

FORT GANSEVOORT

Matrons & Mistresses

Zoë Buckman

ARTIST PROFILE · MAY 7, 2020



Almost a year has passed since we flew to New York to take these photos... a fact that completely blows my mind. Zoë and I had hoped to do our interview in person, to sit once more in her space which smells of incense and tea, getting lost in conversation while surrounded by her art. But timing seemed to have other plans and the only instance our schedules aligned was when we filmed her *Heavy Rag* (<https://www.matronsandmistresses.com/articles/2019/09/25/heavy-rag>) video in the fall... So we waited.

Before the world turned upside down, Zoë and her daughter took a pilgrimage to India—a place that we have often discussed our shared connection with. During her trip, I woke one night at midnight certain I was supposed to interview her right then. So I left my bed, grabbed my computer and sent her my “midnight questions.”

I am learning to trust Timing’s plans... She is usually right.

And today, on the week of Matrons & Mistresses’ one year birthday, I cannot think of a better time to share Zoë’s gorgeous and powerful work.

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– ZOË BUCKMAN

Lizzie Cheatham McNairy: Dish towels, punching bags, lingerie and neon... rap lyrics, ovaries, poetry and wedding dresses. Help us enter into your work and your story?

Zoë Buckman: I make work centered around the female experience. The impetus is often autobiographical and from there I’ll often expand to incorporate other women’s stories. The materials I use often explore some kind of tension or intersection between polarized states: masculine and feminine, delicate and resilient, permanent and impermanent, etc. I feel like my experience with being a woman is so much about the complexities in between those two forces and the pushing and the pulling between these two polarized states, and that’s really the space from which I make art.

I’ve always been drawn to textiles. I did textiles G.S.C.E when I was 15 and I was just super inspired by the material tactile quality of fabrics. For me personally with my art practice, I’ve always used fabrics that have been worn or used by women, and that’s really important to me. Whether they’re quilts or wedding dresses or vintage lingerie or more recently, domestic fabrics—a big part of the work is the fact that they have been used, they’ve seen some lives, they’ve had some experiences, they’re stained, they have their own stories to tell.

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LCM: Your art is bold and brave and often pushes up against some of the most charged topics of our time... Do you ever second-guess yourself or struggle with people pleasing? Do you ever find yourself worrying at 2 a.m.... ‘Crap, was that a bit too much? Did I go way too far?’

ZB: Yes! I always have some anxiety about how a piece will land, whether it will land at all. I try to toe the line between speaking my truth and being self-indulgent or over-sharing. For everything I make, I ask myself the following questions before showing or sharing it:

Is this work authentic? Does this need to be made? Does this need to be made by me? Does this need to be made by me now? If yes to those... Is this the right method and material to tell this story? Of course there’s a lot that ends up in the studio rubbish bin, and I hope I’ll always put those guidelines on my practice.

I do think that, particularly in the culture today, there can be oversharing or emotional dumping, and I’m not personally drawn to work like that. I might create a piece and decide not to show it because I’m like, ‘You know what? It’s too didactic,’ or ‘No one needs to see that.’ Hopefully I’ve done a good job of toeing that line between the personal and the universal and shared works that people can draw their own stories and their own meanings from.

Also, the idea of beauty is important to me, particularly when the work does deal with so many di cult experiences and ideas. I’m not trying to make work that pushes people away or shouts a message at people. My intention has always been that it draws you close and it draws you in and that—in the literal beauty of the pieces, I’m expressing our strength and our pleasure.

LCM: Your mother, a beautiful writer who you lost a year ago, greatly impacted your life and your work as an artist. It seems she gave you her love for words and encouraged your feminist spirit. What do you hope to pass on to your daughter, and how does that play into the decisions you make and the art you create?

ZB: Yes! My mother gave me those things for sure and so much more.

I want Cleo to advocate for herself.

I want her to consistently recognize her privileges and examine her blind spots, soften with compassion, see everyone as equal, and look for moments of humor in everything.

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LCM: As I write these questions, you are currently on a pilgrimage to India, a country that we both greatly love. What is coming up for you there? How are you being stretched and challenged? Fed and healed?

ZB: I'm spending a lot of time here deepening my connection to the divine, putting it in the center! But I have Cleo with me and that's making the experience even more profound. She *is* love and devotion for me, and so I'm on this journey with a living, breathing reminder of what it is I'm seeking, and I'm seeing it through her eyes. It's wonderful. We came here with my Mum's ashes, which we offered back to the River Ganges at the foothill of the Himalayan mountains, and it was one of the most beautiful moments of my life.

LCM: How do you foresee this time in India will impact your work?

ZB: I think my time in India has accelerated my journey with detachment. I would like to make work intuitively without being concerned about "results." *Was it received well, did it sell, did people like it*, etc. Those concerns are not good for the creative practice. A lot of the focus of pilgrimage is about seeing what you do as an act of service or offering, and I like that idea! I hope to bring that into the way I approach my art.