

Sophia NARRETT

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Studio Visit: Artist Sophia Narrett on How an Anonymous Renaissance Painting Cycle Inspired Her Latest Feminist Embroidery

The artist is currently the subject of a solo show at Kohn Gallery in Los Angeles.

Sarah Cascone, November 18, 2020



Sophia Narrett at work in her studio. Photo courtesy of the artist.

In her vibrant embroidered works, **Sophia Narrett** paints with thread, deftly creating detailed figurative scenes tinged with fantasy, desire, and eroticism.

Her tapestries take center stage this month in “Soul Kiss,” the New York artist’s first solo show at **Kohn Gallery** in Los Angeles. Her layered thread designs, almost

Baroque in their complexity, present a fever dream of feminine sexuality, with women in ecstasy reveling in their freedom.

Narrett took up her unusual medium after earning a BA at Brown University and an MFA in painting at the Rhode Island School of Design, both in Providence. Each work is unique, shaped not by the rectangular bounds of a canvas but by the scene that's depicted, with embroidered figures and swaths of color jutting out in unexpected directions at the edges of the composition.

Ahead of the opening, we spoke with Narrett about her recent inspirations and the internal logic that guides even her most riotously colorful works.



Sophia Narrett, *Through Closed Eyes* (2020), detail. Photo courtesy of Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles.

What are the most indispensable items in your studio and why?

Aside from thread, fabric, scissors, and needles, to directly construct the pieces, access to the internet is also crucial, for research, inspiration, and background entertainment while working. Lately, I am so thankful to be in a studio with great windows and beautiful old wooden shutters. And of course, dog toys and treats are important to keep my chihuahua Merlin happy.

What is the studio task on your agenda tomorrow that you are most looking forward to?

I'm in a transition right now, as I've just finished my last piece for "Soul Kiss." I'm most excited to start building an image for a new narrative that has been percolating. Also, I'm looking forward to reorganizing my thread. When I start a piece I have it fairly organized in color piles, and as a piece progresses the palettes get wilder and wilder.



Sophia Narrett's studio. Photo courtesy of the artist.

What kind of atmosphere do you prefer when you work? Do you listen to music or podcasts, or do you prefer silence? Why?

While I am working out a narrative or designing a scene I listen to music, usually either an online radio station so I can get an unexpected playlist that matches a certain vibe, or one song on repeat for hours. While I'm sewing I listen to all kinds of things, podcasts, audiobooks, tv shows, and movies.

What trait do you most admire in a work of art? What trait do you most despise?

I love work that is vulnerable and captures something that feels relatable, especially nuanced emotions that evade verbal expression. I love when an image or object surprises you and describes something that is so immediately recognizable, but does it in an unexpected way, or when an artist is unabashed with making things that could be considered embarrassing in some way. I often respond to work that mixes humor with genuine and intense emotion, even with sadness. I like things that feel urgent, like they needed to be made in exactly the way they are, almost like they revealed themselves to the artist.

I don't like work that lacks a sense of stakes. This could mean something very different depending on the practice. It could be materially, conceptually, formally, or emotionally that work follows an internal logic and defines the rubric it should be read in terms of. But if there is no internal logic, no theoretical way that it could "fail," then there is no vulnerability and it is very boring. Having an internal logic helps a work of art to avoid becoming arbitrary. Work that risks failing is almost always exciting. Even actually failing is much better than making something safe.



Sophia Narrett at work in her studio. Photo courtesy of the artist.

What snack food could your studio not function without?

My snack foods change but a constant requirement is iced coffee, all day and all year.

When you feel stuck in the studio, what do you do to get un-stuck?

Change the music I'm listening to.

What is the last exhibition you saw (virtual or otherwise) that made an impression on you?

In January I saw *The Story of Griselda* panels, painted by an unknown artist in the late 1400s, at the [National Gallery](#) in London.

At the time when I saw the panels, I had been revising and designing the story and image for *Whisper Like a Magnet* for about a month. Seeing *The Story of Griselda* gave me a new approach to the structure of my image, and also even brought some narrative clarity.

The Story of Griselda is patriarchal and misogynistic; it links ideas of extreme submission to marital fidelity. Yet if the image is taken out of context, there is a captivating eroticism and sense of magic to the image itself, especially in the first panel. The image transcends the disturbing parable it set out to illustrate.

In my piece, it is the female character who begins the story by rescuing a man, and their dynamic subsequently becomes more complicated, as they recur five times throughout the piece.



Sophia Narrett, *Whisper Like a Magnet* (2020), detail. Photo courtesy of Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles.

If you had to put together a mood board, what would be on it right now?

The Story of Griselda, Part I: Marriage, Alice Neel's *Pregnant Julie and Algis*, excerpts from *Three Women* by Lisa Taddeo, four-leaf clovers.

"Sophia Narrett: Soul Kiss" is on view at Kohn Gallery, 1227 North Highland Avenue, Los Angeles, California, November 13, 2020–January 15, 2021.