

In Conversation with Olivia Brouwer

BY ANNA CIPOLLONE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY OLIVIA BROUWER

Hamilton-based artist Olivia Brouwer's work examines themes of seeing and misperception. As a partially blind artist, Brouwer's inkblot series began as a way to explore her own limitations of vision through abstract painting. When we speak, she's in the midst of back-to-back residencies, working not only in painting and printmaking, but also fabricating art for all the senses, sometimes mixing her media by sewing strips of silkscreen on top of a canvas or drawing beneath to add dimension. From braille passages exploring questions of self-inquiry, to printmaking and sound installation, Brouwer's work is all-encompassing, tactile at times to resonate with those who are non-sighted, and rendered all the more powerful within the context of a global pandemic.



Photo by JD Howell www.jdhowell.ca



A Whisper in the Clouds, oil, Dura-lar film, and thread on canvas, 60" x 48", 2019

As a visually impaired person, how does the theme of misperception get filtered through your work?

It started with being self conscious about my blindness. People can see that my eye is foggy and discoloured, so I wanted a way to talk about it and become more confident. I can't change that about me so I chose to embrace it. The inkblot series is mostly abstracted from close up images of fungus so I use this idea of decay but it's also alive—kind of like my eye, where it's not working but I'm still able to see some areas with my peripheral vision.

How would you describe the philosophy behind your art?

I've always been interested in perception but the themes have changed over time. I moved on to a spiritual interpretation of blindness. I went to parables about people who are blind and then healed from it. I'm Christian and I wanted to put that into my work somehow without being super evangelistic. There are two ideas in the Bible about being physically blind and spiritually blind so I wanted to create a series based on those interpretations. The stitched braille verses remind me of what I need to work on to become more spiritually aware—it's a way of bringing that to light. >>



"Inkblot No.1" Oil, charcoal, and thread on canvas, 48" x 48", 2015

What are you working on now?

I started this idea about a year ago, and was accepted into two residencies right when Covid hit. In my proposals, I talked about touching a lot—obviously, Covid does not encourage this and the shows will be delayed. I'm working on different ways of using our senses, bringing in the inkblot imagery but using it in a tactile way, and also working on audio, what people hear from abstract sounds. I'm embossing so people can feel the paper, and working on a book series on learning braille.

Where do you find inspiration?

I go into art books; artists like David Milne and Adam Lee. I like picking out little details and going out into nature to walk around and clear my mind. This connection to nature frees your mind somehow when you go to this space.




"Weeds and Seeds" Oil, Dura-lar film, and thread on canvas, 48" x 36", 2019

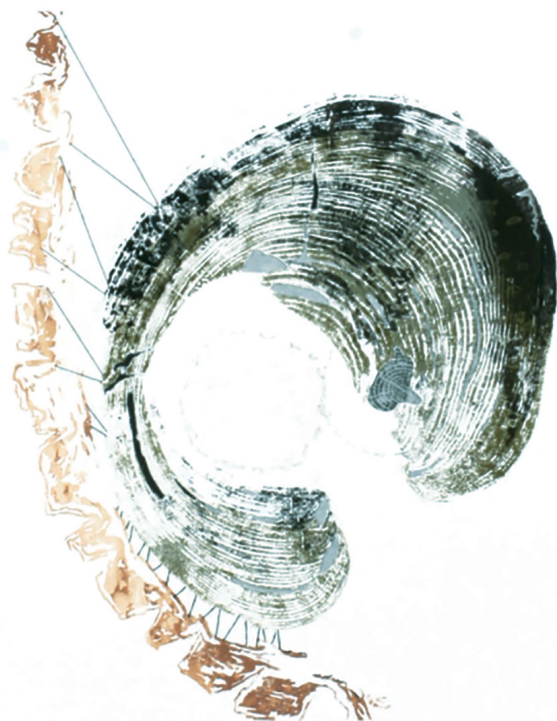
What is the intention behind your work?

It's important to give a voice to people who are blind or somehow disabled. I feel like I have this responsibility to bring awareness in a way that those people can experience the artwork.

What's coming up for you in 2021?

I'm about to start a six-month residency at the Cotton Factory in Hamilton so I'll be continuing my series there. I will be working on larger paintings, and I'm using conductive ink that creates sound through its connection to a speaker. I'm experimenting with different ways of touch and using senses that can be fun for everybody. 

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"Pine II" Silkscreen and wood print with acetate, Japanese paper, and thread, 20" x 20", 2015