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Shara Mays

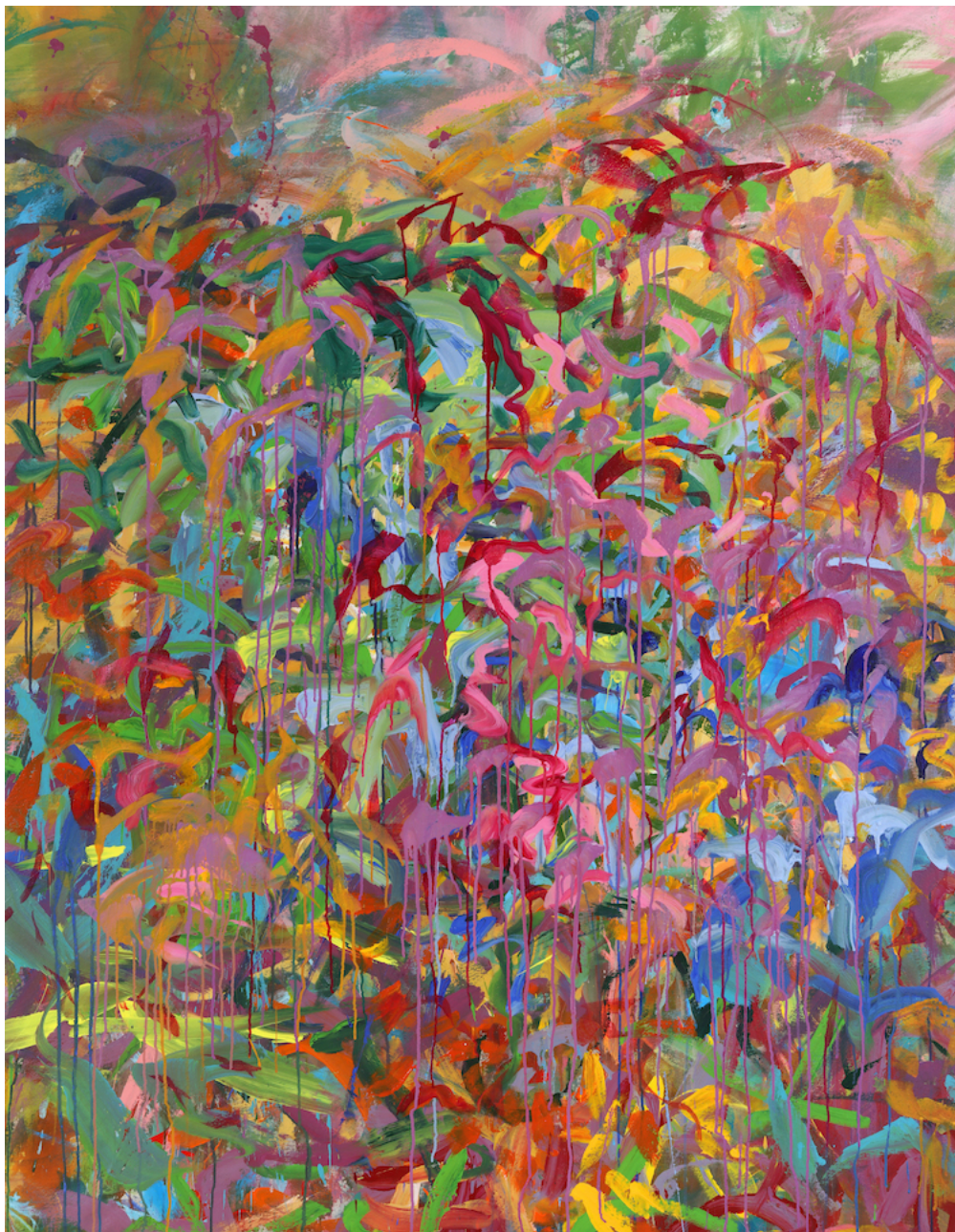
The Maximalist

Interview by Kristin Farr // Portrait by [Alex Nicholson](#)

“Color, color, and more color. I can’t get enough of it. I am obsessed with the vibrancy of bright color,” explains Shara Mays, describing a main ingredient of her work. Drips and swirls, twists and turns, her paint whirls in animated motility. There is control and chaos within Shara’s hand, and she paints compulsively—it’s her purpose. As she moves paint intuitively and performatively, her empowered brush strokes unpack storied experiences. Abstraction can reference life in fantastical ways, and Shara describes the inevitable infusion perfectly, **“Although the imagery is not literally translated into my work, the energy of it gets into the paintings.”**

Kristin Farr: Do you ever stop painting? It seems the paint is constantly flowing and moving around you, maybe even within your mind, while you sleep?

Shara Mays: I feel seen! If I’m not painting, I’m thinking about painting. I’m at my studio at least five days per week, sometimes more. Plus... I have a vandal’s urge to paint on anything I can find. I look at random objects and fantasize about how they would look if I added many, many coats of paint to them!



Tell me about the research that goes into your work.

The last few years of my work represent an evolution of my painting practice, from a focus on Southern landscapes and family struggles to chasing freedom through the act of painting, thereby finding my identity as an artist. I’ve switched from literal landscapes to internal landscapes. The first paintings in this vein were inspired by a family photo from the 1950s of my dad as a toddler. In the photo, he is being held by an older cousin, while two other relatives stand alongside him. They are

surrounded by a thicket of lush bushes in my aunt's front yard. Their neighborhood—an all black community on the east side of the town—feels safe in the photo, even though I know the world surrounding them in the South was not safe for black children, especially black boys. I became interested in conjuring up, on the canvas, a safe Eden for those like my father, ancestors who are no longer alive, yet who deserved transcendence from the limitations of racism. Equally important, I've always been concerned with the spaces around me, whether they be mental or physical, societal or personal, inside or outside.

I have, on my studio wall, printouts of vintage imagery of Black American bodies interacting in some way with the land. I'm able to find these photos via the online archives of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. They're images that are in the public domain, anyone can seek them out. I use them as visual prompts for my work. I'm interested in how Black Americans have journeyed from slavery to farming—my great grandfather was a sharecropper—to being systematically removed from farming to having almost no connection at all to land, and now our lived experience is synonymous with the urban landscape. Although the imagery is not literally translated into my work, the energy of it gets into the paintings.

Tell me about your *Wonderment* series and how you incorporate sculptural elements.

Most of those pieces seek to either amplify a cause or occasion for wonder, or help me to let go of a burden, typically a heavy one; an example of a burden in my life would be hearing about another murder of a Black person at the hands of police. The process involves me using leftover paint, discarded clothing, old drop cloths, and found objects like driftwood. I'm interested in embracing physical destruction—and restructuring—of the materials. It involves a level of physicality that feels different from my other work.



What about the strips of painted material you interact with? Are those paintings you've cut up?
Yes, those are fully rendered paintings. There's an energy of post-vandalism in the final pieces. You see it and naturally wonder why someone would do that to their work.

Your paintings are considered abstract but I see figures and script...

I've heard that before. There's a density to the paintings and I feel like sometimes people think that that is what creates the figuration. You can see something but you can't quite grasp what it is.

Is it safe to say you're a maximalist, and what does that mean to you?

I am a maximalist to my core. Maximalism, to me, means a deep history, a history of both momentum and deterioration. I want people to experience that maximalism from afar but also up close, and to see all of the labor that was put into making the work. That's important to me. To see those layers and to feel almost overwhelmed by all the color, the strokes, the drips.

Overwhelmed in a good way. Is it possible to narrow down the key elements of your paintings?

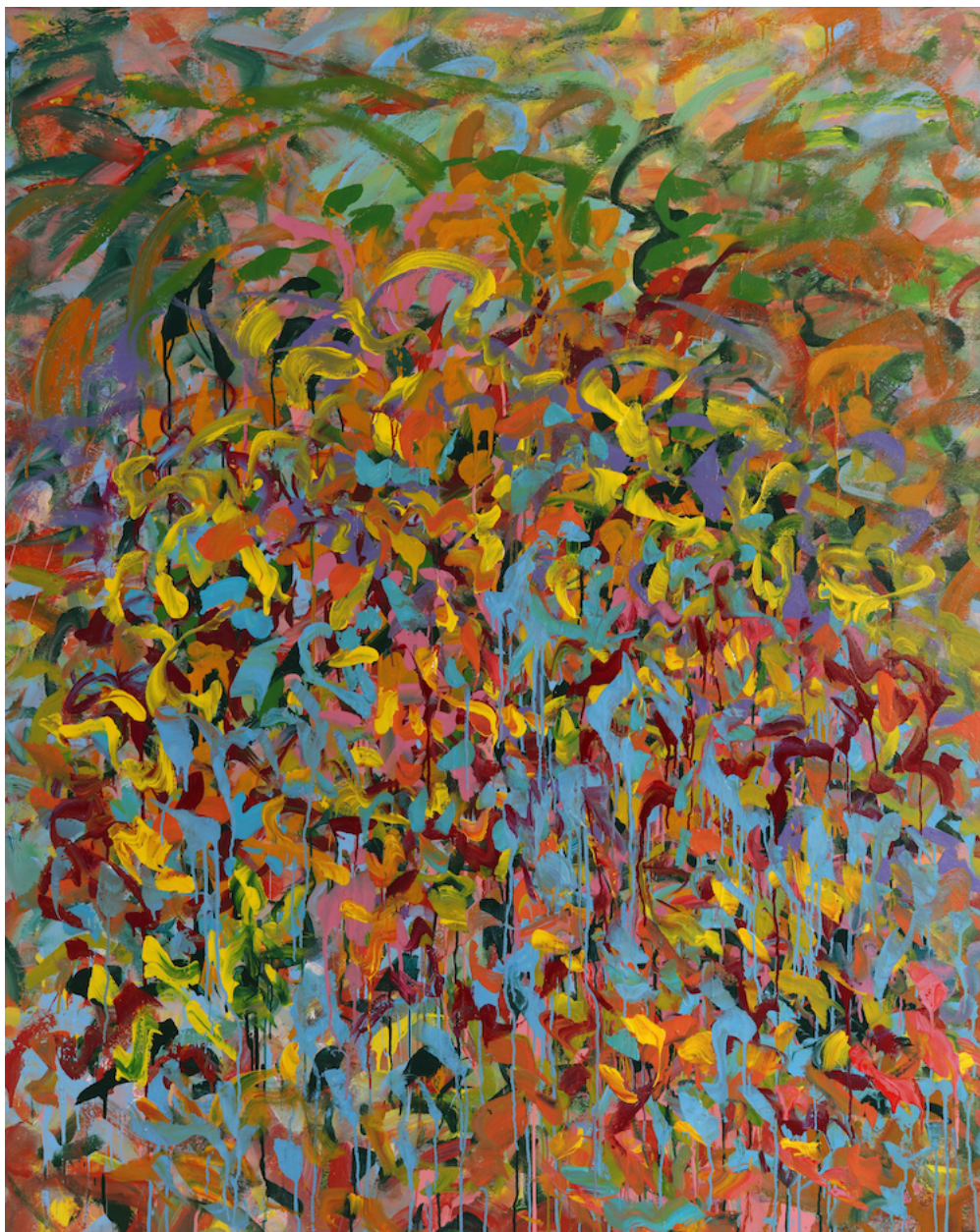
I really believe that my paintings are helping me to learn about things in this world that are indescribable, unknowable, including emotions I have no way to define or memories I no longer have access to. I'm guided by my intensity and my determination to have those experiences in the studio. Also, I believe in letting the innate qualities of paint dominate the work. So I really embrace bright color, drips and splashes, the way paint dries on the canvas. Those attributes of paint are an important part of the work.

Color, color, and more color. I can't get enough of it. I am obsessed with the vibrancy of bright color.

Freedom is a main ingredient, as well. I often try to get into a zone where I'm not hindered by what I've learned over the years. I try to do whatever the hell I want to with each canvas. I'm looking for immediacy, for accepting mistakes, for overcoming the challenges of each composition. I rely on my instincts, on muscle memory so that compositions emerge on the surface that wouldn't otherwise.

I try to simplify things. There's a methodical process to the way I work. I start with my paintings on the floor. I use gesso and really high fluid acrylic to make the first layer. It's all about having that first layer be the physical interaction between the canvas and me. From there I take my work to the wall, and begin a more concerted effort to think loosely about a narrative. My paint has to be really fluid. But, you know, in every piece, there's a moment where I struggle, even feeling like I've messed up. But I keep going. Because that's part of the work. I want that struggle embedded into the canvas. I just work through the struggle. It's a lot like life.

The amount of hours I spend painting transforms from struggle to easing up, to letting go. Sometimes I'll set work aside and come back to it but other times the painting just sort of defines itself quickly.



"Maximalism, to me, means a deep history, a history of both momentum and deterioration."

What does perfection look like to you?

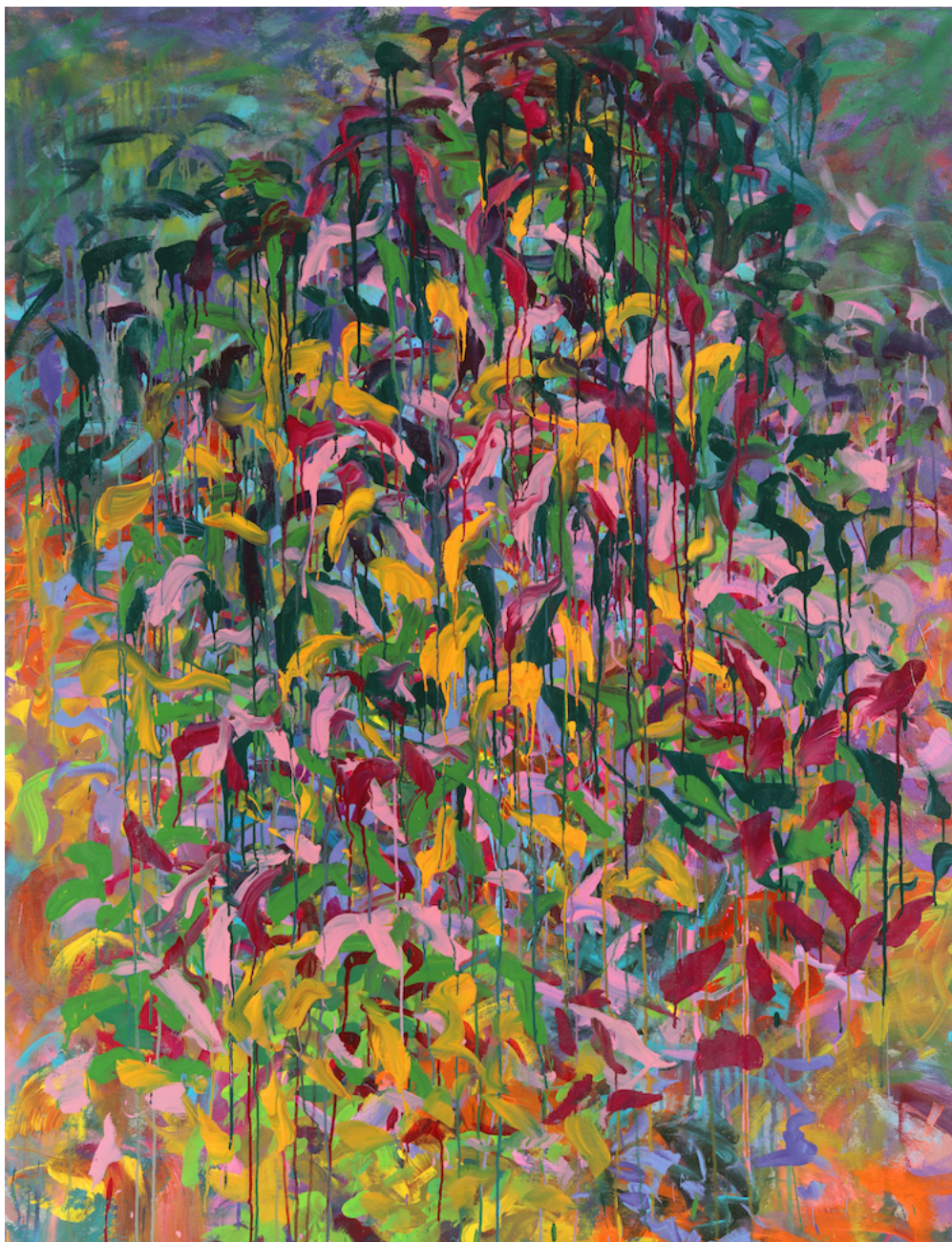
Perfection in the normal sense is suffocating, because it's defined by the culture we live in. I like to think of perfection as something that is messy, yet beautiful. Perfection is intuitive, ordered chaos. It's intentionality, the result of a cosmic flow. At least, in my studio, it is!

How did your process and style develop? Were you making figurative work in the past?

I was making figurative work, but at some point I felt constrained by it. I felt like the use of photos and photography as reference was stifling to me. I decided I wanted to reclaim my art practice and get rid of those suffocating moments in the studio. I wanted more energy in the work.

What kind of music have you been painting to lately?

Let's see. My current studio playlist has songs by Alex G., Jessica Pratt, Beirut, Sam Amidon, Cate Le Bon, Devendra Banhart, DMX, Bonnie Prince Billy, J.B. Lenoir, Gregory Alan Isakov, D'Angelo, Nina Simone, Hurray for the Ruff Raff, Norman Greenbaum—"Spirit in the Sky."



That's a good list. When you look at previous paintings, do you remember what was happening in your life or what you were listening to—like records of time?

Absolutely. I'm thinking right now of the paintings I made in 2020. It's interesting. I was kind of struggling with what to paint during lockdown and then, at a certain point, I just decided to stop painting figurative work and start painting more abstractly. It was cathartic. Now when I look back at those paintings and that time, I feel like they symbolize a key milestone in my practice of letting go and trusting myself.

Is there something beyond you guiding your hand and, if so, what is it?

I've been creative pretty much my entire life. If I were to describe what's guiding me, it would be my peace with being an artist. Also, I'm guided by my ancestors and their lives lived before me. Doing this type of work makes me feel safe and empowered.

Do you feel a different energy when you work smaller versus larger than your physical self?

I was just working on two smaller pieces in my studio the other day and I noticed at that moment that I was thinking way too much about my choices. There's something about a small canvas where there's an intimacy, and you really have to be super specific, not only about the brushstrokes you're making, or the color you're using, but also the intentionality. I actually prefer when my canvases are larger than me, because there's much more freedom to be immediate in my choices. I chase after a controlled immediacy in my work.

How do you know when a work is finished, and does the process feel performative?

I have many moments in the studio where I've decided a piece is finished. It sits in my studio for a few weeks. I come back to it, and I look at it and think to myself, oh shit, I could do more! I break out the paint and add more! And that's where the maximalist in me comes out. My process is performative in its physicality, most definitely.

Sometimes I have canvases on my floor just lying there, sometimes rolled up. I'll get back to them a few weeks later and add more layers. I'm usually working on two to three pieces at once.

**Tell me about the most recent painting you've completed.**

I just finished this large piece where I switched up my color palette a little bit. There's like a deep green in the background, but then the foreground reveals itself in these strokes of fuchsia, cadmium yellow and lots of lighter shades of green and pink. And then it's almost like the composition just sort of revealed itself along the way with all the different layers that I put onto the canvas. I just felt completely satisfied with it.

I'm working on a few small installations in my studio where I'm painting on everyday objects. I'm really interested in the objects we carry with us mentally that become precious and important pieces of memories. Once we lose those things, you know, where do they go? They remain in our memory, but they become magical. I'm interested in recreating that magic in a tangible way. Everything I do has a reference to painting, but it's been fun exploring my work away from the confines of a gallery wall.

What's up next?

I have a solo show coming up at Chandran Gallery, and I'm so excited for it. It will include large-scale paintings and a couple of experimental installations.

Which parts of the California landscape inspire you most? I saw you were painting in Point Reyes last winter.

I love Point Reyes. My family and I go there a lot. We go there for oysters and then we'll find places along Tomales Bay to have a picnic and hike. I also love Ocean Beach in San Francisco. I love the coastline. I'm an avid hiker and I'm always exploring the trails in the East Bay Area. The Oakland Hills are so magical to me. To live in an urban environment but be just minutes from nature is rare.

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Shara Mays will open a solo exhibition at [Chandran Gallery](#) in San Francisco in August 2022.

[@SharaMays](#)