Julie 'In Studio'

The Art of Making a Splash

by Zach Rosen

Julie Anderson Mathias has spent much of her life thinking about how things fit together.

Buildings. Rooms. Geometric grids. Colors. Occasionally, very large paintings that don't fit through doors.

The Chicago-based artist began her career in interior architecture, where precision was paramount and measurements generally had the good manners to stay put. Painting, however, offered an entirely different proposition.

Here, a drop of red might have an unexpected encounter with blue. A carefully constructed grid might disappear beneath a wash of color. And a canvas that began as an exercise in geometry might end up resembling something closer to a particularly exuberant weather system.

Her latest exhibition, *In Studio*, brings this collision of calculation and creativity to Seimandi & Leprieur Gallery in downtown Santa Barbara, where her large-scale abstract paintings are on display through November 8.

And for Julie, color is always the main character.

"Color is always the subject matter of my work," she says. "No matter who we are or where we live, we make color decisions every day. That is part of the art of being human."



Julie in front of *Perseids* at Seimandi & Leprieur Gallery (courtesy photo)

Building a Colorful Career

Long before Julie was splashing paint across enormous canvases, she was building miniature houses from balsa wood and constructing forts in the woods near her childhood home outside Chicago.

That fascination with building led her to Syracuse University, where she studied interior architecture and discovered the work of Abstract Expressionists and Color Field painters, particularly Morris Louis and Helen Frankenthaler.



Dew Drops 2, 78"x78", on display now (courtesy photo)

Their paintings made an impression. Architecture, however, paid the bills.

Julie eventually landed her dream job at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, the celebrated architectural firm, where she developed an appreciation for grids, scale, and proportion. Many of those lessons, and even some of the same tools, eventually found their way into her paintings.

"Even today I often have grids under my paintings," she explains.

Her career also took a rather sizable detour through mural work. After graduating during the Vietnam War, when architecture jobs were scarce, Julie returned home and began painting the sides of buildings.

Some murals stretched 60 feet across and 30 feet high. Armed with scaffolding and a system of grids, she learned to translate her designs onto enormous surfaces.

It was an education in thinking big.

And Julie has been thinking big ever since.

"I prefer bold, larger pieces," she says. "I don't get tired of them."

In fact, one painting in her dining room has become something of a permanent installation.

"I couldn't get it out if I wanted because it won't fit through the doors," she laughs.

Making a Splash

For all her architectural discipline, Julie is happy to let her paintings misbehave.

Her *Dewdrops* series begins with a grid constructed from lightweight string (maybe even dental floss). She places droplets of color across the raw canvas, carefully considering which hues will complement each other and which might become unpleasant neighbors.

Then comes the water.

The droplets spread, mingle, and form little rivers of color. Some behave as expected. Others apparently find their own path.

Julie delights in watching the paint soak into the raw canvas, a technique inspired by the Color Field painters she admired in college. She prefers crystal-clear, cheerful hues. Gray is welcome. Brown, not so much.

"I love gray when things go gray. I'm happy. When things go brown, not so," she laughs, although she admits that some people, including her son, prefer those earthier results.

Behind the colorful exuberance is considerable experimentation. Julie tests combinations on smaller canvases, studying how neighboring hues create depth and dimension. She once produced ten paintings using the same red, yellow, and blue, discovering just how differently those colors could interact.

Of course, knowing when to stop is another matter.

One favorite, *Snow Moon*, uses negative space and restrained gestures to create its composition. Another, *Shimmering Gold*, was so beloved that Julie practically had to convince herself to send it to California.

She eventually relented.

Santa Barbara can consider itself fortunate.

A Studio in Miniature

The exhibition's title, *In Studio*, refers to something beyond the finished paintings.

Julie has spent years photographing works in progress, collecting images of her tools, and documenting the experiments that eventually become finished compositions. When she began sharing these behind-the-scenes glimpses at art fairs, visitors were fascinated.

So she brought the studio experience into the gallery.

Alongside the paintings are a slideshow of her process and miniature models she constructed to plan the exhibition.

Yes, miniature models.

Before shipping her oversized canvases west, Julie built a scaled-down version of the gallery to study how the paintings would interact across the room.

She even included tiny wooden figures, although one particularly stubborn fellow refused to sit down and read his newspaper. Fortunately, gallery co-owner **Julian Leprieur** helped solve the miniature engineering predicament.

The whole exercise is delightfully characteristic of Julie, an artist who moves between architectural calculations and playful experimentation without missing a beat.

It also speaks to her affection for gallery owners **Fanny Seimandi** and Julian Leprieur, whose attention to detail impressed her from the beginning.



See *Horizon Detail*, 78"x78", and more through November 8 (courtesy photo)

The invitation to exhibit came after the couple encountered her work through art fairs, where Julie had discovered an enthusiastic audience for her colorful abstractions.

She admires California's artistic spirit and its history of experimentation, making Santa Barbara a particularly welcome destination.

An Invitation to Color

For Julie, the exhibition is ultimately an invitation to peruse and perhaps leave with a few creative ambitions of one's own.

She hopes families will wander in, that children will examine the miniature models, and that maybe even some of the mini-artists-to-be might go home inspired to make something.

There is no need to understand abstract painting, know the difference between a Morris Louis and a Frankenthaler, or possess a wall large enough to accommodate one of her enormous canvases.

Just come in and enjoy the color.

After all, Julie remembers the excitement of first encountering paintings that made her want to pick up a brush herself.

Now, with *In Studio*, she has an opportunity to return the favor.

And if a few visitors leave inspired to build a miniature house, experiment with a splash of paint, or simply reconsider their relationship with brown, all the better.

In Studio *by Julie Anderson Mathias is on view through November 8 at Seimandi & Leprieur Gallery, 33 West Anapamu Street, Santa Barbara. More information at www.seimandileprieur.com.*

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