

## In the Studio With Soumya Netrabile

Chicago-based painter Soumya Netrabile traces the development of her distinctive style.



Soumya Netrabile, *The Spell* (2020) (detail). Oil on canvas. 27.94 x 35.56 cm. Courtesy the artist.

By Ocula Advisory - 18 January 2021, Chicago

With a solo exhibition at Pt. 2 Gallery in Oakland due to open this year, Chicago-based painter Soumya Netrabile traces the development of her distinctive style.

**What brings you to the canvas? Is it a feeling that you build up to?**

I don't really wait for a feeling; I just start working. I try to switch up how I approach the canvas, just to keep myself excited and moving forward. One of my goals is to learn as much as I can about the medium and the surface, and what I can do with the surface.

I'm trying to build a relationship with the medium, and that's pretty much my primary focus. I then let my urges lead the way.

Over the years, I've learnt that there are these forms that come out of me, and I'm just going to let them come out as they will. They're constantly being reinvented and reinvestigated in different ways throughout my work.

**Did your early studies in engineering ever influence your approach to the canvas? Or has it always been very fluid?**

It might have when I first started art school, as I was also working at the time. But I don't think it's a factor now.

I'm always mixing up how I work, so fluidity is important. Sometimes I think it's a way to remake myself every time I begin a painting. So I like to try changing up my work methods.

The history of painting is so vast, and the possibilities of how to make a painting are infinite. Why shouldn't I tap into all of that? I had that realisation at the Art Institute of Chicago, where there is a phenomenal collection of work to study.

One thing I heard often at school was teachers telling students to explore options to find your style. For many years, I was very confused and frustrated, as there didn't seem to be a recognisable particularity to the way I painted. And I equated this as not having my own style or voice.

Now I realise that my voice is perhaps all these influences blended inside of me. I paint in whatever way feels relevant at the moment. So in that sense, yes, I like to stay fluid so I am free to do what I want.

**That endless possibility comes across in your work. Do you imagine your style will change much from now?**

I hope I'm evolving. It's most comfortable for me to work intuitively.

I think as long as I keep pushing myself to explore possibilities, I will keep changing. I've had people tell me that they see connections between the different trajectories of work, which makes me feel that my subconscious inclinations must be quite strong.





Soumya Netrabile, *Outliers* (2020). Oil on paper. 40.64 x 50.8 cm. Courtesy the artist.



Soumya Netrabile, *The Secret Voices* (2020). Oil on canvas. 40.64 x 50.8 cm. Courtesy the artist.



Soumya Netrabile, *Tonsil* (2020). Glazed terra cotta, wood base. 25.4 x 30.48 x 13 cm. Courtesy the artist.



Soumya Netrabile, *Collapsing Figure* (2019). Oil on canvas. 40.64 x 50.8 cm. Courtesy the artist.

**Do you return to figuration ever? Or is it always an abstract process?**

When I was at art school, I mostly concentrated on the figure. And I love people, so that was always something that was attractive to me. I love watching dance, and I love watching athletes do what they can

I took as many figure drawing and painting classes as I could, but I was not good at it. I came out of school making bad figurative-based work mixed with mystical surrealism.

I eventually strayed into abstraction, which comes more easily to me than perceptual work. Since I was young, my imagination has been a profound part of me and has offered me escape from times of boredom or difficult situations. I could always rely on that—to just float away somewhere. I find invention and abstraction comforting.

This year, I've slowly been returning to placing a figure in an environment. I don't know exactly where this may lead, but stories are starting to play a more important role in my life.

**Are there colours that you gravitate towards more than others?**

I used to gravitate towards pink, perhaps because I've always been attracted to flesh tones. With the work where I was investigating the relationship between the land and my body, pinks and reds acted as a connection between the two.

**Was it your interest in the figure that led you to ceramics?**

I came to ceramics because a friend of mine asked me to join a ceramics class. I had just had my first child and I was sort of chomping at the bit to make something. At first I was just making functional work and never thought of making sculpture.

The first sculptures I did were of these fantastical creatures. They're rather small. And they're all whistles, so you can blow on them—most of the time you blow on an orifice, and it sounds out only one note. It's not obvious that they're whistles when you look at them. They just look like creatures.

I had a show and sold most of them, and then I moved on to creating other things. I made small sculptures of the forms that are evident in some of my paintings—organ-like things with holes, tendrils, and pipes.

**Will there be any sculpture at your upcoming exhibition at Pt. 2 Gallery, or will it just be painting?**

The Pt. 2 show in Oakland will be just paintings—mostly the botanical works I've been working on over the past few months.

I've been investigating different ways of looking at plants and organic forms. The forms are mostly fictional, mostly pulled from memory.

When I hike, I bring a small sketchbook and take notes of things that pop out at me—flora, grasses, pods—as well as interesting rock formations that make up a mountain.—[O]