



"I got the kids raised, but never the husbands.
I had to kick them to the curb." — H. Pitre

HEIDI PITRE

A DELICIOUS, DIMINUTIVE DYNAMO

Q & A

An interview with painter Heidi Pitre on the frustrations of no-count husbands, today's kids and what's required to push through the BS to reach your dream.

Heidi Pitre moved from New Orleans to Bay St. Louis five weeks before that whore Katrina ripped her way up I-59. Unable to return to either city, Heidi and her family sought refuge in Hattiesburg and refuge she found. Her paintings soon lauded her as a darling of the Hattiesburg art community.

"I'm from New Orleans, but Mississippi has given me more encouragement and support than I ever expected," Pitre said.

While living in Hattiesburg, Heidi watched her daughters spread their wings and leave the nest, began a business painting pet portraits and received several art grants, including ones from the Andy Warhol and the Pollack-Krasner Foundations. Five years ago, she dropped her other hats to pursue her gift of painting full-time.

Since then, Heidi's work has taken her across the Southeast as the recipient of artist-in-residence programs in both Florida and Texas and, most recently, back to Hattiesburg.

She is the first beneficiary of the recently established Hattiesburg Arts Council's "Open Studio on Front," a program which seeks to provide artists from five disciplines studio space for seven weeks with a concluding gallery exhibition. Heidi's intent is to spend this studio time elaborating on her latest series, "Time & Flies," brought forth from the nostalgia of looking through old photos that didn't make the cut into the family album and remembering the lost days of childhood ingenuity.

Of her work, Heidi writes: "These feminine characters prove that every woman can embrace her own reality, laugh at her tragedies, spotlight her bad decisions, expose her vulnerability and choose to exchange pain or sadness for a new understanding of the past." This is precisely what she has chosen for herself. Delight oozes not only from her paintbrush but the lilt in her voice and a smile that consumes its receiver. No stranger to tragedy, at times self-inflicted, Heidi Pitre's a study in choosing joy.

INTERVIEW BY JANE CLAIR TYNER
PHOTO BY DAVID RODRIGUE

JC: Your work is so straight forward, it speaks for itself. But let's delve into it.

HP: *I agree with you. It took years to develop, but I think it's kind of obvious and what's not obvious, I want people to fill in the blank. The blank is for everybody's interpretation.*

JC: I love the unrivaled feminine voice of your paintings. You capture the dichotomies of the female experience perfectly: the angst and the humor, strength and vulnerability, innocence and mischief. Is making sure there's that piece of relief in your work important for you?

HP: *My work is very autobiographical and that goes for almost every piece. So many times I had to laugh to keep from crying because my life was so insane at so many different points, from major catastrophes to minor catastrophes to multi-catastrophes. My mother always said if I wrote a biography they would have to put it in the fiction section because nobody would believe it. You can laugh if it's a bad hair day or a bad marriage. Eventually, you have to look at it light-heartedly; you can't carry that around with you the rest of your life. I work that out in my pieces.*

JC: Let's talk about your library card project.

HP: *The paintings in my new series, "Time & Flies," are based on things that kids today have no idea about. They look at those paintings and need someone to tell them what's going on. They don't know why that kid is holding a tin can to her ear or what the string on the fingers is for. The library cards are the same thing. If you showed one to a kid today, they're totally clueless. It seems like up to our age, we learned how things used to be done, how they didn't have the conveniences we have today — like tampons. They used burlap sacks, right? Our moms would tell us shit like this. Technology is moving so quickly, there's no time to discuss how things were because*

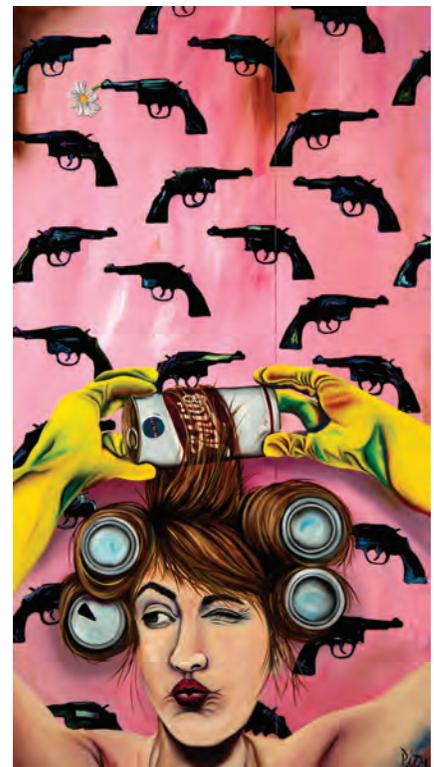
we're too busy learning how to use all the new things. When I was staying in Texas for my Navasota Artist-in-Residence program, there was a library one block up that still had library cards in their books. The librarian said I could take them, but it felt so shady sneaking them into my purse. I was going to just draw on them and sell them, but then I thought how significant it would be if I drew an element from the book. The response was so big, I decided I would like to see them go on tour to different libraries. I want them to be something that engages conversation, especially for kids. I want kids to look at them and for someone to explain how the cards were used and possibly the meaning behind my drawings on the cards. I'd like to have an interactive station set up where the kids can create their own. I'd love to do this in conjunction with the Hattiesburg Public Library.

JC: Why do you choose to paint?

HP: *I have no choice. It's a gift. Sometimes when I'm painting, I step back and can't believe that I painted it. The idea of creating something that didn't exist before I put the paint to canvas is almost touching. I try not to take it for granted. I had an uncle named Willie Willie Lump Lump, true story, who was an artist. I was about four or five and I traced the cover of a Charlie Brown book, and I was like, 'Look what I did,' and he was like, 'You traced that. Go back and draw it without tracing.' So I went into my bedroom and drew it. I brought it back to him and he was like, 'Holy smokes!' It wasn't perfect, but it was close enough. Right there, I felt power. It was my light switch.*

JC: There's a lot of ambition and drive that comes with motherhood, but it's often inferred such pursuits are at odds with its role and nature. Did you experience that and was there a point at which you said, 'F* it, I'm going to do this'?**

HP: *I've been raising kids and husbands my whole life. I got rid of all of them so I could paint. As soon as the kids were old enough, I began painting full time. Of*



WEAPONRY by Heidi Pitre.

course, I got the kids raised but never the husbands. I had to kick them to the curb. With kids, it's all kind of innate. You're making sandwiches with one hand and varnishing a painting with the other, but taking care of another adult and their crap is huge. I've asked my kids as adults, 'do you think your upbringing was odd because other kids had soccer moms?', and I'd pick up my kids from school covered in paint with paint brushes sticking out of my hair. The freezer of our refrigerator had globs of paint on it from me bending over at the wine box, but it's very endearing to them. I think they wouldn't trade it for anything.

JC: You're having coffee with 20-year-old Heidi, what would you say?

HP: *Don't waste your crush on Bruce Jenner, Bill Cosby isn't all that great and do not go to the theater to see 'Eyes Wide Shut.' It's not worth sitting there for two hours trying to make yourself bleed so you have an excuse to leave. Be fearless. Be true to yourself even if it means being a little selfish. You don't have to be everything to everybody. I don't regret my mistakes. I truly feel they have helped me arrive at my current destination. My main regrets are fueled by the lack of urgency to accomplish what I*

Heidi's favorite sno-ball flavor is pink lemonade. If you dig libraries and have grant-writing skills, do her a solid. Through Nov. 14, you can hang out on Front Street in downtown Hattiesburg and watch her work. Wine is appreciated, Malbec preferred.

want to say to the world. Say it. You can always modify it later or redact. You just need a really wide magic marker.

JC: What's your favorite piece in your last show, "Time & Flies"?

HP: *La Petite Merde, "The Little Shit."* I was a mean little girl. My best friend from childhood has a scar on her forehead with my name on it from me pushing her into a two-by-four. So when I look at that piece, it reminds me of this girl who's just looking to cause trouble. I love how the pigtails look like horns and the painterly aspects of it. I think it's the best painting I've ever done. It makes me laugh. It makes me proud.

JC: What's your best trait?

HP: I can laugh at myself. Everybody should be able to laugh at themselves. The last time I went to Denver, I had one piece of chocolate left [when in Rome or Colorado] I was saving for

the airport. I timed it just right and ate it before I got there. Denver's TSA has those scanners where you hold your hands above your head. So I made it through the scanner and started searching for my belongings on the conveyor belt, and the TSA agent came over and tapped me on the shoulder and said, 'Ma'am, you can put your hands down now.'

So I was walking around looking for my shit with my hands in the air for probably like two minutes.

JC: Last question and the most important: do you make your bed?

HP: It's the first thing I do every day. Every day. I'm not anal about dust or cleanliness as in dog hair all over the floor, but all my coffee cups have to face the same way, in a certain order. If you put a spoon in the fork section, I'm going to have a heart attack. So definitely, my bed has to be made immediately. I need organization so I can think about other things.



“Gorgeous Hair is the best revenge.”
— Ivana Trump

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Dale Chihuly, *Aventurine Green Chandelier with Copper Leaf*, 2008