

AN INTERVIEW WITH ZSOFIA SCHWEGER

HOME

I have been preoccupied with the idea and definition of home for years now. Often when you're asked where you're from or about your hometown, people just mean the country or town where you were born or sometimes even just where your family is from. So that kind of becomes your home by definition, or home by default, and then you need to qualify your response further. I sometimes say "I grew up in Hungary, but I live in London now." Then if someone asks more, let's say they pick up on my slightly American-sounding accent, I'll also explain that I lived in America for several years. Anyway, home is very different for everyone, pretty fluid, and **a question of identity**.

The first time I went to America was for boarding school at 16, so for my junior year I was in **New York** on a scholarship. It was a program where you were not really allowed to go home and your parents weren't encouraged to come visit you, to minimise homesickness. After a year you can really adapt and feel pretty good about most places.

At the end of the year I went back to Hungary and finished high school in **Budapest**, but by then I wasn't thinking of staying there longer-term, which is how I ended up back in the U.S. at Wellesley College for my undergrad. It's an interesting question "**where do I feel at home?**" And I'm quite surprised that...no, not surprised, that's the wrong word to use...when I decided to move to London from America after Wellesley I didn't quite expect to like it because I was really loving life in the U.S., both in Boston and New York.

I didn't quite expect to like London as much as I did. I feel so settled here, if you ask where I'm at home, **I'm at home here**, but at the same time I have to reconcile all these different feelings of belonging I have to different places. Obviously, I'm **Hungarian** so I know that's kind of how I'm always going to be classified as, as a Hungarian artist. I'm thinking about what that means for me...it's always been in my work.

I don't know. What comes to your mind first when you think of home? Food? I don't know, but it's positive. I've got a very supportive family, I'm very lucky. So that's why maybe I'm not quite sure. It's just lots of really good things, nice memories... It's a good question though, I'll have to think about it, maybe it'll have to be something food related, like some specific Hungarian food. I've got a serious sweet tooth, and my Grandma is a really great baker, so maybe it's something like that. My Grandma and her baking.

COLOUR

When I talk about my work in terms of 'pleasant interiors' with 'seductive colours' I'm interested in the first impression of someone interacting with my paintings being pleasant, at least in the colour. I'm looking for my paintings to be able to function in that very pure **aesthetic pleasure** sort of way. But then, when you look at them closer they're strict and block you out, because they are all flat.

There's something in front of you that first invites you and then doesn't let you go into the space, which is something a **one point perspective** does really well, as opposed to a two point perspective. In two point, you can imagine corners and edges opening up the space in two directions, towards the vanishing points. With a one point perspective you kind of block it, that's the way I think about it. That invitation of 'hi look at me I've got some pretty colours' and that's something I'm very interested in a formal way, but also 'you can't come in' because it's **blocked compositionally**.

I like the playfulness of the word **BLOC**, without the K, having political implications for the Eastern Bloc vs. Western Europe. I like that resonating with the political undertones in my work. The word BLOCK itself works with my paintings, as its blocks of colour, three dimensional blocks of furniture flattened out into two-dimensional blocks of colours.

PAINT

I've always been **taught in oils**. But last year when I was preparing for my MA degree show I had so much trouble with allergies to some of the solvents that I was getting quite ill from it. Not seriously, but it was getting uncomfortable enough to not want to interact and work with them every day, my eyes would really hurt or my skin would get irritated. So I thought the **residency** would be a **really good chance** to switch to acrylics.

It's actually really quite hard to **switch mediums**...it's quite an investment, and that's not something I was able to do on my own financially, because it's such a risk. You know, I'm buying all this paint and spending several hundred pounds just to be able to practice and develop some experience and skills specifically for acrylics. And then it still might turn out that I don't like it at all. So the great thing about the Griffin residency is that it allows you to **try anything** - and different brands, too, Liquitex and Winsor & Newton - and you can focus on experimenting and learning rather than stress about the financial consequences of something not working out.

PROCESS

Maybe a better answer to your question would be, in terms of **process**...I'll put it this way: I've found a year or so ago that it's really important to me that I make decisions about everything I can think of when it comes to a given painting. That means I don't ever really start making the painting until most of it is planned and decided. That's kind of what I mean when I talk about a '**rigid painting process**.'

So I try to break the whole process down into phases and tasks, so by the time I paint I don't have to think about "**okay, is this gonna be this colour or that colour?**" I don't know whether it's because I am otherwise a very indecisive person, so maybe I balance it out. Either way, decisiveness is very important in the process. And that is counteracted by the paintings still being very much handmade and volunteering clues to the process of their making. They're not machine made objects, I'm not a factory.

GAP

The **Griffin Art Prize** has lots of different really cool elements, like the solo exhibition and getting to do a catalogue and getting to work with a **team** and being next to a paint laboratory. But the very best thing for me is to be able to paint every day, which is something I couldn't afford to do before, ever really, because I always had a job, both during my undergrad and grad school, working two, three, four days a week, so I would always paint super late in the night and have to run around a lot. These last six months I've taken the time to just focus on painting. I come to work every day and paint rather than it being secondary after going to a job, and that's really something that the Griffin Art Prize let me do. It provides the **space and materials** and by that it provides the time.

EDUCATION

I probably wouldn't be an artist if it wasn't for **Wellesley**, because I was very focused on academics throughout my high school years. Arts education in Hungary - in high school at least - is not very serious. If you want to do arts you go to a specialised high school, so you have to commit to it at around age 14.

At Wellesley, which is a liberal arts college, you take a little bit of every subject area and then declare a major in your sophomore year. So I was studying a bunch of subjects, and I was most into English, and declared a comparative literature major because I was writing a lot on Hungarian literature in translation.

But I had a really, really amazing professor called **Daniela Rivera**. It was when I took a drawing class with her, when it first clicked how art could actually be...how you could do research and how you can, sort of, produce new knowledge in the same way you can through reading and writing. Had I not gone to Wellesley, I would probably be doing something very different like literature and tried to do a PHD, or I'd be working in business maybe.

NEW YORK TO IRELAND

I did a summer internship at the library of the **Guggenheim in New York** after my sophomore year. At the time my student job was at the Wellesley college libraries, which is partly how I qualified for this internship. It was a really, really amazing opportunity and obviously very formative in terms of being in New York at a big institution. I still love the show that was on at the Guggenheim that summer: **'Haunted: Contemporary Photography/Video/Performance'**.

And then I spent the following summer Ireland as a Visiting Artist at **Cow House Studios**, which is a really amazing artist-run organisation that organises artist residencies in the fall and arts programs for high schoolers. It's in a rural farm in Ireland, it's absolutely beautiful there.

FRIENDS

The **Slade** and grad school in general was really important for taking myself seriously and developing my practice and thinking of myself as a professional artist. I learned about what I might need to do to work and live as an artist, and what that means and who my community is and who my colleagues are that I will be working with for the foreseeable future. My friends and **peers** from my grad program are also my colleagues and my network.

It's been really meaningful and important to make some really, really great friends at the Slade who are also artists and with them we can really support each other. That's the one thing Wellesley actually didn't offer. Studio art is not an especially popular major there, it's an incredible arts department, but it doesn't raise many artists in the end. I was the only painter doing a thesis, so I didn't have the community where you can learn from each other and you can support each other. The Slade was very important in completing my education in that sense.

REFERENCES: CHARLES SHEELER

Other than the 'Haunted' exhibition which I still reference, one of the first people I really looked at closely was the **American painter Charles Sheeler** who is not very well known in Europe. The first time I learned about him was in a Wellesley art history class on American painting. The first couple weeks of that class surveyed the first century or so of U.S. painting, and it was like, 'here are some paintings, they're not very good but they're important'. But by the end of that semester we were looking at 20th century American painters and I loved, loved, loved Charles Sheeler. He was a 1920s/30s American photographer/painter and was classified as a **precisionist**, meaning he's got smooth surfaces, **hard edges** and a machine aesthetic. He painted a lot of industrial scenes and machines, and also had a series of **domestic interiors**, and that was what I got really interested in. And I look at his paintings to this day because there is something.

You know, it's like one hundred years ago, but there's something really interesting about him being a so-called precisionist artist. At first the paintings seem perfect, but if you look at them closer you notice that things are not quite right, the perspective is not right, the geometry is not right, it doesn't make sense. But then you can actually imagine the artist painting **because as you paint you move your body around so you have a different point of reference to the objects you are painting**. So the imperfect process of observation then makes it into the paintings themselves, so they kind of undo their own perfectness, and that was something I was really, really interested in.

Some of the writings on him would have terms that I still remember, like **'rejection of the painterly surface'**, whatever that means. I think about that all the time when I paint big flatness.

He's got really beautiful photographs as well; he was also a commercial photographer and did commissions for big factories and companies. He did this big project for Ford, I think. He took photos of the factory and then he later based a series of paintings on them too.

REFERENCES: JULIE MEHRETU

And of contemporary artists, my favourite is **Julie Mehretu**. She is also an American artist, living in New York. I've seen her talk a few times, twice in London, and I just find her really fascinating, and her paintings gorgeous. The first painting I saw was at the **MoMA** in a 2011 exhibition called '**On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century**'.

Mehretu has a lot to say about spaces and cities, all quite political. I really relate to her concerns, her research. She's definitely been an inspiration of mine in a conceptual way, and whenever I've seen her talk **she's just been incredibly smart**. But also, the format or the look of her paintings really appeals to me; I think they're really beautiful.

One of the most influential shows to my practice is Mehretu's 2013 **White Cube show 'Liminal Squared,'** showing paintings from her 'Mogamma' series. The paintings had already been shown once at Documenta, and had been made for a specific wall there. At one of her talks, **she talked about how she didn't quite like how they looked in that show so she brought them here and displayed them in a way that made more sense, kind of resolved them**. She worked with **David Adjaye**, a very successful, young architect, who designed the environment specifically for the paintings. So they built walls within the White Cube gallery in order to have the paintings function just as she wanted them. You could walk through the space, so you were kind of made to spend more time with the paintings. You had a proper, durational experience. It was really beautiful.

So I found this White Cube show and her artist talk especially inspiring. You had an incredibly successful artist there talk about how she wasn't totally happy with a past work or her past approach to displaying them, so she went back and resolved it. So that really highlighted to me the importance of the way work is displayed, and I try to spend a lot of time thinking about how my paintings might work together. The Griffin solo show will be the first time I'm on my own, so I'm both nervous and excited thinking about **how I can help the paintings function the way I want them to by hanging them right**. I don't know, but that's the idea, anyway.

FUTURE PROJECTS

I'm super excited to have been selected for New Contemporaries. It's such a great opportunity to have such a visible **platform** and have my work first in Liverpool at the Bluecoat as part of the **Liverpool Biennial** and then in **London at the ICA**.

I'll probably apply to so many open calls, jobs, projects, commissions, whatever over the years, and it so depends on who's selecting at the time and luck, I think. So I try to remind myself of that. Obviously you need to have good work that you're confident about, but so many people have amazing work, so at the end of the day, a lot of it, I think, is down to luck.

I don't have any concrete projects in mind for the future just yet. I obviously have some vague thoughts and aspirations. I always, in the back of my mind, think about working in Hungary or getting a studio in Hungary. But sometimes I get excited about that and then, you know, something happens which reminds me it's not quite time for it yet. It's not a good environment to be working in Hungary yet because of the way the arts system is set up and its political influences. But I think about it anyway. In terms of larger painterly concerns I haven't got a next project in mind. **I'll keep painting**.

Zsafia Schweger solo exhibition [Bloc at Griffin Gallery](#) 18 August-30 September 2016

[Bloomberg New Contemporaries](#) 9 July-16 October 2016 at Bluecoat, Liverpool (as part of Liverpool Biennial 2016) and ICA, London 22 November 2016-26 January 2017.

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