



Medrie MacPhee

Words Fail Me





# Words Fail Me

Medrie MacPhee

*Night's Noontime* 2019 *Whiteout* 2018 oil and mixed media on canvas 98 x 62 inches (each)

TIBOR  NAGY

Contents

7 Med School – Essay by Nicole Eisenman

18 Excerpts from A Conversation Between  
Amy Sillman and Medrie MacPhee

41 Biography

43 Acknowledgments

# Med School

Nicole Eisenman

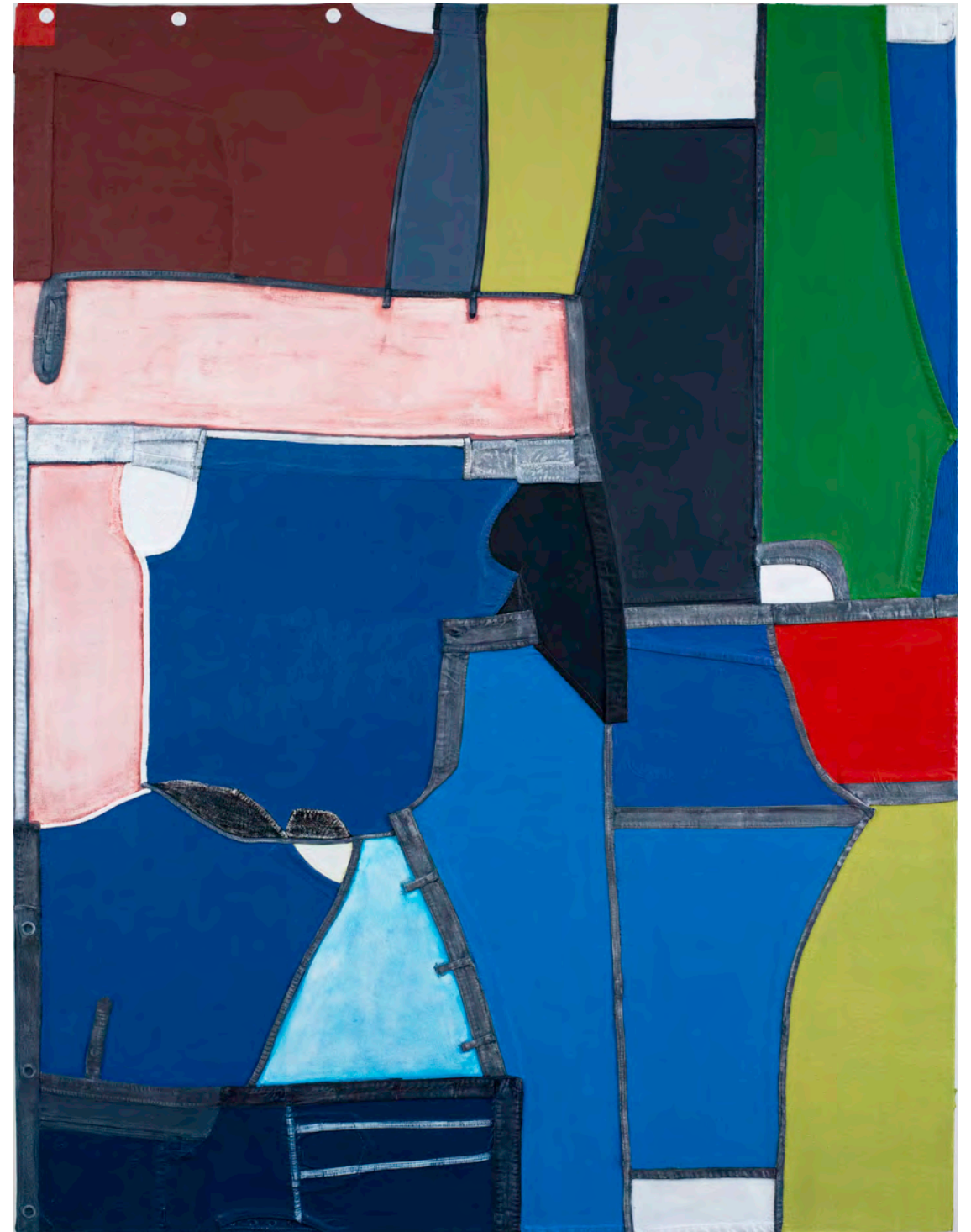
Medrie MacPhee became my Art Doctor in 2002, when we were both teaching classes at Bard College. Medrie had been teaching—and painting—for longer than I had, and on the two-hour drives we shared from the city to the school we would compare notes on shows we had seen that week and she would give me advice: how to structure a painting class, what kinds of projects to assign. Probably because her advice was so good, we began trading studio visits. An early studio of mine she visited was in Gowanus, across from what used to be the Dodgers Stadium; it was possible to see her, looking wiry and boyishly elegant in the raglan-sleeved baseball tees she preferred, as having just come from a game. Medrie’s readiness was impressive: “On a scale of 1 to 10,” she would say, “how tough do you want it?” (I usually opted for 7 or 8, never doubting she was capable of 10.) She is an uncanny diagnostician. It’s almost supernatural how quickly, how adroitly she can point out a painting’s problem. A color that’s too “keyed up,” as she puts it. A corner that looks neglected. An area that should recede but is stubbornly seeking attention. Medrie is a formalist with a careful, intelligent eye; she knows what a painting needs to bring it into harmony with itself. Sometimes she recommends a surgery that feels too invasive, even scary. But she is inevitably correct.

The first studio I visited of Med’s was above a bakery in a tenement building in Chinatown. I bought pork buns and coffee and walked up the narrow stairs to the second floor where Medrie and her husband, Harold, lived and worked. In the modest front room overlooking the Bowery, Med pulled out a series of large and mid-sized paintings. They depicted what looked like the remains of buildings that had fallen apart or been demolished. Things suspended in space, strange piles of architecture rendered in flat milky colors. A vision of awkward elegance.

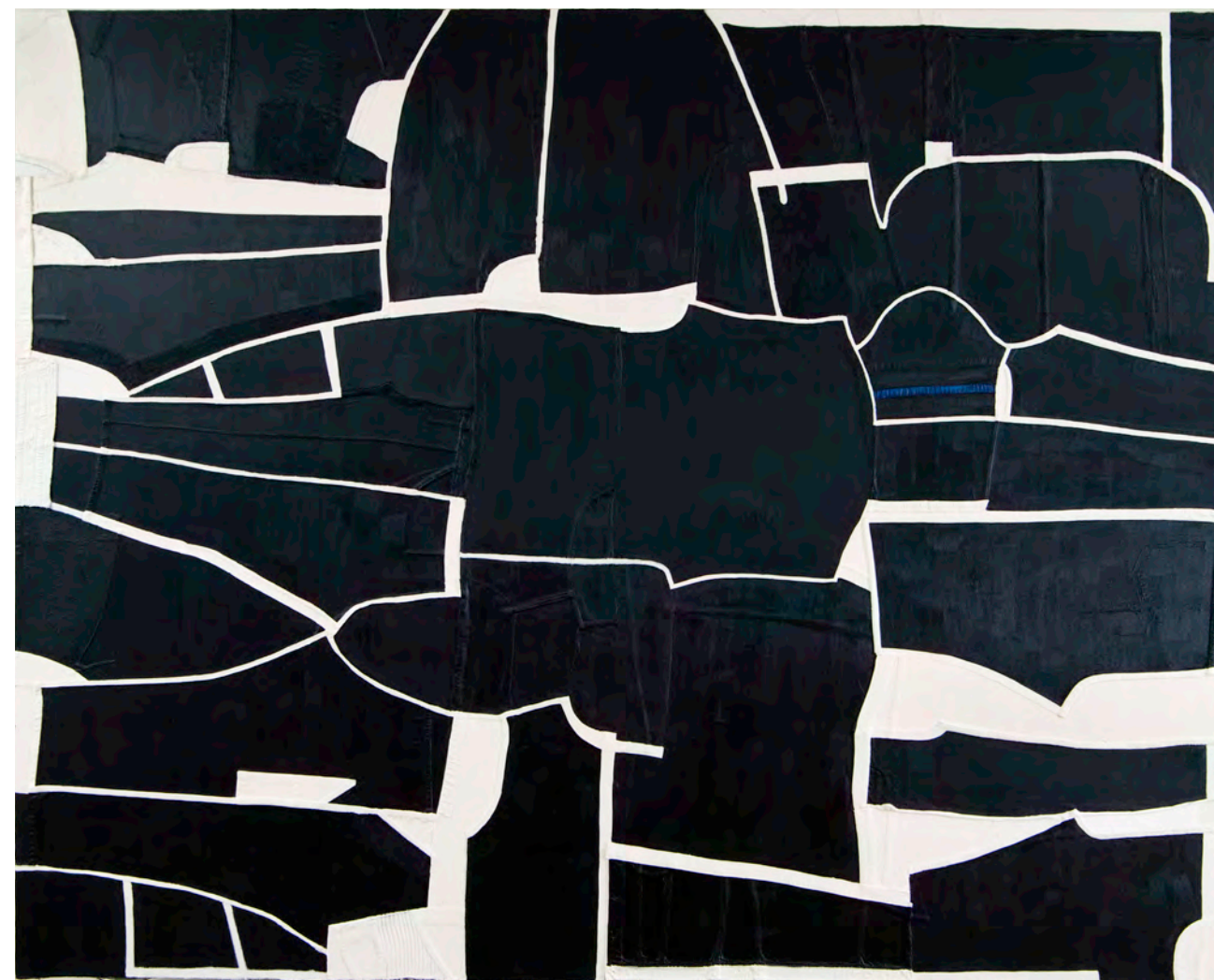
To watch the unfolding of this vision has been hugely satisfying. Content, for Medrie, has swelled and swelled and swallowed the canvas whole. Now instead of abstracted buildings we see complete abstraction that has the rigor and enormity of great architecture, without any of the pomp. Med’s materials are as modest as her handling of material is brilliant, the collaged pieces of fabric demonstrating the textural possibilities of flatness while avoiding the dread morass of paint marks. Her new works can seem anatomical or maplike, depending on their (or the viewer’s?) orientation. Sometimes informed by the clothing they are cut from, for instance a splayed leg or sleeve, the interior shapes often have two aspects: the flatter middle and the raised, lumpy edge. Paint floats above, occasionally ignoring the boundaries suggested by the seams and creating a gestaltist or cloudlike shape, like a shadow on sunlit fields.

Progress takes an immense amount of work, work that is done in the belief that there is somewhere only you can go. The payoff is discovering something new in the very personal problems you create for yourself. Medrie’s work, however, is too smart to insist on its newness. Her paintings show how exciting deliberation can be.















# Excerpts from A Conversation Between Amy Sillman and Medrie MacPhee

**Amy Sillman:** You’ve made big changes in your work over the years, arriving most recently at this very physical, tactile kind of abstraction. Do you feel that this newer work is a big change, too, or do you see your whole body of work as having one continuous through-line?

Medrie MacPhee: For most of my painting life, I found images the best way to convey my preoccupations. But I arrived at a point where I was less interested in story and narrative. I wanted to make work where the content was inherent. Actually, the thing that finally changed things for me was the idea of a matrix.

**AS:** What do you mean by a matrix? Or what is your matrix?

MM: The concept of a matrix presents an armature or a frame out of which something occurs. It is multipurpose and open ended and is used as a beginning point by everyone from scientists to feminist theorists. The format and the resulting process are inextricably bound.

**AS:** So can you walk us through how the idea affected your work in a more specific way?

MM: My matrix is a kind of “scaffolding.” The scaffolding is the outcome of randomly gluing second-hand and discount clothing onto the surface of a stretched canvas. What I end up with initially is a flat structure of seams, shapes, decorative details, textures, maybe a zipper or a button. All of these different particularities are then erased through a white washing of gesso. I have no idea what the matrix will look like until after the whitewash. In order to realize the potential of the scaffolding—the loose grid of low-rise clothing on canvas suggesting shapes, moves, and colors—I begin to paint, to improvise, to erase, to add more stuff, until the painting fulfills the promise of the original set of conditions. It’s finally out of that matrix that the painting gradually arrives.

**AS:** So this idea really changed the method of your work, its development...its space?

MM: Exactly. For the longest time I viewed my paintings as having a kind of spatial arena where I could move things around, distort and play with perspective as well as figure/ground relationships. I was obsessed by how the dimensions themselves could help maintain a sense of disequilibrium or an off-balance feeling in the final image. Over time the depth of field kind of kept contracting until it finally disappeared in a way that I hadn’t expected.

**AS:** I’m lucky to know you well enough to know that after you moved to Queens, you started regularly raiding the local 99 cent store for clothes and objects to deconstruct. And many of our friends have been the recipients of your amazing deconstructions! The fact that this started as a joke/gift for friends is interesting to me! The idea that you were working with a gift economy, not a commodity one. Something freely given.

MM: The search for cheap clothing and then the disassembling of it and the sewing of it back together into wearable collaged clothing was deeply satisfying. I treated an outfit like a painting where I considered things like opacity and transparency, shape and line, color and texture. And it was this act that eventually translated into the paintings.

**AS:** There’s a palpable sense of humor in some of your work: for example, the “future species” series had an animated, burlesque, even grotesque look, because they were made up from composite sources. Is that also something still in effect in your new work? The humor?



Many Rivers to Cross 2002 vinyl polymer on canvas 65 × 98 inches

MM: The burlesque aspect of the “future species” was that the characters were still psychologically burdened by human emotion. You could see them getting into jams with each other, in need of consolation, fleeing the scene. In the new work the humor is more embodied by the cheap materials in a fine art form.

**AS:** Interesting: “burdened by human emotion”—that’s a critical way to think about your own feelings, and it interests me: do you draw a comparison between those cheap clothing materials you use,

**and the idea of emotion as a “cheap material”? As in, being sentimental? Or being melodramatic?**

MM: That’s a great question. But if there is any emotion attached to the cheap clothing , it’s a sense of poignancy and not sentimentality.

**AS: I’m interested in this way you talk about the time in the paintings. It seems like your earlier work more often depicted an image of some kind of just past, like something collapsing that had been there. But then you started working on “the future” —and now you’ve changed to looking squarely at “what it is” —the present?**

MM: Right. I feel like I’ve moved from the long shadows of the past and have got up to speed. That the present feels more pressing. I think that as an artist you create a set of conditions that mirrors things in yourself that even you might not understand.

**AS: Also just now, you said an artificial world allows you to “create or negate” — which highlights something for me about how you see this greater terrain that you position yourself in—for example, when you talked about “creating/negating,” or how this “past/future” time works—it seems like you think of it as a kind of binary, or maybe a continuum, and you kind of work with both ends of the spectrum. Does that make any sense to you?**

MM: Hmmm. Well I know a binary can have a momentary “transitional” state. An in-between state, like with a coin —neither heads nor tails. In the representational paintings I messed around with the perspective to enhance a feeling of slight vertigo and in the “future species” the color



*Pop Goes the Weasel* 1999 vinyl polymer on canvas 65 × 98 inches  
Collection of the National Gallery of Canada



*The Precariats* 2017 collaged clothing

relationships could create a sense of imbalance. Maybe that duality that you speak of is my wanting to take the viewer into a psychic gap.

**AS: How does that gap FEEL?**

MM: Not sure if this describes a “feeling” ...but it’s an essential space and one that is strangely impersonal at the same time. A place, to borrow from Philip Guston, where everyone — all the critics, the artist pals, other paintings, even YOU — leave the studio in order to create the painting. So what’s left is your body, higher thinking and the reptile brain in some inchoate collaboration.

**AS: Over time you have unburdened yourself from the rules of depiction and yet you still depict the feeling of being a witness to something, even if it’s the unfolding logic of your own work. You got rid of perspective, then you got rid of the creature/figures, whited out the colors and textures and you ended up with this procedure: making something that springs from, yet in some way opposes, the thing it’s based on...?**

MM: At this point, through this process, I’ve been able to reverse things so rather than taking you into a space, the painting actually puts you up close to the surface.

**AS: But you imbue a sense of joy in that sense of being up close—I think your new work feels unburdened. It’s not burdened with the task of representation. You assert that you are not a fiction writer in the new work. But you do represent your world by obtaining the materials where you live, and then taking it apart and rebuilding it.**

MM: The whiting out involves erasure to bring me to the underlying structure—that more abstracted place in order to move forward.

**AS: But the gluing versus the fixing seems like two very different impulses. Whiting out as you’re describing—it is a kind of leveling the field, like plowing a field, or ironing or something... You’re building and then whiting these surfaces out, so that you can do them again.**

MM: Yeah that’s good...the destruction or burying of the clothes into a new “field” is critical to the process even at the same time as there is something inherently absurd and funny about the activity.

**AS: That’s the kind of contradiction I am trying to get at in your work throughout. In this sense your operating system is very complicated and contains its own consciousness of consciousness. Not just depicting things, but showing the paradox of perception itself, in its very materiality. Maybe this is related to the process of abstraction itself.**





Haute Relax Popova 2021 collaged clothing

MM: Yes, in a way abstraction is never pure. There’s a kind of perverse-ness to abstraction when an artist makes a self-conscious reference to the world they’re taking in, absorbing, but then making it abstract.

**AS: Your work does feel impure, and restless. You deal with these remains in the form of what you find in 99 cent stores, which is essentially kind of tragic, nodding to a kind of doomed situation. That’s also funny—like a kind of pessimistic productivism.**

MM: I like the idea of “pessimistic productivism”!! I feel that our time on the planet is highly provisional. Basically what you do is to cobble to-gether, you scavenge, you try this, you try that. And I don’t know whether it’s doomed, but there is some pleasure in resourcefulness, in figuring out, “Okay this is not looking promising. What can we do with this?”

**AS: Yeah, it’s a kind of desperate improvisational act, putting yourself on the line, throwing yourself into this moment. It seems like the improvisation is part of the freedom you allow yourself in your work. In a sense you have always established a kind of freedom for yourself, by not knowing even yourself what’s gonna happen ’til you do it.**

MM: Yes! That’s the most exciting part. Both in my early work as well as the present, I’m evoking that psychic space and one that emerges out of surprise and improvisation.

**AS: To respond to a system, to keep making new stuff that you don’t know in advance takes incredible trust and rigor. It makes me think of those Gee’s Bend quilts.**

MM: So fantastic. They embody everything that matters—improvisation, resourcefulness, gorgeous materiality, community, history!

**AS: Yeah, quilting is a way of working that both deals with the harshness of conditions in which the thing has been created, and offers a pleasure in being there, being made. And it seems like your studio operating principles are also partly about a scrappy kind of speed: “Get the stuff, cut it up, tack it on, move it around, paint it white, start again.” That does have a different relationship to time. Not that your work is churned out quickly, but that the decisions you make while building it are made by the seat of your pants.**

MM: Yes. And it’s something language doesn’t lend itself to very well...this way of working. People are generally much more comfortable when a process can be defined and its intentions laid out in language. Maybe it’s because there is a precision in language that is eluded by cer-tain forms of expression.

**AS: You said before how hard it is to talk about your work, and I feel that you’ve embraced a way of working that CAN’T be talked about,**

**totally. It is resistant to narrative. Not that you’re not conceptual and linguistic in your own ways, but trying to turn away from language as THE only matrix, and to search for a visual matrix in distinction from a linguistic one. But there is something funny going on too.**

MM: That’s exactly right. I’m not making fun of bargain basement clothing, much of which I wear myself! It’s more that the clothing has no dignity when it’s being pawed over in a large bin. There’s a kind of Beckett-ian humor in elevating these sad remainders into a new and loftier realm.

**AS: Yes, an attitude of, “it is what it is.” I think at some inner point, your work is a wish NOT to necessarily explain something.**

MM: I told you once that I’d wanted to be a writer from childhood on. But I discovered that language failed me at a critical moment.

**AS: This whole interview should be called “words fail me.” (LOL) All the “failure” you’ve experienced has been an opportunity for some regrowth, or weed, to come out of a field that wasn’t worked right, or was abandoned, or that you’ve gone over twice. You lit-erally moved away from narrative TWICE, once in language and then in the strictures of so-called representational painting.**

MM: Yes, something just popped into my head: it’s about the spirit in which I make things. I called a painting that I did recently “Favela.” It reminded me of being in Rio de Janeiro. I was so amazed and touched by the favelas. The way the residents painted their houses in incredible colors and details and what they did with the pathways connecting them all together. I just loved it. I thought it was a triumph, and in some ways, it has something to do with my feelings of humans as a part of a very failed species, both magnificent and terrible.







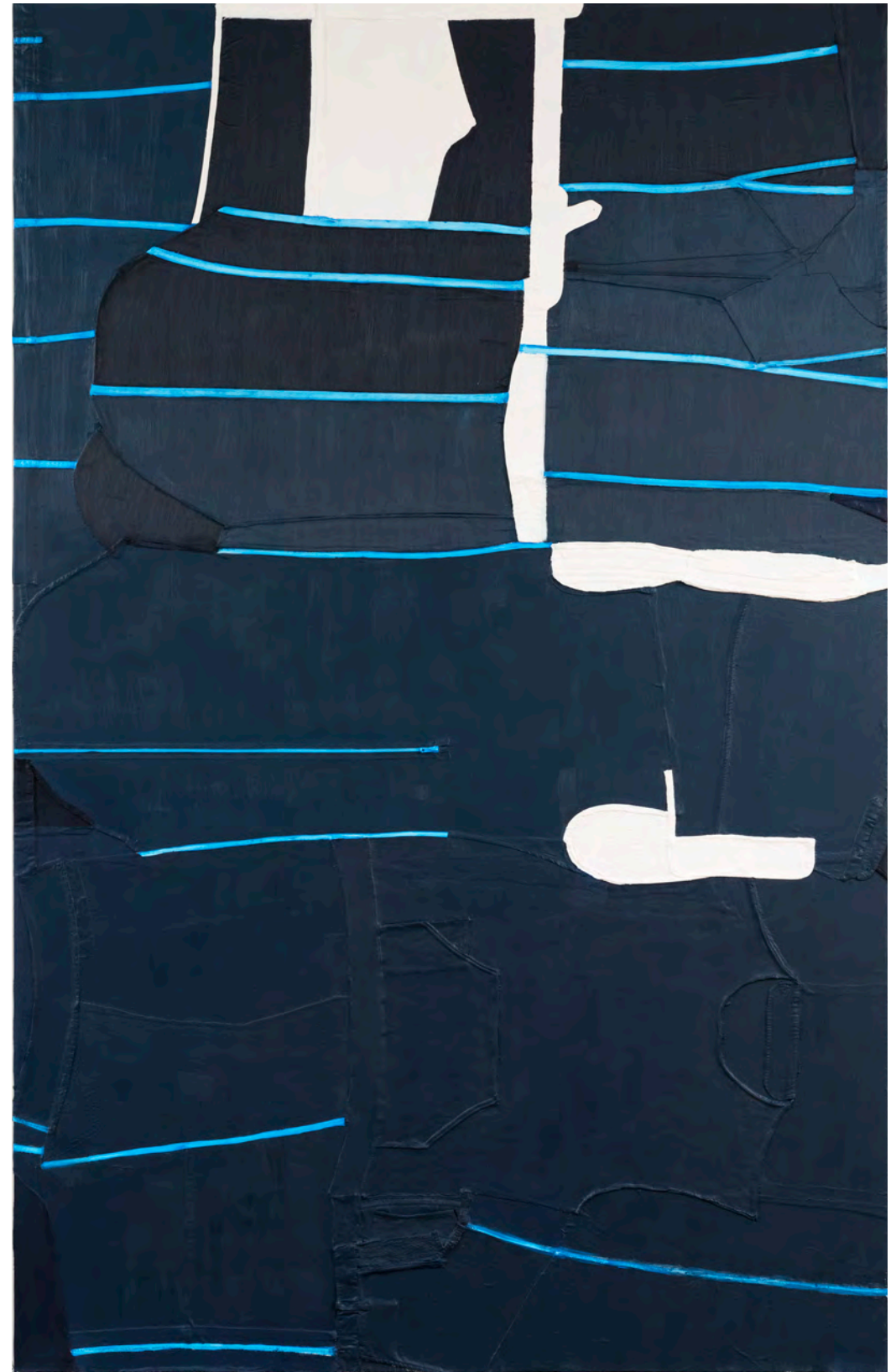
















## Medrie MacPhee

Medrie MacPhee was born in Edmonton, Alberta, and has resided in New York City since 1976. She received a B.F.A. from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design.

MacPhee’s previous work can be divided into distinct bodies such as *The Industrial Series*, *The Floating World*, *Future Species*. Architecture served as metaphor in describing a psychological and historical response to crisis and repair. Her visual representations were built on construction, momentum, collapse and renewal—adding up to “a distinct sensation of being up against an unnameable reality.” [Christina Kee, artcritical.com July 6, 2010]

More recently, her work has gone through a substantial shift. The use of ordinary materials—clothing with its attendant buttons, zippers, seams, decorative details collaged to the entire surface of canvas—has changed the conversation. Although the paintings are non-depictive, the identifiable “real” things in combination with the painted surfaces have created something fresh and elusive.

MacPhee relates the collaged elements of clothing to the idea of a creating a visual “matrix.” An arena of play where the “real” doesn’t overwhelm the imagined and verbal/visual language is malleable. The pauses and gaps, the symbiotic relationship between the present and absent, the subterranean level of feeling and instinct that lies under words, and the force of their undertow are reflected in the new works.

Her work has been exhibited in over thirty solo and seventy group exhibitions, in Canada, the U.S. and Europe. MacPhee is represented in various private and public collections in the U.S., Canada and Europe, including: the National Gallery of Canada; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal; the Art Gallery of Ontario; the Edmonton Art Gallery; the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria; and the Asheville Art Museum, NC.

MacPhee is a recipient of American Academy of Arts and Letters Purchase Prize Awards, a Pollock-Krasner Award, an Anonymous Was a Woman grant, a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship, a National Endowment for the Arts Grant, New York Foundation for the Arts Grants, the Elizabeth Greenshields Award, and Canada Council Established-Artist Grants. She has been a resident at the Bogliasco Foundation in Italy, the Bau Institute of the Camargo Foundation in Cassis, France, and the MacDowell Colony. She received a public art commission from Cadillac Fairview to execute a major painting for the Main Tower of the Mies van der Rohe TD Center in Toronto for 2015.

MacPhee is currently Sherri Burt Hennessey Artist-In-Residence at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York. She is represented by Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York and Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto.

**Nicole Eisenman** is a Contemporary painter, printmaker, and sculptor. She has been awarded the Guggenheim fellowship, the Carnegie Prize and is a MacArthur Foundation Fellow. Her work is in the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, The Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the Kunsthalle Zürich amongst others. In 2019 her work was featured in both the Venice Biennale and the Whitney Biennial.

**Amy Sillman** is a Contemporary painter whose body of work also includes drawings, cartoons, collage, iPhone video, zines, and writing on art. Her work is in many private and public collections, including MoMA, The Whitney, the Brandhorst Museum in Munich, the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, and The Tate Modern in London. Last fall she curated the exhibition “The Shape of Shape” for the Museum of Modern Art’s re-opening, accompanied by a zine entitled “Shapes” produced for *MoMA Magazine*.

# Acknowledgments

Amy Sillman and Nicole Eisenman are two artists who have had a profound effect on my work and thinking. I am deeply grateful to them for agreeing to contribute to this catalogue. Each in their own way is a path-breaking artist, and I am among the many who have benefited from their singular visions.

Enormous thanks to the artist Leslie Wayne who has my back in every endeavor, this one included. A special shout out and love to many others for their contributions in helping bring this catalogue to fruition, including Marina van Zuylen, Donna Masini, Lisa Baldissera and Harold Crooks.

To Andrew Arnot of Tibor de Nagy Gallery and his director Elisabeth Ivers, thank you for keeping up the struggle during this hair-raising time and giving me the opportunity to put new work out into the world.

To Nicholas Metivier and his partner Sarah Massie of the Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto, thank you for the ongoing support.

Finally I wish to acknowledge Nicole Jaffe and Piknik Press in Los Angeles, and the Pollock Krasner Foundation for its support.

# Credits

This catalogue is published on the occasion of the exhibition:

Medrie MacPhee

*Words Fail Me*

January 30 – March 6, 2021

Tibor de Nagy Gallery

11 Rivington St. New York, NY 10002

212 262 5050

info@tibordenagy.com

tibordenagy.com

ISBN 978-1-891123-00-9

Images © Medrie MacPhee

Med School © Nicole Eisenman

Conversation © Medrie MacPhee and Amy Sillman

Editorial Production: Andrew Arnot

Photography: John Berens

Design: Piknik Press

Printing: Shapco Printing

Cover:

*Take Me to the River* (detail)

2020

oil and mixed media on canvas

96 × 120 inches



TIBOR DE NAGY