



Sixty Hotels, "In the Studio with Jesse Mockrin," *Alphasixty*, Feb 21, 2018

# alphasixty

## *In the Studio with Jesse Mockrin*

SIXTY HOTELS Feb. 21,  
2018

The work can seem anachronistic, nostalgically luxurious. Los Angeles artist Jesse Mockrin eschews the oft alluring appeal of trend for work that stands unique within its era by borrowing from the past. While the paintings feel somehow familiar, guided by the framework Rococo masters established long ago, their clever idiosyncrasies bring each piece into the 21st century. Mockrin's perspective plays a bit more in the perverse, where gender norms are flipped and gestures uprooted of standard intention, and where specific crops allude to stories untold.

Mockrin's current style reflects the evolution of her practice. As a teenager, the Maryland-bred artist took painting classes at the Yellow Barn studio. As a student at Barnard College, however, she pivoted to photography. It wasn't until she was in grad school at UC San Diego that Mockrin returned to painting, working from her own photographs.

Today, Mockrin has developed an unmistakable style, lush and otherworldly, her wan protagonists glowing in perpetual twilight. As she prepares for her next show, we head to the Mockrin's studio, where the artist talks experimental farm-raised fish, French postcards, and a notable introduction to Fragonard.



***Former occupation and your most notable memory there:***

I had a previous life doing international development and immigration work. After finishing college, I co-founded a nonprofit organization in Honduras that works with youth. We did a lot of art projects with the kids, but what really stands out in my memory is the tilapia farm we attempted to start. Someone donated land with tilapia pools to the orphanage we worked with, and we volunteered to fix them, fill them with tiny fish, and harvest them for the kids. First, we couldn't get the pools to hold water. After many attempts, we fixed that problem and stocked the pools with 1,000 baby fish. Due to natural and human causes, our stock of fish slowly grew in size but dwindled in number, until we finally harvested 100 full-grown tilapia. So months of work and lots of financial resources went into one fish dinner at the orphanage. It was a nice dinner, though.

***Your first experience with art as a child:***

My mother always carried yellow-lined legal pads and different colored pens in her bag, and I remember drawing in them while waiting in doctors' offices or while she was doing errands. I grew up outside of Washington, D.C. so I frequently visited the National Gallery of Art with my family—what really stood out to me as a child was the architecture.



The Concourse was my favorite part, where the East Building, designed by I.M. Pei, connects with the older West Building. The cascading waterfall window and the moving walkway that runs under 4th Street felt to my young self like entering a movie set from the future. In high school art classes, I began to paint. I was obsessed with

***What did your parents do for work? Were they interested in the arts?***

My father and mother (and my sister) are scientists, all with PhDs. My step-mother is a nurse. Though they do not work in the arts, they are all creative; my father makes fused glass, my mother can sew and knit, my sister crochets and sews, and my step-mother quilts. Despite not working in the arts themselves, my family enjoys art and has always nurtured my interest in painting. ring tree sculptures sprouting in the background of “The Meeting.”





***First Rococo painting that captured your attention and why:***

“The Meeting” from Jean-Honoré Fragonard’s suite of paintings “The Progress of Love,” and “Portrait of the Marquis de Bérighen” by Jean-Baptiste Oudry. Both paintings have a theatricality that interested me. I love the gestures—the reaching, theatrical gesture of the woman in Fragonard’s painting and the delicate, bent fingers of the Marquis in Oudry’s, displaying the dead bird. Oudry was a master at painting animals and I remember initially feeling awed by Fragonard’s towering tree sculptures sprouting in the background of “The Meeting.”

***Are there photographers who influence your work—perhaps in composition?***

It’s funny that you ask because I focused on photography in undergrad and even applied to the MFA program at UCSD with a photography portfolio, so I wound up teaching only photography as a graduate teaching assistant. So I have a photography background and I do think that influences my sense of composition. I think of the rectangle of the canvas almost like a viewfinder. Ever since I became dedicated to painting in graduate school, I started looking mostly at other painters.

***Given the specific androgynous look of your subjects, is it difficult to find the perfect models for your portraits?***

I look at a lot of different sources. Ingres paintings are the best.

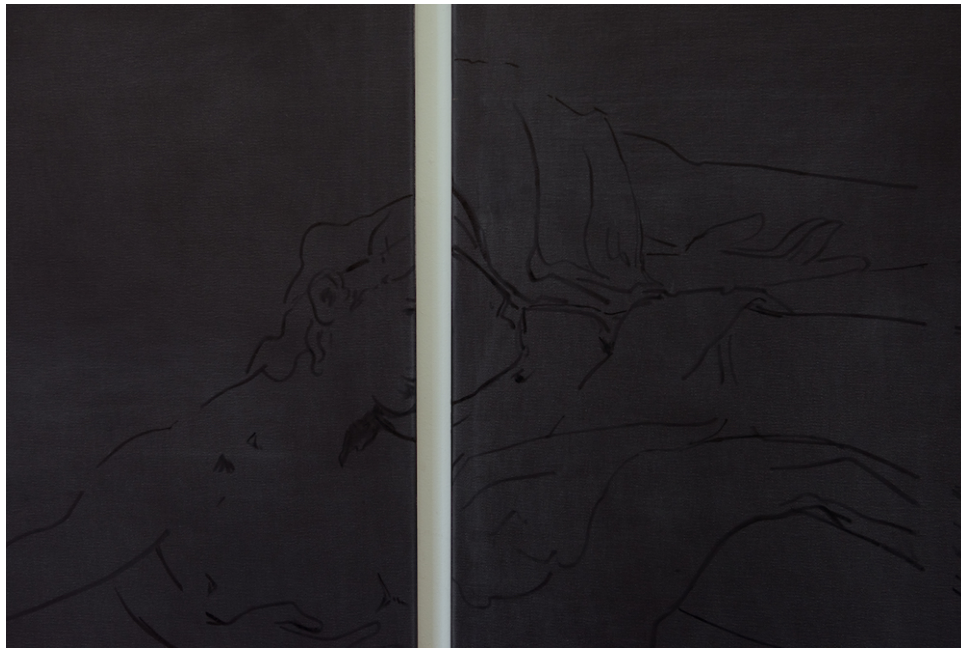


***Has gender fluidity in art always interested you?***

Yes, my undergraduate thesis project was about gender fluidity. I went to Barnard College, which, being an all-women's college, definitely fostered an interest in gender studies. But I think I became interested in those issues even earlier, starting around high school. I thought the social codes of gender were interesting—how are these constructs made, and how are they challenged? I became more interested in looking for gender creating my own art practice.

***How did you find your current workspace and where is it?***

I have a very small studio in my garage in Los Angeles. My husband and I had it fixed it up when we bought our house in 2014. I currently have a temporary space downtown near Night Gallery while I'm working on paintings for my upcoming show at their space this fall.



***What do you eat for breakfast?***

Usually a fried egg on sourdough.

***What's a day typically look like for you, from start to finish?***

I have two small boys, one and three. They wake my husband and me up early, and we spend the morning feeding them, dressing them, changing diapers, and breaking up squabbles over toys. I usually head to the studio around 7:30 a.m. I make a plan the day before so I know what I'm doing in the studio, and the first hour is spent mixing paints. And then I paint and listen to music, podcasts, or audiobooks. Nine to ten hours later, I wash my brushes and head home. Then the kids are fed, bathed, played with, and put to bed. Then my husband and I eat dinner, watch a little TV and pass out.





I am working on a show at Night Gallery for fall 2018. I am making some of the biggest paintings I've made, which have multiple figures and full figures. The images are sourced from art historical works, many by Rubens, Hans Baldung Grien, and some early 20th century French postcards. Some of the themes I'm interested in for this new show include mythological and biblical stories, witchcraft, and depictions of the hunt.

***What medium/tool/color are you most interested in presently and why?***

I paint in oil, which I became devoted to in graduate school. I have spent a lot of time in the last several years testing different formulations of black paint and different methods for applying it. I like using black as a background color because it feels like it could be both space and surface. I prefer my paintings to be matte, and the black to be smooth and free of brushstrokes, so that it doesn't call any attention and can be read as space.



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***What book/film/work of art most recently captured your attention and why?***

I listened to the audiobook version of *Call Me By Your Name* by Andre Aciman and loved it. I love art that deals with the potent feelings of adolescence.

***What's the best piece of advice you were ever given?***

Don't be afraid to fail, even publicly. Make art, put it out in the world, and see how people receive it. Sometimes you'll fail, and that's okay. You have to take risks to make something worthwhile.

*Photos by Tyler William Parker for SIXTY Hotels*