

GAGOSIAN

GARAGE

In Conversation with Jennifer Guidi

With a show currently on view at Gagosian Gallery, the painter reveals how she imbues her canvases with an energy that comes straight from her heart.

Haley Mellin



Guardians of Light (Triptych: Painted Universe Mandala Triangle SF #2T, Yellow to Pink Gradient, Natural Ground; White #2PT, Black Sand SF #1S, Black Ground; White #3PT, Black Sand #2S, Black Ground), 2018-2019, Courtesy of the artist

Jennifer Guidi's paintings are noted for their luminosity, tactility, and presence. Her compositions—wildly textured and vividly colored—inspire shifts in perceptual awareness through a unique painting process that leads to abstraction. Her vibrating palette and innovative use of sand and paint link her atmospheres to the natural world. Drawing influence from Joseph Cornell, Agnes Martin, and Georgia O'Keeffe, Guidi is an artist's artist who listens intuitively to the workings of her process.

Guidi and I first met in early 2018, at her studio. I had seen stories on her Instagram of her roller-skating across the studio concrete floors between painting sessions. We've remained friendly since, and had a marathon phone conversation ahead of her upcoming show at Gagosian in New York, which opens February 28 and runs through April 4. Titled Gemini, the show features imagery from recent drawings of elements like phases of the moon, zodiac signs, and serpents with the sun. "I'm interested in the symbolism of light and dark, night and day, the moon and the sun," she explained. "I'm interested in cyclical movement and how interconnected we all are."



"THE AWAKENING," 2019, GRAPHITE AND COLORED PENCIL ON PAPER COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

What were your earliest experiences with art?

I was always interested in making things. I was the kid gluing Popsicle sticks together, sewing, painting, and drawing. I was around 10 when I took my first art classes in Palm Desert in a little storefront. By my freshman year we moved to San Diego, and then to Irvine. I started painting in high school. I remember saying to my guidance counselor during freshman year, "I'm going to art school, so I don't need to take a lot of academics." I've always known I wanted to be an artist. I finished high school in Massachusetts, and by my senior year of high school I was taking at least four art classes a day.

Seeing how nature is a part of your work, were you often outdoors as a kid?

Most of my childhood was spent outside. We lived in a ghost town of little track houses along a golf course that wasn't used often. If I didn't have school, I was out of the house from after breakfast to dinnertime, roaming the golf course and surrounding neighborhood. There were many houses that no one lived in. The house that my parents rented didn't have a pool, but some of the other homes did. We would go pool-hopping in the vacant houses, figure out who didn't live in what house, and use the pool. One of our neighbors was an elderly lady, and our group of friends would occasionally gather at her house. She would play classical music and put out sheets of paper. I remember spending hours drawing at her dining room table.

Were your parents supportive of your art interest?

Yes, my parents were supportive. When I told my dad that I was going to art school, he asked, "How will you make a living?" I said, "I'll major in graphic design" to make him happy. When I had to sit him down and tell him I was going to major in painting, he said, "Oh, God." I told him I could become a professor. He said, "Okay."



"YOUR COLORS ARE ETERNAL (SCHIFFERMÜLLER)," 2019 SAND AND ACRYLIC ON LINEN, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

What was your experience like in college?

Boston University had a very traditional art program that gave me an immense and valuable knowledge of painting techniques. We drew and painted from the figure for four years. I enjoyed working from life, and I liked the challenge of making things look as realistic as I possibly could.

How did your work develop in graduate school?

I went to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. I came in painting mostly self-portraits, but I didn't want to work from life anymore because I felt restricted. The Art Institute has a huge surrealist collection, and I found myself constantly visiting that wing, as well as studying the intricacies of Joseph Cornell's boxes. I was also working on a lot of domestic projects when I wasn't in the studio that ranged from painting walls, sewing curtains, and making pillows. I started painting and collaging domestic scenes and incorporating imagery, such as furniture, sewing needles, patterns, fabrics, and stitches. A combination of working on those projects and having Jim Nutt as my advisor for two years greatly influenced my work at the time.

After school, you exhibited and lived in L.A., which was a move homeward.

I moved to L.A. when I was 28, and the first night here, I felt like I was back home. I was struck by the light and the colors of the simple block architecture of '50s apartment buildings. I had a job painting faux finishes in houses on the west side. I had a long commute, and on the way home I would stop in neighborhoods along the way and take photographs. At that time, I started making paintings from those photos. In 2005, my first show at Acme was of L.A. apartment scenes. I was painting my life, my plants, my apartment, or anything I saw in my Los Feliz neighborhood on a day-to-day basis.



"TO PROTECT AND HOLD YOU UP," 2019 SAND, ACRYLIC AND OIL ON LINEN, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

You took some time away from solo shows between 2007 and 2013. Was that raising children, or not wanting to be showing as much?

It was a combination of having my twins in 2008 and finding a gallery to work with. I had two solo shows at Acme in 2005 and 2006. It was pre-social media, before artists could promote themselves, and it was hard to get the work out there. I was frustrated because I wanted to show. I never stopped making work, but it took me a while to figure out what I wanted to paint.

Painting doesn't come quickly. The ability to paint is something that one earns.

Yes, it took a long time. It took a lot of different bodies of work and feeling my way through them. Over the years, I rented a variety of spaces that I used as a studio. Then I moved into a new house in 2011, where I could have a studio at home. Painting at home gave me the ability to work as much as I could while raising small children. When I started making the dot paintings, I didn't let anyone in the studio. I had something I didn't want to kill by getting anyone's opinion too early. I started letting people in once I actually had a bunch of paintings and felt, "I don't care what anyone says. I care about these paintings, and this is what I want to commit to." At that point I thought, "I don't even know if I'll ever show again." I wanted to show, but it wasn't going to be the most important thing to me.

It was very freeing. It was good timing with the advent of Instagram, which reconnected me to people I hadn't talked with in a long time. Getting into Instagram had nothing to do with the painting world or the art world. I was photographing things around L.A. and connecting with people who were into photography. I was getting comfortable with being out there in the world again. I had known Nathalie Karg for a long time, but the show at her gallery happened because I was on Instagram and she was on Instagram. She sent me a message and said, "What are you up to? Are you painting? I'm thinking I want to open a gallery." I said, "I'm ready to go!" She said, "I'll be in L.A. in a couple of months." She came over for a studio visit, and I was her second show at Great Jones. It was great timing.

How did you leave representational painting and move toward abstraction?

It was a slow evolution. After the show in 2005, again I thought, “I don’t want to paint realistic paintings anymore.” This feeling kept nagging at me, but I wasn’t ready to leave imagery behind at that point. Although I was no longer painting from life, I was painting from photographs. I did another show the next year based on photographs of plants and shadows up against stucco walls. I was mainly attracted to the walls, the color of them, and how the light affected them. Painting the backgrounds is what I was interested in. I would paint layer after layer trying to capture the right color and feeling. This is when I started asking myself, “Can I just make a monochromatic painting?” That was 2006. It wasn’t until 2012, after I went to Morocco and bought several rugs, that I finally moved into abstraction. I was attracted to the thick stitches and unintentional patterns of their underside. I began working on a series of small paintings on paper from the photographs I had taken of sections of the rugs. The repetitive motion of painting the stitches resonated with me, leading me to a much larger body of work. These paintings opened up a new way for me to communicate through mark-making that was more connected to a personal, internal, and meditative form of expression.



*"LUNAR ECLIPSE/BLUE MOON (PAINTED LAVENDER SAND SF #1T, BLUE GRADIENT, LAVENDER GROUND)," 2018
SAND, ACRYLIC AND OIL ON LINEN, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST*

I was reading about how sand comes from the weathering of rocks over millions of years. It is a physical object, and it is a representation of time passing. You are combining a natural element, sand, with an art-historical element, painting. When did you start using sand in the paintings?

Before I moved into abstraction, combining sand and paint was something I had thought about often. I was drawn to paintings that incorporated sand as a material. I remember seeing artwork by Dubuffet, Kandinsky, Burri, Braque, and Picasso, all who used sand at some point. There was something about the physicality of the texture on canvas that stuck with me. In 2011, I started another series of plants against stucco walls, but this time I made my backgrounds textured by mixing sand in the oil paint. In the summer of 2013, as soon as I returned from my annual family vacation in Hanalei, Kauai, I began making solid sand paintings with marks from sticks that I had found on the beach. Those were my first abstract sand paintings.

You shifted from compositions with a horizon line, where the marks were reiterating the flatness of the canvas to where the marks are coming from a central focal point and expanding out toward the viewer. That is a profound move. How did you come to that?

Moving from left to right, across and down, became unsatisfying. I wanted the work to have more movement, so I tried a few where the marks were expressive and varied in shape and size, but that was too random and didn't activate the surface or draw in the viewer in the way that I was searching for. While watching Tibetan monks make a sand mandala, I was struck by the ritual of how they start in the center, work outwards, and, once finished, sweep the sand from the outer edge back into the center. Shortly after, I was facing a canvas as though it was a mirror and thought, "What if I start where I feel my heart would be reflected?" I followed my intuition and made the first mark up and a little to the left. That was my center. This is when I felt that the work had a definite energy source, where it created a vibration moving in and out.

I appreciate how you integrate elements taken from the natural world with the human-invented space of art. I like these two worlds, nonhuman and human, colliding in a surface. What artists do you feel connected to?

I enjoy looking at Agnes Martin, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Hilma af Klint. When I was making my first abstract paintings, I would have moments of doubt. Around that time, I remember watching a documentary on Agnes Martin and she said, "Stop overthinking it. Make it and keep making it. It doesn't have to be such a big deal. You just need to want it and not change your mind." I thought, "She's right. Make it."