

Cat Sommer
Artist's Statement

Painting is a way of reworking, refiguring. It is not a mirror held up to the world but a field where I can place elements together and let them push against, bend, reimagine themselves. My paintings are a visual social diary— thinking done outside the burden of language, and beyond its limits.

My work constantly returns to identity: a word that in its limits manages to encompass both a system for categorizing others (labels pressed from the outside) and a means of aligning oneself (a site of agency). It encompasses notions of gender, culture, race, sexuality. If my work must mark a point as its center, it is this word, but it is only because I am interested in creating work that celebrates the relationship between people and what I call the human spirit, and all of the cultural norms and constructs such a spirit must navigate.

I paint portraits. I paint people intimate to me, people I know and want to understand, their untold stories. I wonder how to work in portraiture without objectifying. How to portray subtleties when our vision has been trained to flatten. I bring to each of these portraits my own history and set of concerns— a lens of complexity, of my own ever-changing *identity*:

I was born to a Colombian mother and American father. Raised in California in the 80's, I wonder: How Latina am I? How American? Ask an American and I am Colombian American. Ask a person on the street in Bogotá and I am American. As a child I was encouraged to assimilate.

I am now a mother in San Francisco. Motherhood is a central theme in my work because it has been a central theme in my life. It is written on to me with my gender. The adornment of my infant body (earrings, rings, lace dresses...)— its treatment as a trophy— was both a reflection of the prize of motherhood and the start of my gender-marking.

Through my painting, I want to challenge my own conceptions of identity, gender, race, culture, and to discover in them the force of change, the fluidity of reality. My portraits are overrun with flora and fauna. I pair solitary men with the sweet animals that adore them. Men are also victim to social norms, but not all fit perfectly into our molds. These are the men I find most interesting. I want to create a visual palette that neutralizes gender and celebrates relationships regardless of sex or race. Plant and animal imagery can be read as “feminine,” and I embrace this, as both a celebration of my identity and as a destabilizing force in my work— in its action against other objects it encounters (branches become skin, flowers become eyes) in addition to the power one wields in embracing a pejorative— the “girly.”

My work— a visual social diary— is a place for defying dangerous cultural norms, imagining alternatives, and embracing fluidity as a working model for understanding the world. Portraying a beautiful, strong woman without objectifying. Working through the expectations of a Latin

woman in a feminist age. Facing biracial and cultural norms in the United States without devaluing heritage, history. Parsing out biracial dynamics in the home, especially as they relate to motherhood. Accessing my unconscious, visualizing emotion, making tangible the human spirit and histories. Reworking, refiguring, reimagining.