



# *Carving Out a (Feminine) Space for Yourself*

INTERVIEW WITH

## Megan Ellen MacDonald

BY CHRISTINA NAFZIGER

The world Megan Ellen MacDonald paints is shiny, smooth, slick, and juicy. Her vibrant, unnatural hues compose seductive and irresistible compositions that feel so real, yet contain an air of simulation—as if we are looking at a theatrical set instead of a still life. Her paintings are not only hyperreal, they are hyper-femme. Bright, neon pinks and luscious magentas often dominate her still lifes, which are filled with objects like flower petals, pearls, and snakes. The artist also includes classic symbolic still life elements that reference mortality, like fruit and skulls. However, for MacDonald, these paintings reference the avoidance of death by reflecting on mortality by way of the immortal—meaning, the objects in her paintings are fake. They have never existed in our world, only in the one the artist so realistically creates.

In this interview, MacDonald tells us about the significance of creating feminine spaces in art and how she continuously rebels against the masculinity that is so embedded within the history of painting. Join us as we discuss the moments of her life that influence her work, the importance of observation, and the female painters who have inspired her journey.



**Your paintings are so detailed and visceral! Where did you learn your incredible skill in painting? Did you have any teachers and/or people in your life who have influenced your practice?**

I attended OCAD University in Toronto and graduated with a BFA in drawing and painting in 2013. I didn't have a lot of instructors who were able to teach the technical elements of painting—the curriculum at that time was extremely focused on conceptual development without addressing skill. I learned the skill of painting from observation by studying painting on my own time, mostly through video tutorials and a lot of trial and error. I did a lot of master copies and still life paintings. Lisa Yuskavage was a huge inspiration for me as a student, and I spent a lot of time looking at her work (even traveling to New York to see it!) and trying to replicate the way she layered color to achieve the depth and volume you see in her paintings. Studying the works of the few female masters exhibited in major museums was also very influential on my practice. Seeing works by Rachel Ruysch, Élisabeth Le Brun and Mary Cassatt made me feel like it was worth exploring a visual language usually reserved for men.

**The objects in your paintings seem very intentional. Do you have a collection of objects in your studio that you work from?**

I do! It has shrunk over the years from downsizing, but I still have a considerable collection of porcelain critters, brass pots and painted vases that I once used for composing still life paintings. I still collect objects to use as references for textures and models in 3D, which is how I create my current subjects and compose my “still life” these days.

**Where do you find inspiration for your still lifes? Do you consider your paintings a contemporary version of vanitas?**

My last two bodies of work, “Modern Love” and “Wet Dream,” contained quite a few references to the theme of vanitas—the transience of life. There are so many ways in which that theme echoes throughout my work, but the one I like to reflect on the most, and keep coming back to, is the contemporary obsession with alternate versions of reality. None of the subjects in my paintings are organic—the flowers and bees are plastic, glass and metal textures. They don't even exist in a real space—everything has been designed and composed in 3D. The spaces and things I paint cannot wilt or die, so I've created this conundrum of reflecting on mortality using the immortal.

I like to think of it as a callback to the vision of departing further away from reality through the development of a “metaverse,” which is such a human thing to desire. To me, the metaverse seems like a convenient space to exist outside of the reality that our environment and planet are dying ... the ultimate avoidance of death.



**What has your journey been like arriving at your distinct, stylized aesthetic? Have you always leaned towards a hyperreal style?**

I've always been drawn to representational artwork and painting, and I find the act of observing very meditative. To try and reflect on the inner mechanics of the way light hits and interacts with a specific surface, the way it affects how we perceive the color of that object, all of these elements of observation are so fascinating to me. Sometimes I feel like a magician or illusionist—I'm able to conjure something that feels real out of nothing. There is something slightly mystical about storytelling in that way.

To me, style and aesthetic come naturally. I don't try to think about it too much and aim to create in the way that feels most authentic to myself. I've been told many times early in my career that the work I was making was too kitschy, too feminine, too pink ... but pushing back and rebelling is also something that comes very naturally to me. If anything, the negative criticism of my work made me ask deeper questions—why would painting something so overtly feminine bother someone so much? If anything, it validated what I was doing, and made me want to do it more.

### Can you talk about the element of femininity and/or femme objects present in your work?

Femininity and identifying as femme has been such an important element of my work from the beginning. When I was studying representational painting and aesthetic, I felt like an outsider. Even the artists I looked up to were imitating their male counterparts with a masculine way of painting—any element of femininity present in their work made it inferior. I quickly learned femininity, when expressed through my gaze, was a dirty word.

I eventually became exhausted trying to be someone I wasn't, and I think the first extremely kitschy work I made was out of frustration—like I needed to unburden myself from all the criticism I had faced for existing in that space. It was this painting of a huge ragdoll cat, completely out of place in the middle of a picturesque 17th century-esque landscape, and I remember feeling like that was me. Since then, I've made it my mission to carve out space for myself. I'm using the language of representational painting, harnessing its history, symbols and narratives, but instead of being an outsider in that space, I'm reinventing it as my own.



### What aspect of your life and/or personality inevitably seeps into your art?

My work is narrative based, and at times very personal. A lot of those narratives are built through reflections on my own experiences—for example, the work from my last solo exhibition was largely inspired by the fact that I had purchased a boat and was spending the majority of my time outside of the studio on the water. I was experiencing parts of my world that had once been hidden, and whole ecosystems that I had never really seen up close before. The dynamics between species could be beautiful and also brutal, and it made me reflect on my own impact on the land more than I ever had.



### If you weren't an artist, what would you be?

I don't think I became an artist out of wanting to be one... it was more a need to create, coupled with needing to make it profitable, that brought me here. I'm extremely lucky and privileged that I can make a living doing the thing I love most, and I wouldn't want it any other way.

### What is your dream collaboration?

I want to design a video game or immersive VR space—that is something I would love to collaborate with someone on in the future. ♦

See more additional work and learn more from the artist:  
[www.meganellenmacdonald.com](http://www.meganellenmacdonald.com)  
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