

Number: EightyTwo

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Interview: Vivian Liddell

Vivian Liddell is the winner of “Best in Show”, *Art of the South 2015*, the second annual exhibition sponsored by *Number:* at the Hyde Gallery at Memphis College of Art, 477 S. Main, Memphis: May 20 – July 31.

So, Vivian, what does it mean to you to be selected “Best in Show” by our juror, Wayne White?

It’s a great honor to be chosen by Wayne White. His work is so impressive in its breadth — directing, painting, puppets, cartoons — I really admire that he works across genres. I love the humor in his work, his involvement with music, and his use of text. I spent a ridiculous amount of time watching MTV in the 80s, and the Peter Gabriel video he did opened up my idea of what was visually possible.

I just watched the *Beauty is Embarrassing* documentary on him and the part where he talks about the “shame ray” and the older southern dudes saying you “look like a girl” — oh man. I totally get this. Although, I got the opposite, “you look like a tomboy” or worse “a slut”. I aspire to his level of irreverence. His fearless take on the art world, and on the South, is inspiring and a great relief. I’m still struggling to be brave enough to have a “Fuck You Invasion” type work — ; I’m literally putting my first “fucks” into a painting right now! Thank you, Wayne!

How did you come to be an artist? Was art a big part of your childhood, or did you discover it somewhere along the way?

I was always drawing and writing. I was painfully shy and spent a lot of time in my own imagination as a

child. The idea my parents had of art was very different than what I now know. Art to them seemed to be something pretty, or something that captured a likeness. My great-grandmother, who I was named after, Norma Vivian, was a painter. She painted scenes like a horse and carriage in the snow — even though she was in Eclectic, Alabama, where there is no snow! Some of my earliest memories are of sitting in her dining room floor watching her paint a still life of fruit. It was magical watching the fruit appear on the canvas. I think that those early oil paint fumes put some primal association with happiness and paint in my head.

The first time I went to a museum was to see an Egyptian exhibit at the Brooks Museum in 1981. My parents bought me the catalog and I still have it. I didn’t have any exposure to the art world until I was old enough to drive myself to shows, and by that time I was in Albany, Georgia. The first time I remember really connecting with someone else’s art was at the High Museum in Atlanta. It was a Basquiat painting. I got chills standing in front of it. I felt like he was there, speaking just to me.

You were born in Memphis, earned a BFA from the University of Georgia, then moved to the North where you received an MFA from the Pratt Institute and a MS in education from Pace University. Can you talk about how living in the North has shaped your experiences and influenced your work as a southern artist?

I was 28 when I moved to New York the first time, and it was an awful shock to me. I thought I had a

good grasp of where I was going with my art at that point and Pratt really took the wind out of my sails. But I learned so much as a person, and as an artist, in Brooklyn. I can now order food decisively (Salt bagel! Toasted! Light on the cream cheese!!) and am much more direct in my personal interactions as well. Southerners tend to think that being direct is rude, but I think of it as a brave kindness. As an artist, I think the most important takeaway for me was that art is a respectable career. Before I moved to New York, I always thought true artists were eccentrics or visionaries (I had met Howard Finster the year before I went to Pratt) and I would have to do something else as a career, to make money. When I saw the artists in New York being revered as intellectuals, this was a huge shift in my mindset.

What is your artistic philosophy?

My artistic philosophy, and maybe just my life philosophy in general, is always changing. But at the core of everything I do there’s a commitment. I believe in persistence and perseverance. I think that if you want to make art, you need to be able to do that no matter what else. A friend of mine was once debating on whether to move to New York and I told her if you’re not sure if you should, then you shouldn’t. New York doesn’t need an extra resident; you have to be a fighter to make it work there. Art is kind of the same way.

In your work you use bold colors in a very graphic format, very reminiscent of graffiti artists. Has Pop Culture played a role in the creation of your artwork?

Definitely, yes. I think my current work is really coming to terms with the 80s. I developed my aesthetic sense in a time when I was going to Bryan Adams concerts with my friends dressed in matching fluorescent skinny ties and socks. I read *Tiger Beat*. I loved reading magazines and staying on top of the current fashion trends and celebrity gossip. As a teenager in Albany, Georgia, this was really a window into a much larger world for me. Of course, at that time, I had no idea who Elizabeth Murray, Julian Schnabel, or Mike Kelley were — my entry into the larger world came mostly through music. But now that I find myself drawn to their work, I can see there’s an underlying 80s sensibility that speaks to me. It’s fun and serious at the same time. The bright colors are there. And there’s a breaking free from tradition and norms. And the graffiti — that’s all about a decade in Brooklyn. There’s all the concrete, and the beautiful neutral grey, and then there are these dynamic, saturated, graffiti revelations. I taught at a public high school in Brooklyn, and everything I know about graffiti (which, granted, isn’t a lot!), came from my students. I love the cryptic quality of it.

I noticed many of the titles of your paintings are song lyrics. How do you choose the songs and how do you match the imagery with the lyrics?

I recently re-watched a video of Philip Guston talking about his art making process. He really sums it up for me in so many ways. He talks about how a painting can be a perfectly good painting, but then you make one change, and then you have to change something

else, and then the next day you have a completely different painting. I tend to overwork things, and this process can become never-ending. I’ve been trying to pare down my work. I always listen to music when I paint. So what happens is, I pick whatever I’m in the mood for and start painting. Usually at some point, the music and the painting collide. When that happens, I put the song (or artist, or album) on repeat. What this does, for me, is to help me stay in that mindset. So, when I come back the next day, I put the same song on and I’m more easily able to get back where I was in the painting. Sometimes the painting becomes more narrative as a response to something in the song lyrics. That’s when I use the lyrics as a title.

Do you have certain messages/themes/obsessions that come up in your work?

I’ve only recently started working in complete abstraction. Before that, a lot of imagery in my work had to do with being female or domesticity. I did one series of paintings of bridesmaids with big eyeballs, another of giant baby heads as a way to create a female equivalent of the male gaze... I guess these themes are still there. I’m definitely interested in feminist art as it pertains to the high-low divide and the use of “craft” materials. Motherhood has turned my work on its head and given me a different perspective on why women have traditionally been the masters of fiber-based art. It’s easier to do in small chunks of time, for one thing. So lately, motherhood has been a new lens for femininity and this shows in my art. My process changed significantly to accommodate schedule

changes and address toxicity levels — oil paint was out. My work has regained a playfulness as a result of watching my children make art. They are so confident; they haven’t reached the point where they doubt their ability to represent the world (since they haven’t gone to art school!). All of the joy that I had in working as a child—that’s all coming back to me now as a direct result of playing with my kids.

Many of our readers aspire to make a living as an artist. Can you tell us how you make that work?

Honestly, it’s a constant struggle. Athens is a whole lot cheaper than Brooklyn. I have more time and space here to create. I’ve done all kinds of stuff to make ends meet: waiting tables, cooking, working in galleries. For me, teaching has been a great way to stay focused on art and have a flexible schedule. I think the key is just to decide that your art is your main priority and live accordingly. If you want to make art, you can’t take a day job that takes all of your energy. Also, I know this goes against the stereotype of the free-spirited artist, but I have to have scheduled studio time. I go to my studio like any other person goes to work whether I feel like it or not. That time is sacred to me, and I schedule everything else around it.

If you had an opportunity to send a message to yourself at eighteen years old, what would the message say?

What other people think about you is none of your business.



Portrait of Vivian Liddell, *The Mountain Climber* (background), 2015. Photo courtesy of Jason Bennett.



Vivian Liddell, *The mountain she has to climb*, 2015, 48 x 48 inches, Synthetic polymer paint, watercolor, lace ribbon, and buttons on canvas.



Vivian Liddell, *I've been set free and I've been bound*, 2015, 46 x 46 inches, Synthetic polymer paint, ink, watercolor, and embroidery thread on vintage fabric and raw canvas.



Vivian Liddell, *The lonesome death of Hattie Carroll* 2015 (*Talisman of the Charcoal-stove, for Baltimore*), 2015, 48 x 48 inches, Synthetic polymer paint, buttons, embroidery, and plastic netting on canvas.