

A conversation with Heidi Pitre, artist extraordinaire

Heidi Pitre is an artist from New Orleans, Louisiana, who currently lives in Austin, Texas.

You may recognize Pitre's work from "A Permanent Record," a solo show in Hattiesburg at the Hattiesburg Library in 2017. Also published as a 10-inch by 10-inch hardcover book, "A Permanent Record" is a series of drawings on vintage library borrower cards dating back as far as 1930 and invites a "conversation between generations for discussions of the past" and creates "interests by introducing old titles to new readers."

You may also recognize her most recent mural contribution to downtown Hattiesburg, near McLeod Street and the Thirsty Hippo, entitled "Suffrage." The mural commemorates the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment, which protects the constitutional right of women to vote.

Pitre's work often touches on the kitschy advertising themes of the 1950s, drawing attention to traditional women's roles in the household. She also introduces personal childhood memories, feminine overtones and strange stories while giving a sense of playful irony and intimacy.

I recently caught up with Heidi about her art practice and what life looks like in the studio these days.

RM: What does your daily art practice look like? I remember you saying once that you like to paint late into the night; do you still do that? Do you have any routines that keep you creative?

HP: I love painting late into the night, but lately I'm really relying on natural light to work by. It seems to make such a difference. Recently, I stayed up painting

late a few nights, and the next day I was shocked at the difference in my palette. "When I went to bed, she wasn't purple..." (I probably need to upgrade my lighting system as well).

I do find that when I'm forced to keep a schedule, I'm really productive. This happens when I go to the Mississippi Art Colony or a residency. The problem is, when you are participating in those opportunities, you plan to put everything else on hold while you are there. When you get home, there are doctor's appointments, laundry and grocery shopping. My other time-leech nemesis is social media. I regret it stealing my studio time, but I am so thankful that we have such great platforms to share art these days!

RM: A few weeks into lockdown back in the spring, I found that I had time to get things on canvas that I had been thinking about for a while. I also had a core group of friends that I hung out with in their yards a few nights a week. But in some ways, I felt unmotivated to make things and found it harder to be creative for a while. Did your creative routine change dramatically during the lockdown, or did it stay the same? What do you do to stay motivated and inspired to make art during this time? Have there been any positive things to happen with your art practice during this season?

HP: I'm so glad I wasn't the only one! I also struggled with being creative for quite some time. I felt terrible as I scrolled through everyone else killing it on Instagram. I think maybe I was in shock and could not exactly make sense of what was happening. I became obsessed with cooking and figuring out how to leave the house as little as possible. My



recovery prescription was to take a watercolor class. I have struggled for years with watercolor, so I finally took the plunge and signed up with a teacher. It really worked! I'm no watercolor prodigy or anything, but I'm liking it so much better than I have in the past.

RM: You recently completed a large mural in Hattiesburg; what inspired you to make this work, and what do you want others to take away from it?

HP: That piece has many Hattiesburg ties. Rebekah Johnson of the Hattiesburg Arts Council told me the story about how women had the right to vote in the '60s but not the means to go to the courthouse to register to vote. To help with this, women began setting up tables in places men didn't attend such as grocery and department stores. From this, I decided to create a painting of a housewife who appears to be going to the grocery store

with her shopping list but is secretly going to turn in her voter registration application. That painting was in a show at the Cultural Center for the Hattiesburg Arts Council in October of 2019. Mayor (Toby) Barker attended that show, and he was the one who had the idea to turn the painting into a mural. He also had the idea to dedicate the mural to all the women who have held office in Hattiesburg or Forrest County during the last 100 years.

I hope this mural inspires women of all ages to persevere. Without the suffragettes, women would not be voting today. Laws aren't changed just because someone in the legislature got a hankering to shake things up a bit. Laws are changed by activists and engaged citizens. I hope this mural reminds women to put up will!

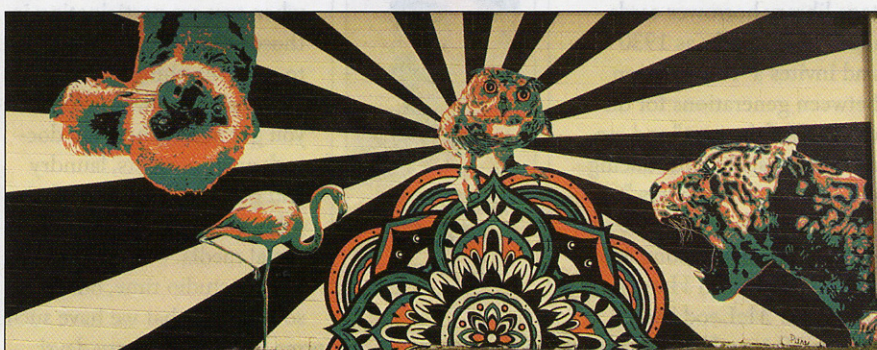
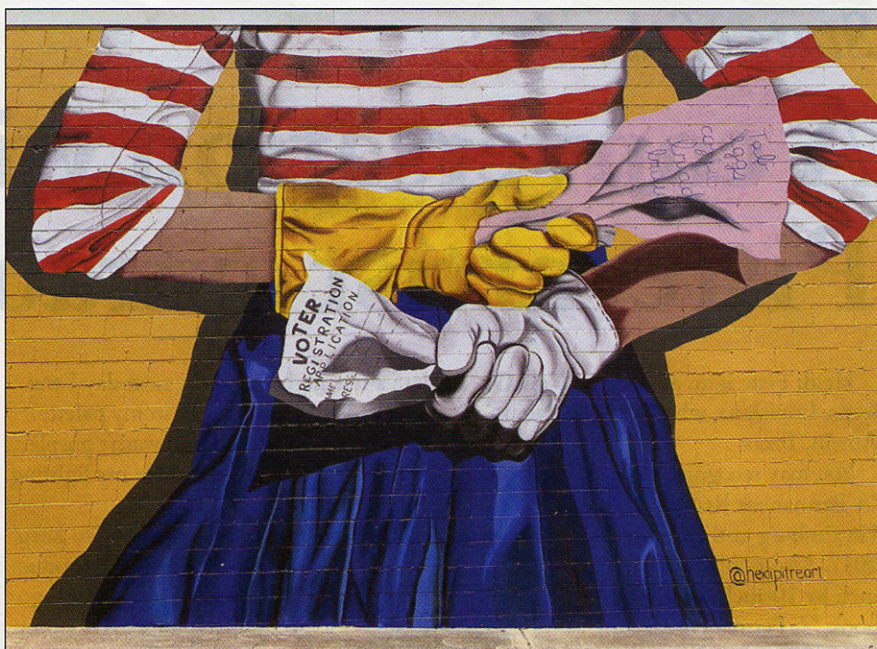
RM: You work a lot on canvas and paper. When did you start painting on walls? What do you like about painting on that scale? What do you like about public art, and why is it important?

HP: Hattiesburg's amazing dedication to public art is what got me started. My paintings on canvas were large scale in the past, but not near the scale of the murals. The suffragette mural is my third in the Hub City. I love how professional and organized the murals and sculptures are. The Hattiesburg Alliance for Public Art is doing a fabulous job of beautifying the city with both paintings and sculptures.

Public art is important for so many reasons, but I feel one is prominent. Geographically, many rural areas are not in proximity of museum and gallery access. A short two-hour drive gives Hattiesburg citizens access to countless art museums and galleries in New Orleans, Jackson, the Gulf Coast and Mobile. For that, young artists or admirers who do not have the means to travel across town, let alone to a neighboring state, this journey is impossible. Public art may be the only art they see until adulthood. Imagine this being the situation pre-internet. The local library provided some options, but that is very limiting when we are talking about the vast world of art that is out there waiting to be discovered and viewed.

I also love how it belongs to the community, it builds the community, and it beautifies the community.

It is available to everyone, and you don't even need a ticket to view it. It's great for



economic development, building pride and culture. It creates a sense of connection to our neighbors, encouraging a communal sense of pride and/or a message, especially in the current times. It's an incredible tool to share a message or an idea.

I am particularly fond of those who are spreading positivity and respect of others.

RM: How can someone find your art?

HP: Thanks for asking! My website is heidipitre.com. My handle across all social media is @heidipitreart.

Ricardo Moody is an artist in Hattiesburg and an art teacher at Presbyterian Christian School. Learn more or contact him at ricardomoody.com.