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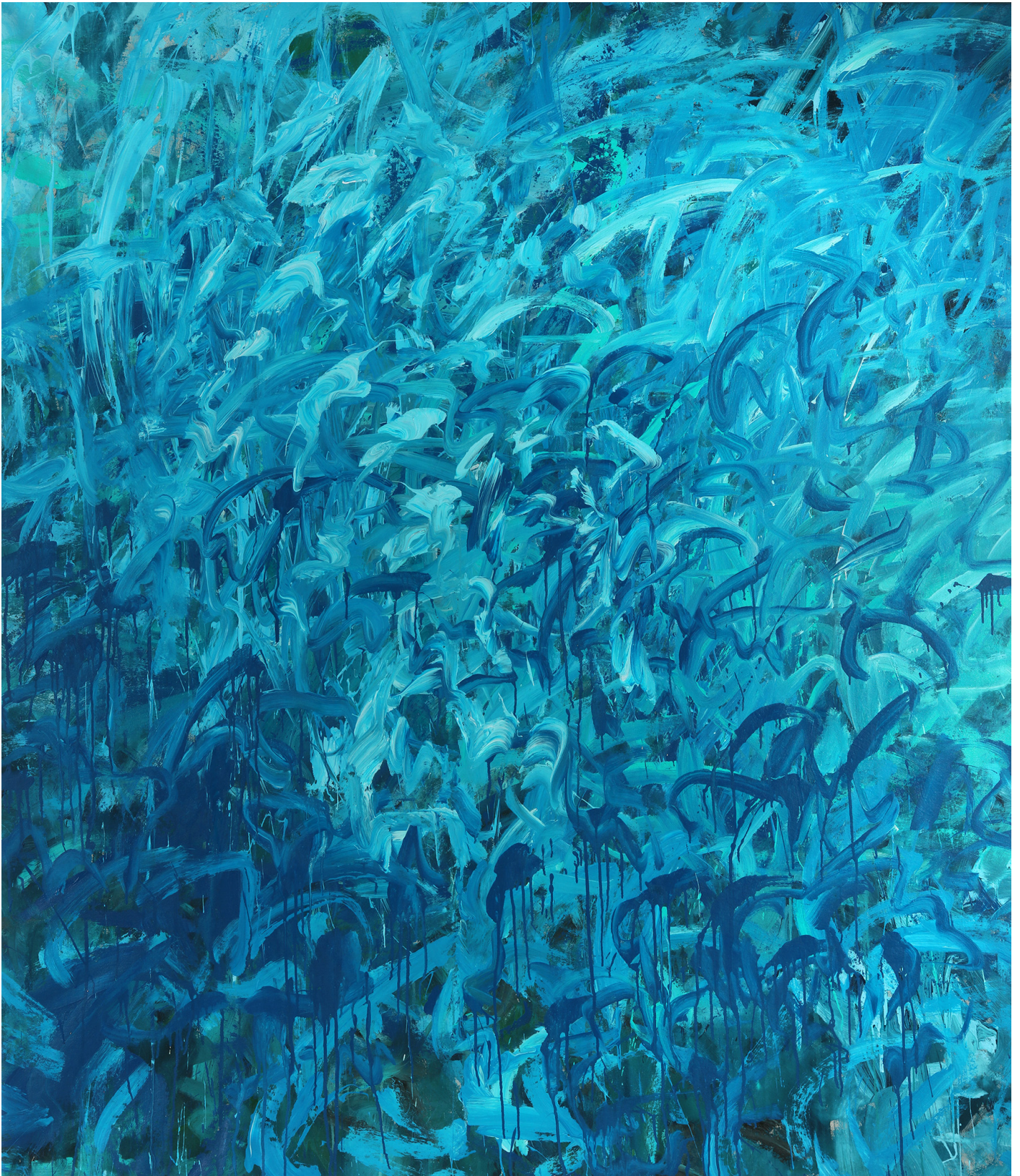
Art and Design

Landscape Paintings From Within

by [Matthew Harrison Tedford](#)

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"Night Hike," courtesy Shara Mays.

Shara Mays makes paintings that are big, bold, expressive, and not at all like what many think of when they think of landscape paintings. Her paintings can be as tall as seven feet and feature a panoply of bright colors, brushstrokes she describes as “lyrical,” long paint drips, and palpable energy. What one may not see are any identifiable places.

Unlike many landscape painters, Mays doesn’t generally paint specific locations, either from photographic references or plein air. Instead, she paints what she calls “internal landscapes.”

Eighteenth- and 19th-century landscape painters, she explains, sought to create a window onto what they saw. Mays says she instead is “giving people a window into how I think.” These internal landscapes start with Mays’ own memories of hikes, people, or experiences rather than specific geographic features or flora. In the painting *Bush*, for example, named for her great-grandfather, lively brushstrokes of nearly every color wrestle for attention in dense layers of paint, forming an abstract image. “It’s a landscape that is not meant to mimic what we know as landscape,” Mays says. “It’s a landscape that tries to reach or grasp the unknowable.”

People remember a place through a lens of emotion and physical sensation, and Mays’ abstractions invite viewers into her own experience and memories of the land. Though there are also no identifiable people in Mays’ landscapes, they teem with an emotional energy that illustrates the entwinement of people and land. She says that when people look at her paintings, she wants them to “see that my energy as a painter was still present.” This goes hand in hand with Mays’ desire to challenge viewers to not think of abstraction as without references.

The colors Mays employs, for example, are a reflection of herself. “My identity as an African American is bold,” she says. “I want to use the boldest, brightest colors all at the same time because that’s a part of my identity and I’m a maximalist.”

Though some of her titles, such as *Night Hike*, introduce connotations more typical of landscape painting that may guide viewers’ experiences of the paintings, many of Mays’ works are named for family members. The titles once again connect Mays’ artwork and her relationship with land to her own identity and history.

Mays draws inspiration from a photo of her father as a young boy with his cousins and great-uncle in front of a family home in North Carolina, surrounded by verdant shrubs and greenery. Even though Black boys in 1950s North Carolina faced violence and uncertainty away from home, Mays says that in the photo the boys feel safe in that space. In one series of paintings, she sought to create such landscapes of safety for family members and ancestors. The painting *Helen*, named for an aunt, gives the impression of a kaleidoscopically lush landscape at dusk. This is somewhere Edenic, as Mays describes it, but it is also a potential hiding place, perhaps a dense thicket or swamp. “By painting landscapes,” Mays explains of this series, “I was paying homage to the people in my life who deserve transcendence beyond the limitations of racism that they faced when they were alive.”

Mays describes the power of landscape painting for an African American contemporary painter as distinct from the colonial power characteristic of the genre. It’s a way “of chasing freedom,” she says. “I have no restrictions in my practice, and that’s because this is my space.”

Shara Mays’ solo exhibition, Paint. All. The. Things., is on view at [Chandran Gallery in San Francisco](#) from August 6 through September 1, 2022.

About the Author

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Matthew Harrison Tedford is an arts writer focused on ecology, history, and politics. Based in San Francisco, his work has appeared on KQED, Hyperallergic, SF Weekly, Art Practical, and elsewhere.