

Listen to the Paint: Harriet Yale Russell



Above: Harriet Yale Russell, *Chasing Shapes*, gouache on paper, 22.25" × 30.25".

Opposite top to bottom: Harriet Yale Russell, *Pangea*, gouache on paper, 22.25" × 30.25".

Harriet Yale Russell, *White Horses on the Black Sea*, gouache on paper, 17" × 20.5".

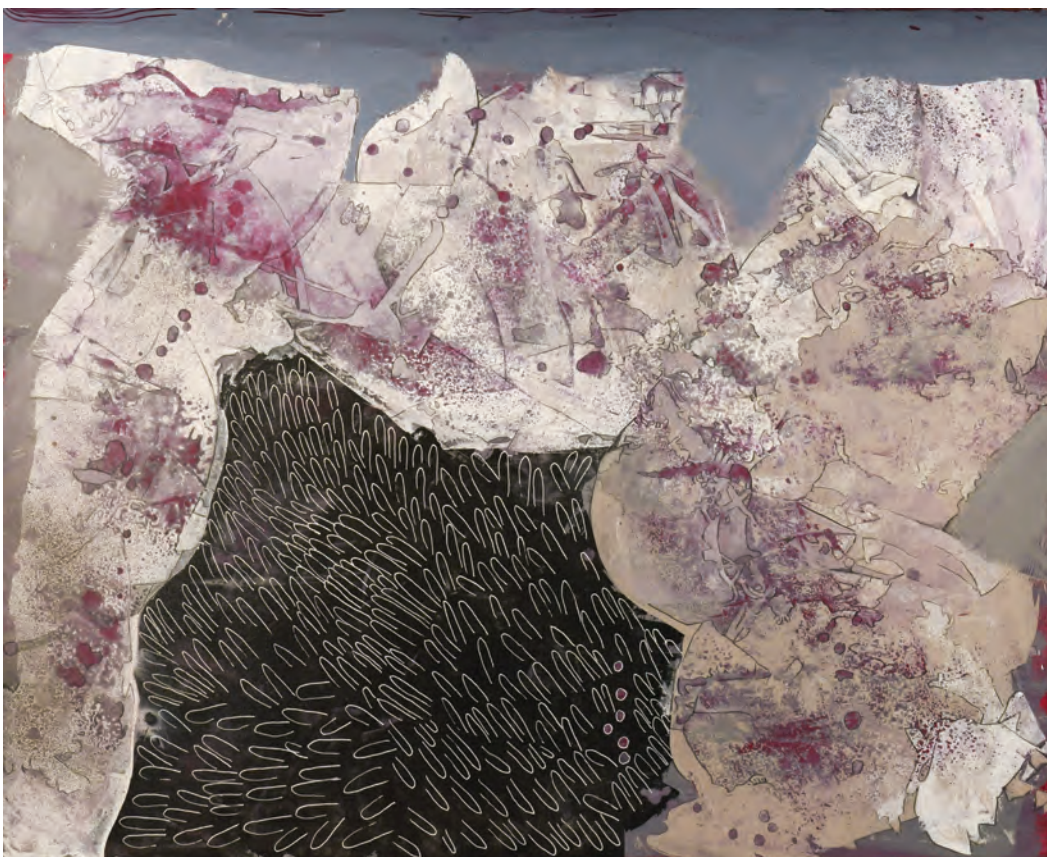
To visit the studio of artist Harriet Yale Russell is to enter the fervently creative mind of its occupant made manifest. Here, stacks of heavy watercolor paper; there, an easel displaying a work in progress; over there, an inadvertent collage of works on paper layered on a wall. On a worktable are an artist's expected brushes and paints, along with less conventional tools: handmade tissue stencils, inks, and toothbrushes. Post-it notes scatter surfaces in the studio: "Listen to the paint"; "New? Give it time"; "Color in one place only." Classical music pipes from a radio in the corner—"Music is my driver," says Russell. "I try to be neat but am often overtaken by pots of paint," she says, laughing. This somewhat anarchic environment belies the disciplined work schedule of the artist who works here as many hours as possible in a day.

Russell grew up in Rochester, New York, and attended a progressive school whose motto was "To thine own self be true," a maxim to which she has tried to remain true throughout her life. She attended the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, where she taught etching for ten years. She received her MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute, where, after traveling and painting in the Azores and Portugal for 18 months, she taught drawing for two years in Richard Diebenkorn's teaching studio. She moved to Cuba, New Mexico, in 1992, and in 2017 to Santa Fe, where she now lives and works full time.

Primarily a painter of large-scale abstracts, Russell has shifted her focus in the last three years. "When the pandemic hit, it changed everything. It was hard on me, but also wonderful." Her current body of work is a response to and exploration



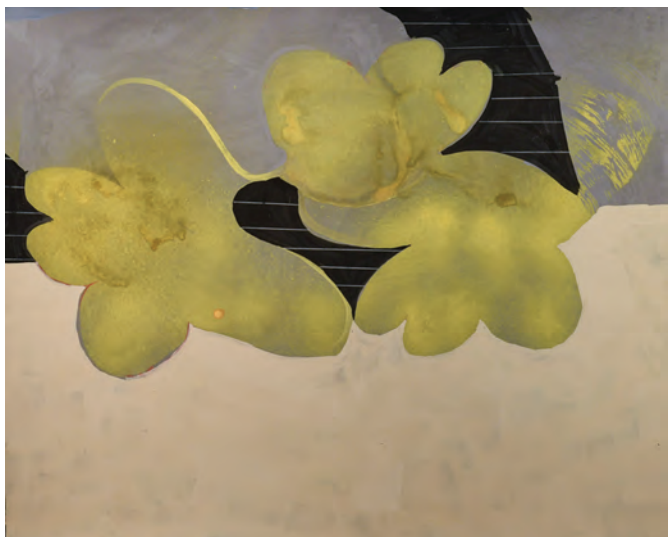
of her experience of the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and nightmares. Russell revels in the freedoms of abstraction, even on a smaller scale. “Your only restriction is yourself,” she says. While her subjects are serious, Russell enjoys playing with graphic elements and media—in person, her very present sense of humor is a contrast with the solemnity of her themes. Her work is smaller and





darker than before, yet more playful. “I’m much more focused than ever before—I’m doing something very personal.”

In a series called *Nightmares*, Russell explores her feelings about the pandemic in smaller works. “It was a scary time—I was alone. I needed something dark here.” She worked from impulse to impulse in black and white gouache on gray paper, with occasional focal points of subtle color. Combinations of geometric and amorphous shapes play with the concepts of the clear and the unclear. Russell explores how she works, playing with values and shapes in the highly flexible medium of gouache. Dripping, scraping, and overpainting, the artist works through techniques, composition, and shapes.



When Russia’s invasion of Ukraine began, in February 2022, Russell felt it keenly; not only because it was a cataclysmic world event, but also because it was personal—she has family in Poland. Inspired by maps, many of the works in her series *Ukraine* straddle the line between drawing and painting and evoke landscapes as seen from above—topographical features, roads, towns, train tracks. *White Horses on a Black Sea* is an aerial perspective on whitecaps on the Baltic Sea; in another painting, *Moving Ukraine*, Russell envisions moving Ukraine to the Caribbean for a rest.



“We never know what’s going to happen,” Russell says. “I could make a painting that saves the world so we don’t have wars, so we’re kind to each other. You can’t *really* do that, but you can do something that affects the viewer. I just hope my work goes out and speaks to someone!”

—Mara Christian Harris

Top to bottom: Harriet Yale Russell, *Moving Ukraine*, gouache on paper, 16.75” x 20.75”.

Harriet Yale Russell, *Yearn for Softened Edges*, gouache on paper, 16.75” x 20.5”.

Harriet Yale Russell, *War on Snow*, gouache on paper, 17” x 20.75”.