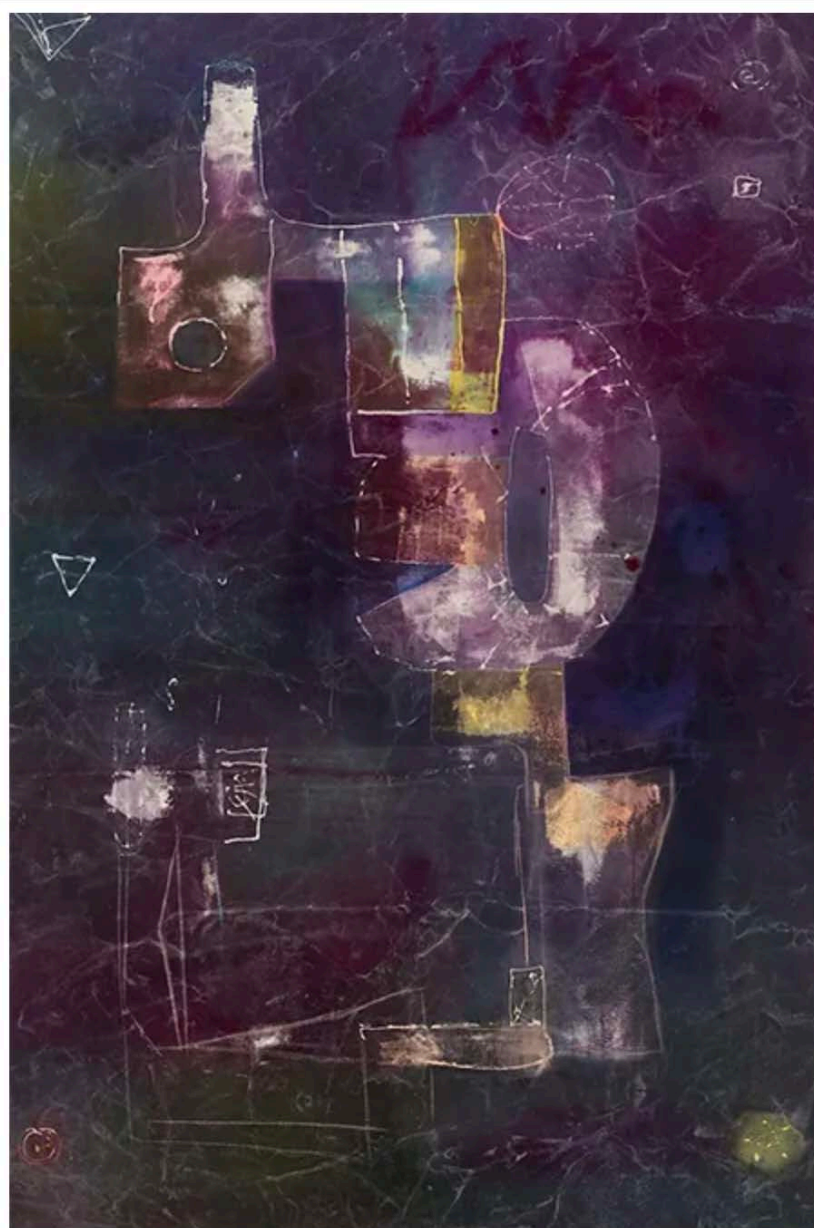


MICHELLE WASSON - A SIZABLE UNENCUMBERED AESTHETIC APPROACH

Without doubt, entering the massive studio of Michelle Wasson one will note a sense of ephemeral thoughts in contemplation. An immediate realization of scale is located due to the size of the space, the large works, and her apparent reflective production. Wasson's practice and conceptual approach is fluid, substantial, tactile, and often produces visual ideas and metaphor that appear to be gateways for further inspection beyond what is initially gathered through a mere surface reading. This week the COMP Magazine travelled over to West Garfield Park to chat with Wasson about painting "big", her upcoming show at Dominican University, the healthy spirit created via collaboration, and what's the plan for the new year.



Michelle Wasson, Mirage, acrylic on raw canvas, 81 x 53", 2017
(photo credit Tom Van Eynde)

You grew up in Chicago, studied at the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana, then in St. Louis at Washington University. Since then you have been working here in the city for nearly two decades. Can we start with looking at your foundation? Can you note any early experiences with the visual arts? When did you decide to dedicate your life to the pursuit of art making?

My earliest art-related memories center around visits to the Art Institute of Chicago with my Mom. We spent time in the Impressionist galleries and always found our way to Pierre-Auguste Renoir's *Two Sisters (On the Terrace)*. I began to understand the power of light and space and connected the way paintings played with light and abstraction to the way the sunlight danced through the grand space of the museum.

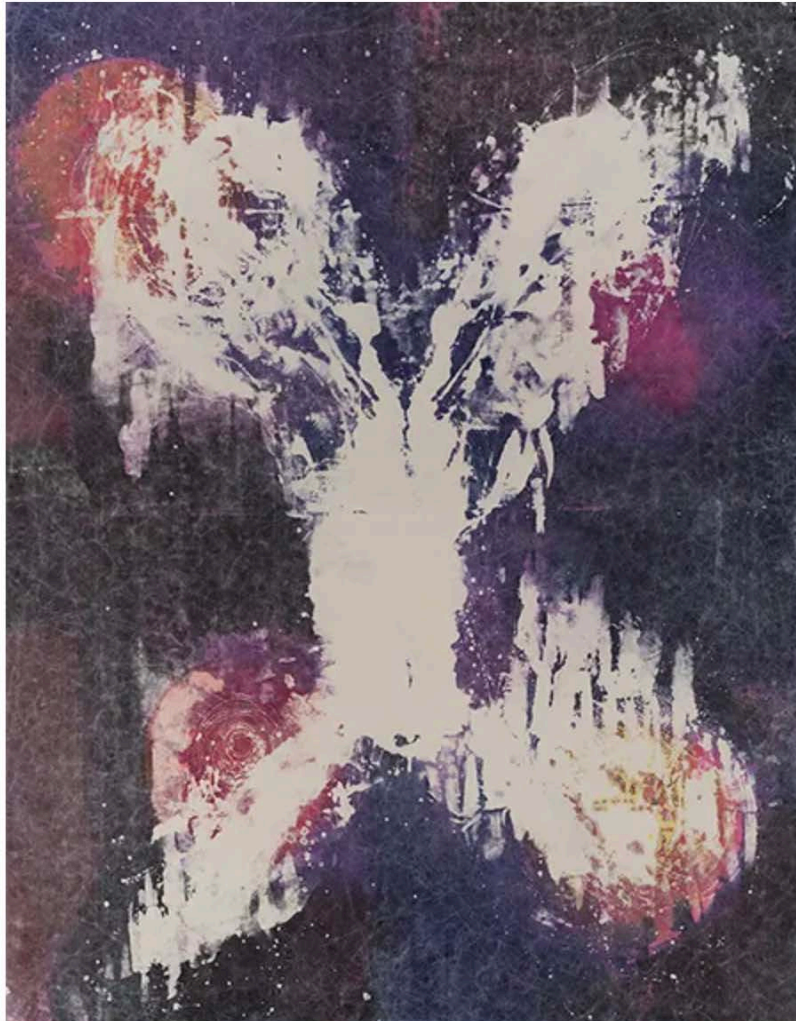
As a child I immersed myself in painting and drawing and planned to study Art Education until late in high school when I was transformed by a Robert Rauschenberg exhibition at the National Gallery in D.C. It was a culmination of his work related to the Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Exchange (ROCE)—a project that promoted freedom of expression in far-flung places like Chile, Tibet, Japan, Cuba and the USSR. I was completely overwhelmed by the scale of the exhibition, the breadth of colorful painterly experimentation with a wide range of materials—film, combines, sculpture, installation—and most of all the power with which his project engaged with culture and governments worldwide.



You are currently preparing for a solo exhibit, *Making Rain*, for the O'Conner Gallery at Dominican University in River Forest. Can you walk us through the process? What is the focus of this effort? What are you planning to exhibit?

The focus of this exhibition is five large-scale paintings from an ongoing series called *Earth and Sky*. Over the past year I've developed a process where I pour, scrub and drip homemade resist followed by a series of thin washes of paint and pigment. The resulting paintings are traces of this painterly performance that often present as microscopic and cosmic landscapes.

The Gallery Director at Dominican is fellow painter and curator Karen Azarnia who I've been in studio dialogue with for the past several years. We have a mutual interest in the relationship between painterly gesture and memory, which is a driving concept behind *Making Rain*.

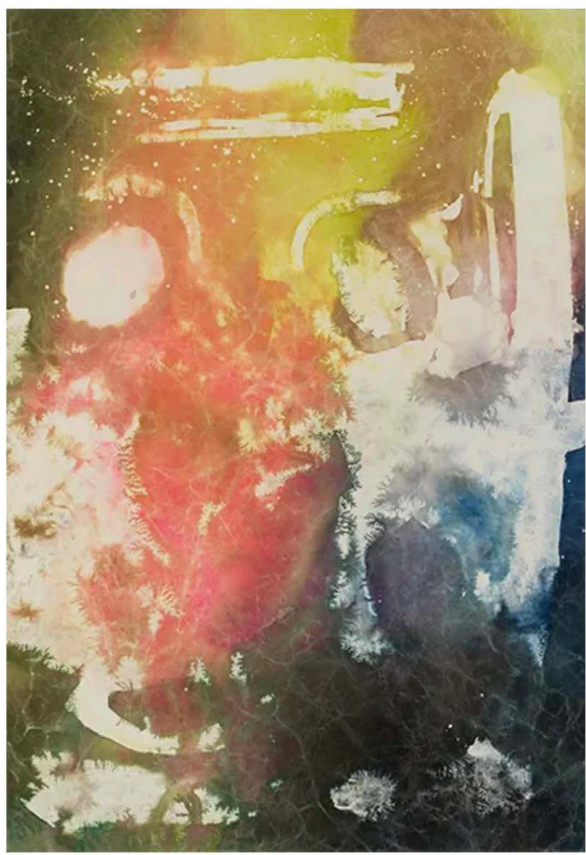


Michelle Wasson, November Rain, acrylic on raw canvas, 95 x 74", 2017 (TVE)

You recently produced a series of lithographs with Keystone Editions in Berlin, Germany. What type of preparation was done prior to travel? Also, can you share with us what it was like to work abroad during this residency?

I spent a few weeks at Keystone producing a set of three 4-color lithographs entitled *The Past, Present and Future* (Vergangenheit, Gegenwart and Zukunft). Because I'd never printed with limestone before I did some research on drawing and painting on stone. However, since I work intuitively, most of my learning was on site through experimentation and the guidance of Master printer Sarah Dudley.

The images were finalized on location in reaction to a haunting history; museums; exploring the city; and memory of war. I couldn't help but connect what's happening politically in the U.S.—thinking history has a way of repeating itself.



Michelle Wasson, Chiba City, acrylic on raw canvas, 73 x 49", 2018 (TVE)

Your studio is one of the largest studio spaces I have visited. However, it did not feel vacant in the slightest. The scale of your paintings and sculptures compliment the space. I am wondering if you can discuss your working process? Does the environment you work in have any impact how you think about your work? Perhaps, you could focus on the *Earth and Sky* series (2017-2018)?

I recently expanded my workspace to accommodate the scale and pace of my process which has become much more physical—crawling on top of large sheets of raw canvas, soaking them with color, orienting them and re-orienting them. Since I work on multiple paintings simultaneously and am interested in physical and aesthetic experimentation, at any given time there are multiple unstretched paintings drying horizontally on the floor, while others are stretched and at various stages on the walls.

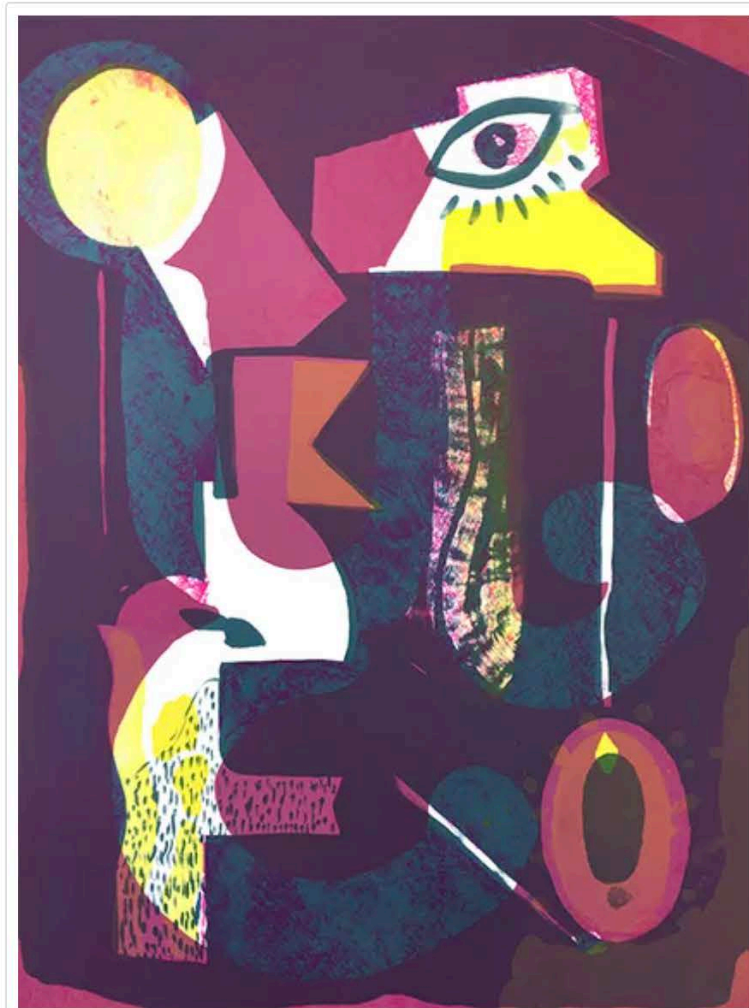


Michelle Wasson, Red, Yellow, Blue, installation at Terrain Exhibitions, Oak Park, Illinois, 2016

You cofounded Tiger Strikes Asteroid Chicago in 2016. As part of this collective you helped organize *Sabina Ott, All Flowers Tell Me* in 2018. Sabina was a force in the Chicago art community and beyond. Can you offer insight on this exhibit?

We collaborated with Aspect/Ratio gallery to present a selection of Sabina's paintings from 1999-2000. These lushly layered encaustic works combine her interest in digital collage, Gertrude Stein's poetry and stubborn physicality. They were constructed by pouring and carving wax to create overlapping graphic flowers, stripes and of course her signature recurring motif—the letters R_O_S_E in various combination.

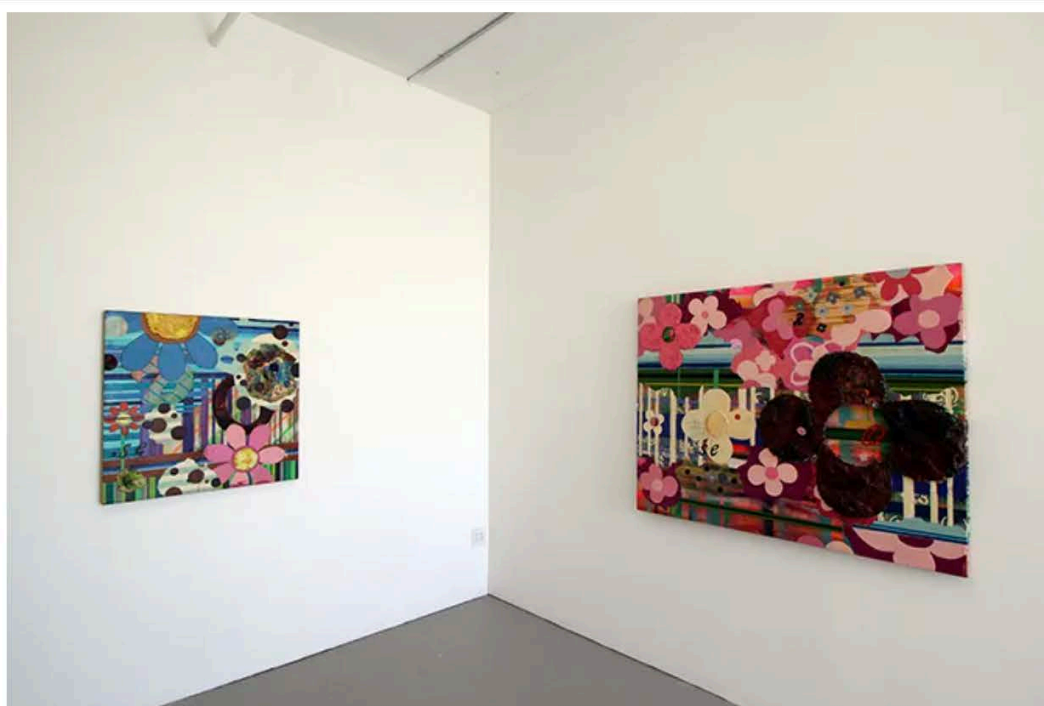
Sabina is an irreplaceable force in our community as an Artist, Teacher, friend and founder of Terrain Exhibitions. She was making these paintings when I was her graduate student and studio assistant at Washington University so there is a deep connection. As a young artist it was liberating to work in her huge loft in St. Louis where she modeled ambition, dedication and tenacity at every moment.



Michelle Wasson, *The Past*, 4 color lithograph on BFK reeves, 22" x 30", 2018

What do you value most in your art practice?

I value moving at will between ideas and materials, unencumbered by expectations.

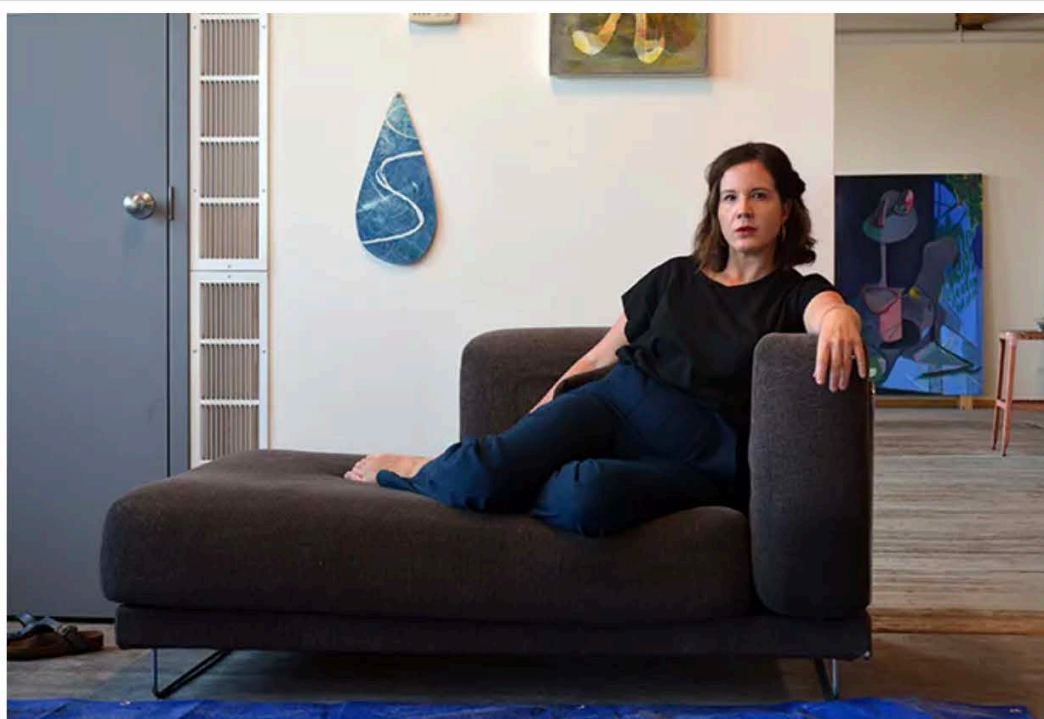


Sabina Ott, All Flowers Tell Me exhibition at TSA Chicago curated by Michelle Wasson and Anna Kunz, 2018
(photo credit Esau McGhee)

At present I assume the focus is preparation for the solo exhibit that is scheduled to open in January 2019. What else is on the docket? Are there any items coming up at Tiger Strikes Asteroid or other projects you are currently working on?

In addition to my continued work on the Earth and Sky series, this month I head to Detroit to open *A Conspiracy of Accidents* at Pops Packing. I'm honored to be included in this exhibition of collages alongside Barbara Kendrick, Tim van Laar and Ryan Standfest.

I'm also working with Berlin based curator Mirjam Wendt on an international exchange with the Tiger Strikes Asteroid Network set for Summer 2019.



Michelle Wasson, artist, West Garfield Park, Chicago, 2018