

## Mia Truman '20 Interview with Aubrey Basla

When walking into the Ritter Art building (on the studio side), you are likely to be greeted by a myriad of artworks—hastily pinned to the walls, hanging from the track lighting, on pedestals with chipped white paint marked from sculptures bumped and shifted to get the perfect angle. Sometimes pieces cascade down the staircase. The gallery is uniform and clean, just waiting for weeks of transformation as art students manipulate the space to showcase their work—whether it be a partially completed texture experiment, a masterpiece with each brushstroke intentional, or, more often than not, somewhere in between. It's a gallery as versatile as its students, ready from day one to shape shift into a gallery fit for anything they can imagine. You never really know what to expect when you walk in. So in the fall of 2019, I was eager to see just how the landscape was rearranged.

I walked in to see five portraits hanging at eye level. They were floating heads on blood red backgrounds. I don't mean blood red like bright red. I mean dark as blood freshly drawn—the type that you aren't sure if it's black until you see the middle adjust to light. The brightly lit, airy gallery suddenly changed into an empty cavern stifling from a sinister haze. The red drew me in closer until I was standing a foot away. I saw their faces, really looked at them.

Children contorted in a painterly way with mismatched pupils that follow you around the room and have you question whether you have ever looked in those eyes. I was leaning in, discovering how the pull of a cheek to make a “funny face” was not really funny at all. Faces that cut the heads off of Barbies. Faces that the longer you look at them, the more you see wrong. Like thinking back to a childhood memory where the more you think about it, the scarier it becomes.

Did the artist share a past with me? A haunted childhood memory? A chilling nightmare? Why did they look so familiar? No, I understood it was the mutated transformation scene from human to beast. That middle moment when one becomes the other. From child to monster? Oh no. To see a child for what it truly is—a monster all along. These are not Raphael's cherubs. These are Goya's demons. And I stepped back in fright.

Five months later, this week, I sat down and finally talked with Mia Truman, winner of the Berman Award for artistic achievement, the artist behind the works that showcase how our “smallest” fears are actually our biggest fears. We talked in depth about how she selects which memories to paint, how to embrace creepy as the highest compliment, and how she brought our biggest tormentors to life.

**Aubrey Basla**

**I was at the studio review—it was back when you just had the first five girls up and I believe the bus. I definitely remember the five girls with facial distortions and pulling at themselves and making the expressions and I was so struck by your work then, and it’s so fascinating what you have because I don’t know if I’ve seen much like it. I heard in your studio visit video that you didn’t paint before this. That’s absolutely mind-blowing to me. Could you talk a little bit about that?**

**Mia Truman**

Yeah it’s funny because I always really liked art and everything, but I came to Ursinus with the idea that I was going to be a physics major and I was very much determined to succeed. In high school I didn’t really take any art classes even though I wanted to. And then in college I was like, “Okay, every year I can give myself *one* art class.” I didn’t take painting until my senior year and I never really painted before because I was scared of it. But I did end up taking the course and wished I had taken it before because I really enjoyed it. I always had drawn a lot, but I feel like painting is completely different. I love looking at paintings, but I never thought that I would be able to do it myself, and then it was really exciting to see that I could paint and experiment with color. I am really interested in the way that color is used in other people’s paintings and then using it in my own.

**AB**

**It is an intimidating medium but you see your work and I would never have guessed it—that’s the biggest shock of all of this. So you talk about other artists and liking their colors, do you have visual artists that you pull from for these colors or for inspiration on some of these works?**

**MT**

Yeah so the main person especially with color is Lisa Yuskavage. For painting we had an assignment where we had to copy famous artworks, so I was copying Lisa Yuskavage’s work and I think that is when I really started to feel like I could actually paint a little bit. It became much easier when I was copying her work because she uses these monochromatic color schemes with really vibrant, kind of dramatic colors that I liked. I really enjoy looking at her work and I also enjoy painting it and so throughout making my work this past year I was definitely inspired by her paintings.

**AB**

**That’s interesting that you referenced Yuskavage’s work—your backgrounds are very rich in tone. When you start one of your paintings, do you recall your memories for a resource or do you pull straight from the photos themselves, like “I have a photo of my friends on a dock and I want to paint it”?**

**MT**

I was definitely looking at the photos. I asked my parents, my parent’s friends, and a lot of different people to send me photos of my childhood or my friends’ childhood. Then I sorted through them, so now I have hundred of photos on my computer. Some of them I still want to paint—I’m not finished. So I would find the ones that I thought were the most interesting,

either having children looking directly at the camera or having children not look at the camera at all. I thought either way it created this interesting relationship between the viewer of the photographs and the picture itself. Then creating a painting out of that could be interesting and so I sorted through the photos—especially the ones that meant something to me—and I was trying to evoke how I felt about that time through my painting.

**AB**

**You mentioned in your artist statement how we're in a very deliberate Point of View shot in every painting and how in the smaller paintings you wanted the viewer to question what we are seeing. I'm pushed back from terror with the big ones but compelled to stand closer to the small ones to see them fully. What was your intention with sizing?**

**MT**

Definitely. I thought it would be a really interesting contrast between the bigger ones that are more confrontational and I wanted the viewer to compare the two and maybe question the perspective of what you're seeing. Either way it's showing children and their relationships with each other, but from different perspectives. With the littler ones, I was able to explore using the brush—I did it on wood so the brushstrokes look different than on canvas. I enjoyed working on wood as a medium also.

**AB**

**Reading your titles makes me feel like I'm in a dialogue with the scenes. You have a balance between making them very tonal but also descriptive. Can you talk a little bit about how you chose them and your phrasing intentionality?**

**MT**

Yeah, as I've said before for the larger paintings they were more confrontational, so I thought it would be interesting to have names where it seems like it's something that they could have been saying to you the viewer, or saying to whoever is taking the photograph. In my one painting where there are girls looking at the viewer kind of disdainfully, I immediately thought like those girls would be like 'oh hi' ... like '*there* you are.'

**AB**

**[Laughter] I could feel their judgement.**

**MT**

I thought that was a funny title. Then for my smaller ones I made them more descriptive because there is less confrontation. I wanted to describe them very little, but still depict what was happening. Some of them are references to very specific times and the viewer may not understand them unless they were there. My friend will recognize the painting entitled 'weigh down the dock.' It was a photo from a school trip to a lake that we went on together every year. At the lake there was a dock that was not properly buoyed and if enough people got on it you could weigh it down. We would yell and scream 'weigh down the dock!' and everyone would come running to go and 'weigh down the dock,' providing inspiration for one of my paintings.

**AB**

**You captured that well. Have you shown some of the subjects your interpretation of them? What has been their reaction?**

**MT**

I haven't shown that many people—I'm very good friends with two of the girls who show up in many of my paintings—they really like them.

**AB**

**How would you describe your body of work of work to someone who is not familiar?**

**MT**

I usually describe it as 'creepy children.'

**AB**

**[Laughs] That fits.**

**MT**

I would describe my work as half of the paintings are children who are looking directly at the camera and making creepy or funny faces, and then the other half are just little moments captured of children with their backs turned away.

**AB**

**I know it's like *literally* choosing between your children, but which piece made you feel the most when you were making it?**

**MT**

Definitely the first one I did of just the faces—that was the one that I first had the idea for and that photo is really interesting to me. I was really excited to complete that painting. I really do like the one titled 'into the backwoods'—that one I actually took very recently over the last winter break with my friends. It's not actually of children, but they're the same people who are in the painting titled 'we're making a treehouse.' I thought it would be interesting to make another with them and I thought it was a really beautiful photo of us returning to our old school.

**AB**

**There's a lot of emotion that resonates with the viewer and I like that you matched the colors as complementary pieces. You were able to make, unbeknownst to the viewer, a time capsule for them.**

**MT**

Yeah definitely.

**AB**

**So now that the ASE has begun, and you've been through countless critiques, what's been your favorite compliment or criticism that has stuck with you about your art?**

**MT**

I'd have to think about that! Well, this was before my current body of work when I was painting a lot of children's faces that were green, my friend said that my paintings reminded her of Shrek.

**AB**

[Laughs]

**MT**

I do like it when people say that they find my paintings creepy or weird or a little unnerving. Whenever anyone makes that comment I'm happy since that was my goal.

**AB**

**Definitely. Now that we're in quarantine and we have the time to hopefully make art or be a little bit more productive on the inside, what's next for your work?**

**MT**

I have time now so I do plan on continuing to paint. I still have some supplies, paint and some wooden boards that I found. I'm painting those and I have a few more photos that I want to finish up. I definitely have ideas and things that I want to try out.