
MARIKO FROST ARTIST STATEMENT

When I observe someone who is elated, I often feel content. When reading a book about a sad character, I sometimes cry. I empathize with emotions in characters perhaps more innately than in myself. By contrast, my own feelings are subtle, murky, and undefined. Sometimes I have trouble naming what I am feeling and understanding why the feeling emerges. Perhaps this is because my sense of identity is multi-faceted. Growing up, I was influenced by three mothers, three religions, and three hometowns. Am I like my mom, a Russian Jew from St. Louis who interlaces her speech with Yiddish and her extended family that I spent my early years with? Am I like my Step-mom, a no-nonsense hardworking Protestant Christian businesswoman in Texas with whom I shared my adolescence? Am I like my formerly hippie dad, an Agnostic Zen Buddhist, who although of English descent gave me a Japanese name and fed me raw octopus morsels? My personal relationship to different sub-cultures and my shifting sense of identity in growing up has left me perpetually curious about other people's backgrounds, their feelings, and how they form their identities. This psychological curiosity forms the basis of my art.

In one way, my art enables me to make sense of my feelings through empathic projection onto characters. My emotions are often accompanied by spontaneous and distinct mental images. For example, the other day I was thinking about my future. I saw the image of two Spartan women with blonde hair tucked under Etruscan-style helmets that covered their noses. They were leaning towards each other with their palms pressed together. I have no immediate sense of what it means, but I incorporated the motion of the leaning hands into a painting that week. Sometimes years will pass before I can look back on my body of work and decode the causes of the imagery and what I was feeling when I created the painting. Typically, however, I have a better understanding of my feelings by the time I complete an artwork. Somehow the immediacy of painting allows me to see my thoughts all at once, adding clarity to my perception.

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Frequently my art deals with human relationships inspired by my personal relationships. The painting *Couple in a Parking Garage* is about my sister's attitude toward her boyfriends. In the painting, my sister's hair is reaching out symbolically, connecting her to her boyfriend. Yet, by sticking out her tongue she is flirtatiously pushing him away. For me, a person's hairstyle can sometimes function as a metaphorical emotional signifier. For example, long hair can act as a security blanket. Once after a breakup with a curly headed guy I cut off my long straight hair and got a perm. It was my way of realizing I was starting fresh, while bringing the memory of the past with me. In *Couple in a Parking Garage*, both of the figures have ginger-colored hair and are wearing striped shirts. This similarity between the separate figures within a painting is a topic I like to revisit in my work - visual evidence of mimicry. Couples who are together for a long time frequently develop a shared aesthetic, eat the same foods, suffer the same ailments, and eventually begin to look alike. This idea of similarity and simultaneous dissimilarity fascinates me.

My fondness for Fantasy and Science Fiction also flavors my work. I like the silliness and seriousness of it; I get so wrapped up in a book that I will read through the night to discover the fate of "Lady Xylfa-7" at the hands of the "Flargon Prince". In Science Fiction the world that the author creates is unlimited: dragons can exist, gravity can be eliminated, and there can be no moons or perhaps five. There is ultimate control over the environment, much like in painting, and a character's inner feelings are frequently mirrored by their physical realities. The protagonist's identity is ultimately what gives shape to their world. For a person like me with a multifaceted sense of identity, this adventure combined with clarity of emotional space can be seductive. An innocent gets a white unicorn, villains wear black, and a desolate outlook on life merits a desert landscape. This paradigm is akin to my manner of painting, where the world I create (the environment, the negative space) is physically linked to the characters I envision. The process of painting allows the feeling of the character to generate a visual arena with almost no limitations. Perspective and color can change, objects can enter and fade as the painting becomes a dollhouse that is limited only by my imagination and my rendering ability. In the painting, *Room with a View*, I painted from my photograph of a

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German monastery-turned hostel bedroom, and distorted the perspective. I added a cat sleeping in the sun. I borrowed a yellow train from another one of my paintings, and put it in the distance out the window. Through the juxtaposition of these elements, a new psychological space is created. I imagine it as a room with warmth and mystery, where the past and the future exist simultaneously and the perspective makes the viewer feel a little off-kilter.

There is also the experiential part of painting that can't be expressed well in writing. My scientific brother makes fun of me because I can be mesmerized by a wall. He once asked, "Art time is slow time, isn't it?" I realize that he was implying slow as in mentally challenged, but it was nevertheless an astute observation. This level of seeing is a kind of mindfulness. A meditation in experience that one must patiently acquire through frequent, careful looking. The subtle change from cool to warm across a surface and the soft patterning of light rays as they bounce and scatter between objects is a kind of poetry. Through imitation of life I have opened myself to see new worlds, to slow time and read the mystery unfolding everywhere in light and shadow.

My photos from everyday life as well as my travel photos form the bulk of my source imagery. From these images the mass transit systems of New York, London, Berlin, and Paris have emerged as a metaphor for the modern lives of my characters. Trains and Subways are an interesting blend of the mundane and adventurous to me. I am simply amazed by how they are full of people of all ages, socio-economic backgrounds, nationalities, and cultures. So many people are together side by side in a daily physical space, but remain individually distinct. There is also the hint of my beloved science fiction. People riding the subway are sometimes moving sixty miles per hour in the darkness while simultaneously standing still. The moving car becomes a space for inner reflection. The fundamental questions emerge: Where are they going? What are they doing? What is important to them? In my painting, Crowded Train, the main character is fully rendered, and the surrounding characters are gestures. To me this implies that his relationship to the other riders is fleeting and unimportant; they are together in the same space, yet mentally separated.

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In order to accentuate my concerns as an artist, I manipulate contemporary understandings of visual language as a means to conjure a range of effects: self-reflection, romance, longing, isolation, naïveté, preoccupation, detachment, and so on. For example, if I want to depict someone as isolated I will paint them in a different manner than everything else, and make the space larger by deepening the perspective. I frequently break up representational painting with areas of abstract gesture. I also use cues from the visual languages of photography and cinematography. For example, I adopt the language of still photography for motion: blurring the paint in a directional pattern to represent physical movement and by association the passage of time. I employ a cinema's technique of a hard and soft focus, combined with different stages of image development, as a way to draw attention toward particular subjects. In *Waiting on the Platform* I used a long horizontal format, mimicking a theater screen. In this work I wanted to exceed the natural field of vision and force the viewer to look back and forth across the painting. This format reinforces the painting's internal drama of a fast moving train depicted against the stillness of a main vertical figure.

My work is meant to be mysterious, containing layers, subtlety, and undertones that are revealed slowly through looking. Sometimes I hide secret objects in the painting or have multiple implications between objects and the title. In *Hauptbahnhof*, the viewer first sees a vast green landscape, then discovers that what at first read as landscape is a large interior space painted in green marks. Once the eyes adjust to the intense color they can perceive escalators and people on different levels. Next, the viewer may see the connection between appearance and content: The interior of the glass and steel architectural space has become a literal landscape.

I enjoy the subtle poetics in the act of painting and later, in looking. My artwork is most essentially about the exploration of human relationships projected empathically onto a broad range of scenery. This shadow world of painting offers me an unrestrained freedom to explore my own relationships and sense of self.