

JULY 2019

ALICIA MCCARTHY



Untitled (2), 2018
Color sugarlift aquatint and aquatint. Paper Size: 40" x 40"; Edition of 35



Z, 2018
Color sugarlift aquatint with aquatint and drypoint. Paper Size: 39" x 39"; Edition of 35



In the last few years Alicia McCarthy has been recognized with solo exhibitions at such well known galleries as John Berggruen and Jack Hanley as well as large public commissions including the entire side of the Proper Hotel in San Francisco and the new graduate studio for the San Francisco Art Institute at Fort Mason. (Of course, they famously tried to expel her when she was a student practicing graffiti.) On her second visit to Paulson Fontaine Press we asked her about all these changes.

-Kenneth Caldwell

Paulson Fontaine Press: In other interviews, you have talked about how much community has played a part in your formation and growth as an artist. Is this process of printmaking relatively comfortable because it involves such a spirit of collaboration?

Alicia McCarthy: Yes, for sure. That's what I want to do, collaborate with their process here and come to something together. I spend so much time alone in my studio, it's really nice to have these situations where there are other people around.

Q: Has all the recent attention that you've received take time away from creating art or changed how you approach your art?

A: I wouldn't say it takes time away, because creating is happening all the time.

Q: With both your mural at the San Francisco Art Institute Fort Mason campus and your mural on the exterior of the Proper Hotel, you are doing what is essentially sanctioned graffiti. What's different?

A: A different kind of visibility.

Q: That's important.

A: That was the irony of the Art Institute.

Q: Did you mock up the mural at the Proper?

A: I had to propose the image, but I didn't even get the exact measurement of that wall. I approached it exactly the way I approach a painting and executed it exactly the way I make a painting in my studio.

I stood across the street and tried to eye where I thought the center was. There were some windows and different points of reference, and I eyed the center and then had two of the boys go up and mark it with tape.

One thing that was different from working in my studio is that I had to go to the paint store and pick out a bunch of colors. Typically I mix one color and then the next. It's not like I go and premix a bunch of colors. So that was the one odd thing, but it wasn't as hard as I thought it was going to be.

Q: What is it like painting in public like that?

A: There was a peanut gallery watching the whole time. This one guy in particular, he was in a wheelchair. We came down one time and he was complaining to some buddies, "These guys don't know what they're doing. They're doing that the worst way you could ever do." I said, "You are right."

The thing that's neat is that all of those people that hang out there that are generally invisible; people just seen as problems had the best seat in the house and really got engaged with the situation.

Q: Were your crew all artists?

A: They're all artists. When they first started painting the lines, I could



Untitled (3), 2018
Color softground etching with drypoint. Paper Size: 20" x 24"; Edition of 35

tell that they were really nervous. I said, "You guys, there really is no way you can screw up. It's paint. We can paint over it. Relax. I want you to just paint a line. You just have to think about the space between the lines. Drip as much as you want." Hearing them all helping each other, it was an amazing experience.

Q: We should probably talk a little about the prints. Some of this detail looks like spray-can graffiti.

A: Yes. I came in here wanting to do something smaller, because my last prints were so big. But, again, I come to listen. I've been working with a lot more space in the last year or so. This time, I'm going to leave with ideas I get to bring back to the studio.

Q: How is that accomplished?

A: Z put the sugarlift in an empty graffiti pen, and that's how all these lines were made on the plate.

Some of the lines I made with the acrylic pens Pam gave me, some of them I sprayed, and some I got from throwing sugarlift with the pen.

Q: Tell me about the smaller prints.

A: I was excited about doing a rainbow, but those little lines are tough, that's the other problem about working really small. It's pretty impossible for them to ink plates with those little lines so close together. Untitled 4 feels like a body or bodies merging. That's just the feel that I get.

Q: Do you feel more a sense of optimism than a few years ago, despite what's happening politically? Because a few years ago when we talked, it had only been a short time since you had stopped your day job and started painting and teaching full time.

A: I don't feel any different. Obviously, it feels different in that I have a lot more time to do the work, and I have more deadlines and amazing opportunities. When Trump was elected, it was devastating and I really lacked perspective, but at this point, I think it's kind of fermented, and now it's fuel. I go into each thing not knowing if I can do it or not and hoping that something comes to me that feels right for the whole situation. I'm happy that I'm able to take advantage of these opportunities. All I can do is kind of hope that they keep coming.



Untitled (4), 2019
Color softground etching with aquatint and drypoint. Paper Size: 20" x 24"; Edition of 35