminum that had previously functioned as separators for glass "lantern" slides, used in the Art History Department. Everything is digital now. Their loss was my gain. Aluminum is so slick that I can get more detail than ever before without having to wait and build up the paint. Sometimes it feels magical.

I've done over 550 in 14 months. I paint a single object every day. There is no background except for a few strokes to ground the object. During covid I wanted to indulge myself by taking on less of a challenge. What struck me however was how the reflective nature of the metal creates the sense that there is actually a deep space behind the object. The aluminum adds the complexity that I crave. Oil painting seems brand new with this surface.

What do you hope Smith students who see your work at SCMA take away from them, both in terms of formal aspects and subject matter?

1. I hope students studying art realize that having a large studio isn't a requirement for being an artist. These were done in my kitchen with a TV tray and a disposable palette pad.
2. I hope they realize they can be an artist and a mother: where there is a will there is a way. Once I had children I had so much more to say.
3. I hope they realize that bigger is not necessarily better.
4. I hope they feel comfortable painting their lives.

When I was a teenager I thought I had to paint about war, politics, religion or mythology. I wasn't interested in any of those things so I figured, I was just meant to be a hobbyist. Little did I realize that the personal is political.

Is there anything else about these two paintings that you would like viewers or researchers to know?

In Ninth Month I intended to only paint myself. I was working from a large mirror I set up in my kitchen. My daughter toddled into the scene and I quickly added her to the painting. It took about 3 minutes and then the painting was complete. Thank you Olive.

In the family portrait, I'm wearing a very special patterned shirt my college roommate had sent me. I had painted it many times. I stupidly put it in the washing machine and it was ripped to shreds. I destroyed my muse that day. It helped so many paintings. Thank you Beth.

NOTES:

1. Antrese Wood, "Creativity without limits, an interview with Katy Schneider," Savvy Painter, <https://savvypainter.com/katy-schneider/>.
2. Elana Hagler, "Personal Geometry: An Interview with Katy Schneider," Painting Perceptions, Dec. 24, 2018 <https://paintingperceptions.com/interview-with-katy-schneider/>.
3. Édouard Vuillard, The Luncheon, oil on cardboard, ca. 1895, Yale University Art Gallery, <https://artgallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/24322>.
4. Édouard Vuillard, The Kitchen, oil on cardboard, 1891-92, Yale University Art Gallery, <https://artgallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/52841>.
5. The book Schneider refers to here is Robert Gordon and Andrew Forge's *The Last Flowers of Manet* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999).