

TOWN&COUNTRY

At 79, Pat Steir Just Completed Her Largest Installation to Date

by Adam Rathe
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JEAN-FRANÇOIS JAUSSAUD / COURTESY LÉVY GORVY.

The painter's upcoming Washington, D.C. exhibition promises to be one of the year's must-sees.

Ask the painter Pat Steir what she'd like viewers to take away from her work, and she doesn't immediately give a concrete answer. "I never hope for what an audience will get out of an exhibition," Steir says, sitting at a table in a sunny corner of her cavernous studio on Manhattan's far West side. "Because the audience is a group of individuals, and different individuals take away different things."

Still, it's safe to assume that one thing almost everyone who encounters Steir's work this winter might feel is amazed. After all, the 79-year-old painter's next exhibition, "Color Wheel," opening today, will be comprised of 30 paintings made specifically for the nearly 400 linear feet that make up the circular inner gallery of Washington, D.C.'s Hirshhorn Museum.

The massive undertaking, which took close to 10 months to complete, is Steir's largest installation to date and comes on the heels of a similarly ambitious project that saw 11 new paintings, each seven feet tall, installed in the lobby of Philadelphia's Barnes Foundation. (Steir isn't only a presence in museums; she shows with the Lévy Gorvy gallery in New York and in 2018 one of her paintings sold at auction for more than \$2 million.) When pressed to consider what she wants people faced with her work to feel, the artist relents.

"I hope they get that life is very short and you should enjoy its beauty," she says. "That's my ultimate goal."

How do you prepare yourself to be creative?

First of all, I determine a subject—not how a work will look, but what the theme is—and then I work every day, no matter



THE HIRSHHORN MUSEUM, IN WASHINGTON, D.C., WILL EXHIBIT PAT STEIR'S "COLOR WHEEL" BEGINNING OCTOBER 24, 2019. TONY SAVINO / GETTY IMAGES

what. I also do a meditation practice and that's a kind of preparation. It's not that I meditate on what the work will be, I just relax myself.

What place do you find most conducive to work?

Here [in my studio]. I like the light. It's north light, and it's very good. Before I had another space in this building with south light and it was too bright. This is perfect.

What one element is absolutely necessary for your process?

To begin. It's necessary to begin, and I start every painting with an underpainting of a light, bright mixed green. That's necessary because it's paint on the canvas, to not be afraid of the white field.

What time of day do you prefer to work?

Between noon and six or seven in the evening. I'm not a good person in the morning.

What's your go-to snack?

I'm a nibbler and I eat all the time. Have an apple?

How do you take your coffee?

With half and half, no sugar.

Who's your favorite collaborator?

Evelyn Hankins, [a curator] at the Hirshhorn. She invited me to do a project of site-specific paintings with a two or three week installation window. That would be impossible,

so I suggested this project and Evelyn really loved it—better than the one we first discussed. And this I could take 10 months to do.

What do you do to procrastinate?

I really don't procrastinate, it's not what I do. I get very nervous around people who say, "I'll do that later." I decide to do something, and I do it. And I don't judge my work while I'm doing it at all. When it's finished, then I look at it. I'm not an abstract painter in the sense that I struggle with it. I do what I set out to do, and if it doesn't work out I trust I can see that.

It's said that genius is one percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration. What is that ratio like for you?

50-50. I don't think I'm a genius, so 50-50 is an exaggeration. This was a project about mixing color; some canvases have five layers and others up to 11. If you get close, you can see that what looks like flat color has a lot of thin layers to it. It's like a journey... This is not an ordinary color wheel; this is my color wheel. It's not an exact science.

What's your dream project?

This is it.

What have you learned from failure?

To do it again. If a painting fails, do another painting. Do more.

What's your favorite creation thus far?

I haven't seen this project installed, but what I'm working on is always my favorite.

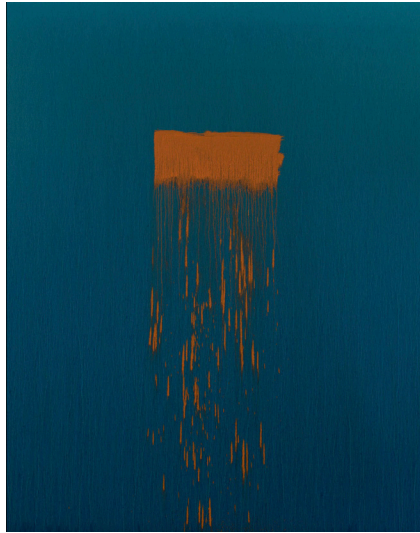
What do you hope your creative legacy will be?

I want to move at least one person to think, it's wonderful to be alive.

PAT STEIR



"SEVEN" BY PAT STEIR.
ALEX MUNRO



"TWENTY" BY PAT STEIR.
ALEX MUNRO



"THIRTEEN" BY PAT STEIR.
ALEX MUNRO