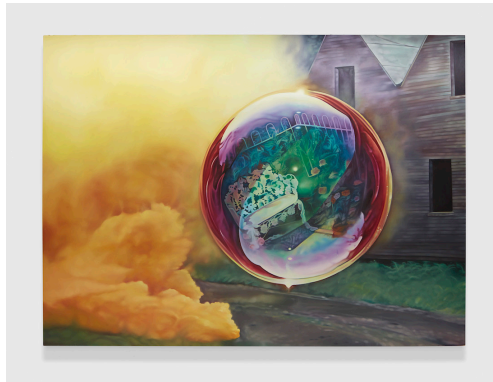


ARTnews

How I Made This: Capturing the Primal Appeal of Iridescence

by Angelica Frey
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Ariana Papademetropoulos, *Espulsione dalla discoteca* (2020)

"I really want my paintings to be like you're going inside an opal," the Los Angeles-based painter and curator Ariana Papademetropoulos said.

Papademetropoulos's art, which has been exhibited at spaces including Vito Schnabel Gallery in New York, Jeffrey Deitch in Los Angeles, and Soft Opening in London, is often classified as "hyperrealistic," "surrealist," or "symbolist." She paints large-scale interior scenes that include a shimmering portal into a slightly alternate reality. These portals open onto detailed renditions of shells, flower petals, and butterflies, which could be still-life paintings were it not for a feminine gazing eye at their center, or exterior landscapes invaded by outsized soap bubbles that reflect parallel worlds rather than their surroundings.

Through a hyper saturated color palette, her paintings faithfully and convincingly recreate what, depending on who you ask (or on what object Papademetropoulos is focusing on in a particular painting) is called opalescence, pearlescence, or iridescence. Naturally occurring iridescence, the one you see in feathers, fish scales, seashells, and pearls, is fickle and mutable, and, as photographs can easily attest, it is hardly captured in still, 2D images, since the colors we see change with the angle of observation and the angle of illumination. "There is a scientific explanation as to why I like iridescence, why humans like iridescence, because anything that's shiny, is embedded, in a primal way, into us," she said. "We like it because it reminds us of water."

Papademetropoulos feels especially attuned to colors. "I think I might see more colors than normal people," she

said, trying to rationalize a process that has always come naturally to her. She realized her perception of color might be different from others in an encounter with a bird. She was in a boutique and had become obsessed with a taxidermied bird, which she describes as "rainbow-colored." "I remember showing a bunch of my friends and they were like, 'Ariana, it's grey. It's not rainbow, I'm sorry,'" she recalled. "I don't understand why nobody else can see that."

Papademetropoulos guided ARTnews through her creative process as she unifies her subjects – interior design, bubbles, and the natural world – through the theme of iridescence. "I only paint with oil," she said. "Acrylics are made out of plastic, and oils are made from minerals." The organic ingredients lend her work a special quality, according to the artist. "There's ground-up crystal, ground-up flowers. I like using rabbit-skin glue to prime the canvas. I like the paintings to have a feeling of something that's real, like there's energy," she said. Painting with oil "will give a certain shine and a certain dimension that acrylic could never do because it's plastic."

Water as a portal

To create her surreal interior-themed paintings, such as *Even the stars in the sky are a mess*, in which a winged horse erupts into a tastefully-decorated drawing room in a prismatic display of light, Papademetropoulos simply starts by printing out a photograph from a magazine and spilling water over a portion of it. The result is a splotch with a color scheme that is slightly altered from the original color composition, with the edges displaying an iridescent

ARIANA PAPADEMETROPOULOS

gradient the same way that water bleeds ink. The artist then fills that area with surrealist details: marine life, naked women, or supernatural creatures.

The palette is a little bit retro. "A lot of images I like are like Kodachrome or hand tinted," she said. She is also partial to the cartoonish realism of Gothic-themed Romance-novel covers and the Chromakey-centric aesthetic of early color TV from Italy, like the Medieval-inspired romp *Stryx* from 1978.

Universally beautiful things

Papademetropoulos's visual vocabulary is rife with seashells, butterflies, flowers, and crystals. "The beauty of a flower, the beauty of a seashell, the beauty of a crystal is something that is universally appreciated; you can't argue about the beauty of a rose," she said. "I think there was guilt: at first I kind of felt like these are trivial things, but now I'm tapping into appreciating things that are universally viewed as beautiful and being okay with that. It's something that speaks to me and speaks to other people."

True to her practice, all of those objects are iridescent, and her recent painting, *The Mother of Pearl*, a spiral-like shell, posed a particular artistic challenge. "I was really wondering if I could achieve that luminescence, and that light," she said, referring to the pearlescent mother-of-pearl-sheen that casts mint-green, yellow, and orange highlights on a lilac surface. She painted it in many successive layers. "I almost felt like a shell was born, where you paint the first coat and then you go back in and go back in. You can see that there's a gradient of color in every spiral."

All about vanitas

If there's one painting that fully embodies Papademetropoulos' yearning to transport the viewer inside an opal, it's *Espulsione Dalla Discoteca*, which is part of her "Bubble" series of paintings (seen at top). They were the centerpiece of her recent solo show, *Unweave a Rainbow*, at Vito Schnabel Projects.

In the piece, a thick, orange cloud of smoke heralds in (or perhaps pushes away) a bubble whose surface is as shiny and smooth as a cabochon stone, and whose iridescence is highly saturated. The bubble itself contains an idealized home environment, similar to those that appear in her interior series. On a surface level, it's a painting that condenses the tenets of millennial aesthetics (soft, warm colors in the cloud of smoke and iridescence in the bubble) but it's actually a multi-layered tribute to Mannerist and 17th-century art.

Bubbles, in fact, are a trope in vanitas paintings, which are a meditation on the transience of life. Artistic sources for this series, and this painting in particular, include Karel Dujardin's *Boy Blowing Bubbles*, a 1663 painting in which a cherubic youth precariously balances on soap bubbles on a seashell while other bubbles float nearby, and Correggio's *Jupiter and Io*, (1532-3) in which Zeus, disguised as thick fog, makes love to the nymph Io. The way Correggio rendered the fog gave it a sheer physicality; the viewer can detect the deity's face and hand. "The moment when you recognize that there is a hand and a face, there's such a perfect balance of realism and obstruction," said Papademetropoulos. "That's what I would strive to have in my work, because it's this balance that never gets old."



Ariana Papademetropoulos, *Even the stars in the sky are a mess* (2019)



Ariana Papademetropoulos, *The Mother of Pearl*