

Shara Hughes (b. 1981, Atlanta) most recently presented solo exhibitions at Le Consortium, Dijon, France; The Garden Museum, London; Newport Art Museum, Rhode Island; Gallery Met at the Metropolitan Opera, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia, Atlanta; among others. Forthcoming solo exhibitions include the Aspen Art Museum, Aspen Colorado, and Yuz Museum, Shanghai, in 2021; and the Kunstmuseum Luzern, Switzerland, in 2022. Hughes has participated in numerous group exhibitions at venues such as the Drawing Center, New York; MASS MoCA, North Adams, MA; and the High Museum of Art, Atlanta. Hughes’s work belongs to many prominent museum collections including the Dallas Museum of Art; Denver Museum of Art; Jorge M. Perez Collection, Miami; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; M Woods Museum, Beijing; Phoenix Art Museum; Rachofsky Collection, Dallas; Saint Louis Art Museum; Si Shang Art Museum, Beijing; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; and the Yuz Museum, among others. Hughes earned a BFA from the Rhode Island School of Design and later attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. She currently lives and works in Brooklyn.

Shara Hughes: On Edge is organized for the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis by Wassan Al-Khudhairi, Chief Curator, and Misa Jeffereis, Assistant Curator.

The exhibition is generously supported by Anne and Joel Ehrenkranz, Dawn and David Lenhardt, Fern and Lenard Tessler, James and Caitlynde Langer, Cathy and Jonathan Miller, Carole Server and Oliver Frankel, and Cindy and Howard Rachofsky. Special thanks to Rachel Uffner Gallery.

Related Programs

Artist Talk: Shara Hughes
Wednesday, October 13, 6:00 pm

Workshop: Crafting Connections with Missouri Botanical Garden
Saturday, January 29, 11:00 am—5:00 pm

Shara Hughes On Edge

On Edge presents paintings, drawings, and monoprints by Shara Hughes from 2015 to the present. The exhibition demonstrates the shift in Hughes’s practice over recent years toward what is now her signature artistic style: colorful, inventive paintings that picture neither real nor imagined places. Employing varied marks, the artist loosely depicts floating moons, gnarled trees, and blazing sunlight, bridging the abstract and representational. Hughes is not interested in closely representing nature and the paintings are not about a specific narrative. They are populated by familiar landforms, foliage, and bodies of water that place them squarely within the visual language of “landscape,” and yet their scenery is never locatable, never real. The works situate themselves within the long history of landscape painting, yet these references serve only as a point of departure for Hughes. The artist has a unique personal vision that compels us to think beyond what we know and can see.

In 2014, Hughes was asking herself, “How can I make a painting if it’s not coming from something?” She felt her painting process was being suffocated by that “something”—the impulse to make representational or symbolic works, driven by narrative. Her practice featured interior scenes with figures and objects playing out their own peculiar dramas. She decided to take a break from rendering a specific subject or working from source material, and “just make landscape paintings.” The challenging experiment led to a major turning point in her career. Today Hughes is referred to as a landscape painter, but for the artist, her paintings “are not really about landscapes at all.” Rather, Hughes is concerned with gesture, symbolism, emotion, illusion, and iconography in her art. Her view of nature is an impression of landscape, lying somewhere between personal memory, imagination, perception, and expectation. For Hughes, her most successful paintings do not give everything away on first look—they are a suggestion, malleable, open, and “keeping you teetering and interested.”

Gallery Guide
Contemporary Art
Museum St. Louis

September 3, 2021–
February 27, 2022



Shara Hughes, *Main Terrain*, 2018. Crayon, marker and oil pastel on paper, 15 × 11 1/2 inches. Collection of Alexander Denzler, New York. Courtesy the artist; Rachel Uffner Gallery, New York; Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / New York; and Pilar Corrias, London.



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Audio Tour
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Painting Process

Painting is intuitive and physical for Hughes. All the works begin abstractly, without plans or sketches, nor does she premix her color palette. Her process is one of balancing control while resigning to the unknown: she sets some parameters then lets the painting tell her what to do next, and listens to her unconscious impulses. Hughes dyes, spray paints, and uses bold colors that, like her marks and gestures, are applied with immediacy and instinct. She establishes a relationship with each painting, and describes the process as a chance to learn more about herself when she is able to fully let herself go. When Hughes leaves the studio she leaves the work there—mentally and physically—and doesn’t think about the paintings when she’s away. By keeping the work out of her thoughts, she allows herself to react to color choices and textures more immediately, to translate something directly from her body onto the canvas.

The paintings are large, offering viewers an immersive and physical relationship with the compositions. She describes the scale in relation to her “wingspan.” Many of the paintings in *On Edge* employ framing devices that engage with the edges of the canvas, creating portals or entryways into the works. Hughes has said, “I like for you to be able to totally believe in the painting but then know that it stops at the edges, and going back and forth between something that feels real but that you know is basically talking about abstract painting. I like being able to have that kind of back and forth of yes and no.” The tension between flatness and illusionistic depth is Hughes’s way of actively pushing toward this liminal space.

Flowers

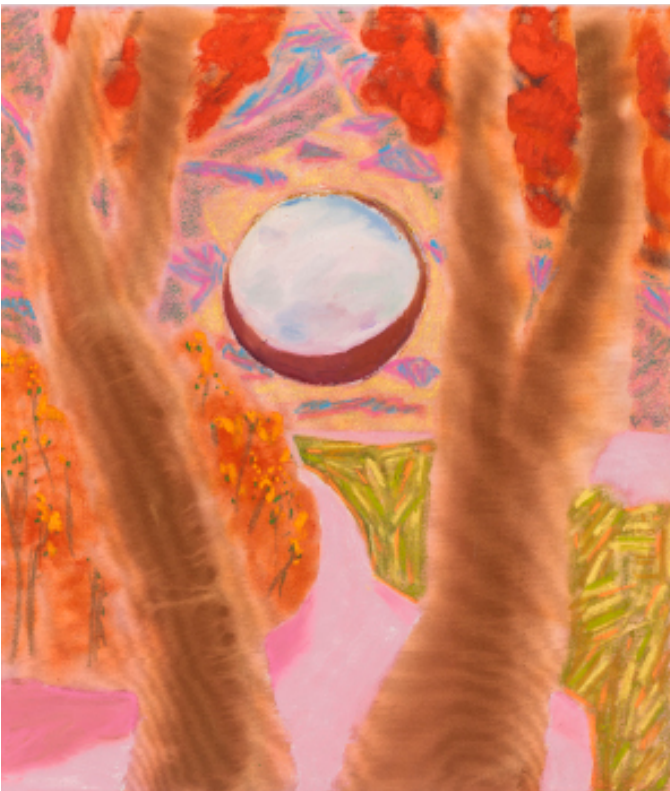
In some of her most recent paintings, such as *Naked Lady* and *I Love You, I Love You Not*, flowers take a central role in the composition. These paintings are not about flowers, but rather about breaking down our ideas of the flower as a sometimes-clichéd symbol of fertility, beauty, and love. Hughes changes the way we see flowers: “So many of them turned into portraits or multiple figures in the space. They often feel dramatic and sad and scary and ominous. I wanted the idea of flowers to twist into something that could be dangerous or ugly. It didn’t always turn out that way, and I think they can be both beautiful and scary or humanlike but also unfamiliar at the same time. I’m always interested in a subject that can be flexible in that way.”

Works on Paper

Hughes is a prolific artist whose practice extends from painting to works on paper, from monumental canvases to modestly sized drawings—both mediums containing universes within universes. *On Edge* also features a selection of recent prints and drawings on paper that demonstrate the motifs, compositions, and techniques



Shara Hughes, *A New View*, 2017. Oil, acrylic, and flashe on canvas, 48 × 40 inches. Collection of Caitlynde and James Langer, Chicago. Courtesy the artist; Rachel Uffner Gallery, New York; Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / New York; and Pilar Corrias, London.



Shara Hughes, *Shine Your Light*, 2016. Oil, flashe, and acrylic on canvas, 32 x 28 inches. Collection of Beth Rudin DeWoody, NewYork. Courtesy the artist; Rachel Uffner Gallery, New York; Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / New York; and Pilar Corrias, London.

that Hughes weaves throughout her entire practice—the swirl framing device, concentric circular “oculus,” oceanside scenes, and forest settings.

Drawings

Hughes’s drawings are neither sketches nor studies for paintings, but are separate and unique artworks in and of themselves. They are made in the artist’s home rather than studio, a more relaxed setting in which to create and feel free from expectations. Hughes uses ink, watercolor, markers, crayons, oil pastels, colored pencils, and paint pens—materials that once applied are difficult to change. The drawings are often made in one sitting, and Hughes has referred to them as a release of her subconscious rather than a fully formed idea.

Monoprints

In 2018 Hughes began making prints. She wanted to extend what she regularly created on canvas and expand her practice into this challenging medium. Hughes quickly learned that printmaking is a remarkably antithetical process to painting—every seemingly insignificant smudge or imperfection transfers onto the final product, and so each print is the result of correcting mistakes from the previous. This exhibition contains a selection of Hughes’s monoprints. Unlike most prints, which come in multiple editions, a monoprint is a unique image—a painting made directly on the plate and transferred through the press onto a piece of paper. Monoprinting demands that the work is executed quickly, which compels the artist to be more selective and decisive about color and gesture.

Monoprint Drawings

Also on view are Hughes’s monoprint drawings. The process involves making a monoprint, then running another sheet through the press, which catches only the diluted ghost of the original painted image. She then draws on top of the ghost print, creating an image that is not a duplicate but rather a literal déjà vu of an image. Hughes’s shift to printmaking has informed her painting practice, encouraging her to both cede elements of control even as she commits more strongly to her vision.

Titles

By assigning titles to her works such as *I Needed a Hug*, *Obstacles*, *The Shell Of Me*, and *Something Special*, she hints at the psychological complexity and the challenges we’re facing today. The titles can be witty, endearing, humorous, and honest—at times entry points into a narrative, but never a direct reference. Hughes invites viewers to reflect their own interpretations into these immersive, captivating works.



Shara Hughes, *Peep Show*, 2018. Oil, ink, and acrylic on canvas, 58 x 50 inches. Private Collection, New Jersey. Courtesy the artist; Rachel Uffner Gallery, New York; Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / New York; and Pilar Corrias, London.



Shara Hughes, *I Needed a Hug*, 2018. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 14 x 11 inches. Collection of Jane Harrison, South Kent, CT. Courtesy the artist; Rachel Uffner Gallery, New York; Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / New York; and Pilar Corrias, London.