

VOGUE
MÉXICO Y
LATINOAMÉRICA



Photo: Lance Brewer

MARY LOVELACE O'NEAL: WHAT I PAINT NOW I DO WITH A COMPLETE SENSE OF DEDICATION

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April 29, 2024

Mary Lovelace O'Neal (1942) is a transcendental figure in the art world. Born in Jackson, Mississippi, O'Neal has explored a wide range of topics throughout her career, from identity, to politics, to activism in the Civil Rights Movement in the United States , to the emotional landscape of his world, with deeply evocative language.

From her early days in art, to her commanding presence as a professor at the San Francisco Art Institute, O'Neal has not only created but fostered a space for critical dialogue. Her work has been recognized and exhibited in so many museums and galleries around the world, establishing her as one of the most powerful and persistent voices in [contemporary art](#).

On this occasion, within the framework of her exhibition HADE IN MEXICO—by hand , at the Marianne Boesky gallery in New York , the artist talks about the challenges of her practice and a philosophy of life that transcends decades, movements and labels.

From the city of Mérida, in Mexico, with a soft voice, Mary Lovelace answers the other end of the line with a sweetness typical of someone who has seen it all, and who has everything to share:

Vogue (V): They warned us that he likes to speak through stories and we want to know what the days are like in Mérida, southern Mexico, in his studio

Mary Lovelace (MLO): It's one of the most fantastic studios I've ever had. Toro, my husband, he built it for me. It was a kind of bribe, to convince me to come live full time in Mexico. And when I walked in, it was immaculate. The only thing I still bring from the United States are my colors, to make sure that what I'm using will hold up to light and, you know, what paints have to hold up to as they age.

V: If you had not been an artist, what path would you have taken?



Photo: Lance Brewer

MLO: The easy life (laughs). I have no idea what I would have done. What I do know is that there is something I never thought I would do, and that is teaching for more than 50 years. In fact, I never wanted to have a job. It never occurred to me after college that I was going to have to get a job. Although I've worked most of my adult life, you know, in strange, very, very strange places, doing things I didn't know how to do and pretending I knew how to do them to get the job. Then people would just teach me how to do it because obviously I didn't know, but it's been a long road.

V: And when was the first time you called or considered yourself an 'artist'?

MLO: I think after college, it took a while before I admitted that this was going to be my lifelong job. It was at some point after college that I decided that I would do anything and everything necessary to be able to do this, which is painting. And I've done everything I needed to do to maintain a studio, to have a roof over my head.

V: And what has the relationship with the blank canvas been like?

MLO: That's terribly scary. When I was teaching, and I had to direct, I think it was a gallery program or something stupid that they made me do, I had to reflect on the importance of the blank canvas and how distressing it is, how horrendous it is.

You know, having all these new canvases, there already made. And I no longer put together my own canvases. I no longer applied Gesso to them. You know, I used to live for that part of the process. To be able to have these canvases and not have to, you know, “change their diaper later,” so to speak. All those early stages...

When I was ready to work, it was a very discouraging experience to walk in and see that white canvas that confronts you. As if challenging you. She tells you, “I dare you to put a little dot on me.” And that's how you think about it and you should approach it differently. And you come back two or three days later, or maybe you come back at night, a little bit when it's dark in the afternoon, and you're somehow brave enough to attack it.

V: And what about the women who have accompanied her throughout these decades?

MLO: I think many women really made the Civil Rights Movement in America possible . And some of those women who are no longer here were my friends, the ones who helped me grow. We help each other grow.

There are also the women in my family, my aunts, my cousins, who were often more aunts than cousins, and whose recipes I still use to cook. And then there are those women whose parenting methods failed me because they expected me to go to college and get a doctor husband or a lawyer or someone rich and important. And they were wrong. I went to university and did whatever I wanted...

I couldn't name them all, because I'd probably leave some out, but I think right now, I mention Dori Ladner , who passed away a few weeks ago, and she never knew she was a hero to me. To Jean Wiley , who passed away a few years ago, an important person within the movement, who she wrote about and theorized about. These women never knew they were my heroines. I didn't write or theorize about the movement back then...

V: But in a certain way he did it and continues to do it with the titles of the works and the works themselves

MLO: For a long time, maybe I wanted to be one of the “big white boys,” all those Pollock-type kids, who just numbered their paintings and signed them with a phrase. And that's how it worked for them. But it quickly became clear to me that I had more to say about my work than a simple number could offer.



So I found things that amused or concerned me about each painting and that's what it became. There is a work whose title talks about children and a sack of cotton and which made reference to the kidnapping of children. As well as a play that talks about these two little girls in Chicago who went out to the store one day and never came back. And after about a week, week and a half, no one was commenting on it anymore. And this happened again and again in so-called minority communities. In black and brown communities, people disappear and no one says a word about it. It seems that no one gets involved, I'm not generalizing, but that's where the issues arise. Those children [the paintings] have to have names, they can't go out into the world without a name.

V: The media, museums and galleries have framed his work into periods, movements or techniques. Do you define your work in any way?

MLO: No, Ramón, I don't. I don't even have to think about that. That's your job. All I DO have to do is put myself in that studio and work. I don't have to name it, question it. All I ask is to be able to continue going to the studio and doing what I know how to do. And the truth is that I don't give a damn about the rest. What they write or what others think... Even with my husband, and most of the time we fight it's about the paint, it's not even about money (of which we never had much). But I don't have to do it anymore. I am 82 years old. Who can tell me now what I have to do or what is good from bad? What really matters to me is this, what I do.

What I do now I do with a complete sense of dedication. I have lived long enough to have seen, with my own eyes, five or six great movements of painting. You know, all that kind of art that's been around long enough to be hanging on walls and given an "ism" suffix. I have nothing against criticism, in fact I have been honored to have women like Lilly Wei see my work and include it in their essays, describing it in ways I had never thought of.

And so it takes a long time to get all those "isms" out of your head to do what you really want to do. Certainly, at this stage in my life, I don't have to do anything I don't want to do. So, going back to your question, I don't categorize my work. I don't give it a new name. I just hope that in the future people see and know that this was a life's work. That's what I've done with my sordid little life.

And if you don't want to pay the price of what my work is worth, it's because that painting is not for you. Collectors should understand that. Do they estimate our work so little that they come asking for discounts?

V: His way of speaking and naming pieces could sound like poetry...

MLO: I hate poetry Ramón (laughs). That's never been on my mind. I don't like poetry, I don't understand it. There are easier ways to talk.

V: And what does it take to be an artist, especially for someone from an underrepresented community?

MLO: Get out there and do it, and you better do it for the right reasons, or you'll be very disappointed when you're not on the cover of Artforum every month. You have to be there, present, even if your name is never mentioned in the newspaper. You have to be there doing what you know how to do because that's what's important to you.

V: And how has your practice changed in Mérida and for this exhibition?

MLO: My practice has changed, again. It changed a couple of times, especially in the last, say 15 or maybe even 20 years, when I could no longer work with solvents that I needed in printing and that I thought were the only option for paint. Also in printmaking, I had to move to other media, and that means “water-based.”

Then there is the issue of my disability, due to problems with my back and spine, I have really had to make drastic changes, like I can no longer easily climb up my stairs and chairs to work. Things I used to do without thinking. And so I've learned to do other things, like change the way I actually organize my paintings at 82 years old.

I make my colors in big bowls. How our mothers and grandmothers made cakes. Now I just have big bowls and beat and mix them like I'm making a cake. I prepare several big bowls, anticipating what I'm going to use, as opposed to years ago, when I was running around the studio, using all these different palettes, running, hustling, really active and, you know, involved in a very different way. Well, in a way that young people get involved with things. Exactly. And that's gone for me now. But I love him. Anything I can do with paint makes me happy.

I'm really grateful that God has given me this different kind of intelligence to accomplish these things, because that's the point. I want to keep doing it, I want to keep painting and I just have to figure out each time how to achieve it.

MADE IN MEXICO—by hand

On view until May 4, 2024. Marianne Boesky Gallery.

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