





By Ani Kodjabasheva

Riding on the Wings of Bees

Paintings like this one (oil on linen, 5x7 feet) from Schwartz's "Beeing" series are portraits of a subject that the artist has been painting since she was a young girl, when she discovered a hive of bees in the attic.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
CHELLO CRUZ

Jessica Anne Schwartz turns synesthesia into art featuring complex storytelling and bursts of color—with each piece offering a clue to reading another.

Jessica Anne Schwartz experiences the world differently than most. The artist has a rare form of synesthesia, a condition in which stimulation of one of the senses automatically triggers sensations in another. For Schwartz, this phenomenon is constant and affects all of her senses. “Colors register a mouth-feel and a sound. Sound registers a visual. Smell is both sound and sight,” she says. “Even my emotions have sounds and visuals to them. All of my senses are cross-wired.”

Making art became the way Schwartz made sense of her cross-wired perceptions as a child. “Sometimes I couldn’t tell the internal from external landscapes because of the visuals I was

receiving constantly,” she explains. “It was difficult to distinguish the sound of a cough from the sound of a word or a pencil dropping. They all had visuals. Imagine that someone is throwing lots of things your way and not having the hands to catch them all.”

CATCHING SOUNDS

Drawing became a way for Schwartz to catch and process some of that information. “A tool I used really early was taking the sounds I was experiencing and putting them all on paper,” she says. A look inside her childhood notebook reveals a young artist’s synesthesia drawings. “They all depict

sounds, and alongside them are the word shapes. That was a way for me to understand and become more able to listen and absorb. So, I drew sound from a very early age.”

Schwartz has continued this practice in a longstanding series of artwork called “Portraits of Sound.” These works, she says, offer as close a verbatim rendition as possible of the way she sees music. Drawing freehand in pen and ink with no underdrawing, the artist simply records what she sees. Shapes, she says, “will land on the paper. And then other shapes will land next to them.” She has described this process as “butterfly-netting”—seeing sounds and pinning them on the page.



In her **Chopin Nocturnes** series, Schwartz depicts music, which she perceives as a “mobile of shapes,” reminiscent of the work of Alexander Calder. For these pieces, she used pigment and ink on Murillo fine art paper. The piece on the left is 27½x16½; the one on the right, 20x19.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PHIL COHEN

Seizure (oil on wood panel, 5x4 feet)

PHOTOGRAPH BY PHIL COHEN

In her *Chopin Nocturnes*, which are part of her “Portraits of Sound” series, Schwartz draws musical pieces by 19th-century composer Frédéric Chopin (Polish; 1810–49). As seen in both examples (opposite), her lines are steady and precise. Smaller shapes unfurl out of big structural ones; edges are embellished with tiny spokes and crenellations. The parts fit together like machine gears, geometric and sharp—yet fine, like filigree, at the same time. The architecture of the music becomes visible, and it operates like a “mobile of shapes,” Schwartz says, referencing the wire sculptures of artist Alexander Calder (American; 1898–1976), suspended in delicate balance. In her inner perception, music is like a three-dimensional mobile spinning around.

GRAVITY AND LIGHTNESS

Another memorable synesthetic experience is evoked in the series “Seizure.” One painting from the series (right) shows a yellow color field with a red-hot center, ballooning and exploding as it engulfs the picture plane. Here, shape or structure play no part as the color takes over. “One of my early childhood memories was an explosion of this yellow sulfur that I experienced while witnessing my father’s first seizure in the kitchen,” Schwartz says. “It was before I had words, but I remember the colors and the way they moved.”

Schwartz’s father battled brain cancer for much of her childhood and eventually passed away. This, too, allowed her to see a dimension of life that may have been invisible to others. “I was like, wow, there are all these kids around me who have no idea that their life is going to end—that the body gets sick and that doctors split your head open and then return you home with stitches,” Schwartz says. “Understanding that at a really early age caused a lot of confusion, but also a sense of gravity.”



Like the shapes and colors coming at her, Schwartz had to learn to make sense of these significant life experiences. “I felt different. I felt apart, and I felt isolated. And I spent a great deal of time alone,” she says. “I didn’t have stability or a foundation. I spent a lot of time with the dog hiding behind the couch. Or under a cot with a flashlight; the dog and I slept there, and we ate there. Or, I was outside wandering the streets.” Some of those early experiences would later become stories in her artwork: The mattress spring she observed from underneath the bed turns into a colorful composition in

Lay Down Dream (pages 56-7), while a hive of bees she found in the attic populate her “Beeing” series. (See pages 52-3.)

Above all, Schwartz discovered that she could not only record what she saw; she could also transform it. “I was witnessing so much devastation,” Schwartz remembers. “I think maybe that’s where I started thinking, ‘I’m going to squeeze as much joy out of life for me and those around me as I can.’ So that’s a big part of my art. I want people to feel light in their heart when they see it.”

Synesthesia drawings helped



Clayfellow (oil on wood panel, 5x4 feet)
PHOTOGRAPH BY PHIL COHEN

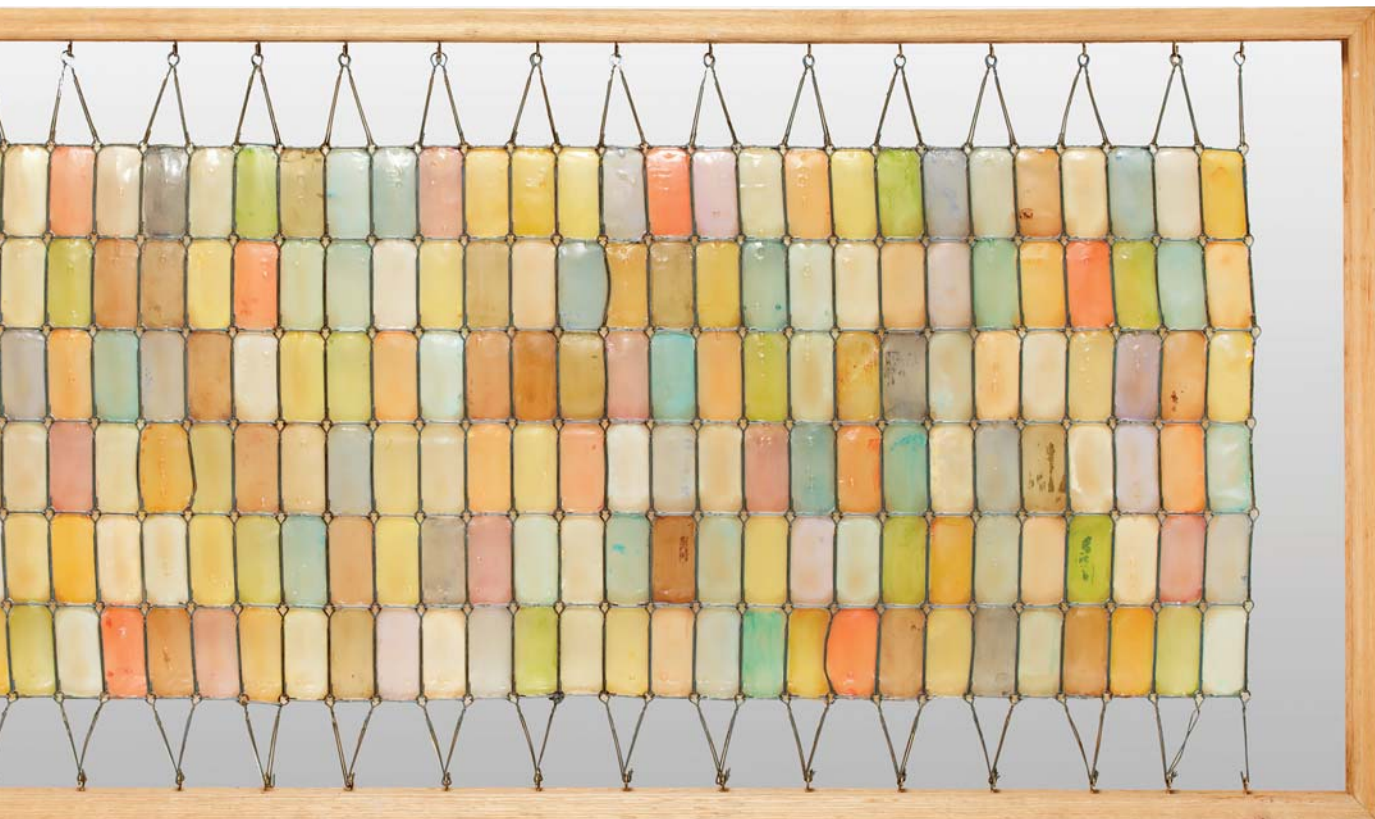
Schwartz translate what she was hearing and seeing, and much of the rest of her practice works on what remained unsaid. “I grew up with people who didn’t feel good and were sad,” Schwartz says, and she felt her job was to make them feel better. “That was something I practiced all the time, which could be why I still continue to try to ease the suffering of people around me. Giving others joy and levity is food for me. It intensifies and enriches my own experiences.”

As a result, a lot of what Schwartz creates is meant to feel whimsical or silly—with the goal of making joy, as she puts it, “grow all over the place.” The artist looks upon any situation

or object, no matter how prosaic, as an opportunity for wonder and comedy. Even the act of mailing her rent payment or her income tax return, for instance, has been a chance to share some art. For six years, Schwartz has been painting these envelopes with a cast of comical characters. (Visit bit.ly/3OO9T3M to see examples of her envelope art.)

She has found that even a filing system can be opportunity for comedy. A flat file cabinet Schwartz keeps in her New York studio, for example, has drawers labeled “Eyeballs,” “Scrambled Eggs,” “Pea Soup” and “Loathsome Shapes”—classifications only she understands, but which provide regular reminders to keep laughing.





Lay Down Dream (resin, mattress spring, pigment and wood, 35x80½)

PHOTOGRAPH BY PHIL COHEN



A COLLECTOR'S PERSPECTIVE

In her studio in New York, Schwartz likes to hold social events—a salon, of sorts—to bring people together with food, art and conversation. Discussion topics have ranged from science and philosophy, to art, film and writing. Schwartz says she invites philanthropists, scientists, even the lifeguard at her swimming pool. She also enjoys connecting with the people who acquire her work. For the artist, relating to people is just another way to create.

Dave Hunkins is an American art collector, currently living in Sofia, Bulgaria, who has known Schwartz for more than a decade and owns several of her paintings. Hunkins appreciates the way Schwartz engages with her network of art supporters to sustain her idiosyncratic practice. “She’s living in a very carefully self-constructed environment which is anti-banality,” he says. Schwartz says she likes to engage people in whimsical and profound experiences that reveal the wonder of the world around us. Hunkins describes this as a “multilevel enigma chess game” that her audience enters: The idea being that the more you discover, the more stories are revealed, and the more you see how they’re interwoven across different art series.

This suits the kind of collecting Hunkins practices. He values a connection with artists and their work that goes beyond seeing pieces in a gallery. “There have been a few occasions when I’ve bought one or two pieces from an artist who I didn’t know well,” he says. “But if I go back a second or third time, I have to know and understand a little bit about them.” He wants to engage with the story: As he learns more about what the work means to the artist, he can draw from this motivation in his own interpretation.

Hunkins especially appreciates studio visits. “If I go to a gallery once, I see the current show, but I don’t really have time to look more,” he says. “But when I visit the same artist three, four, five times, I see where they’re headed. And each time I look, I also look back on their old catalog.” In this way, he sees how the works are in conversation with one another. This makes each piece take on more significance.

Not everyone can maintain a lively open studio, but Hunkins suggests that social media can also help cultivate connections between artists and collectors—something he reckons will become increasingly important in the age of AI.

Dave Hunkins likes collecting work from artists who, like Schwartz, enjoy cultivating personal connections with art supporters. Her piece, **Seizure 82** (oil on wood panel, 48x36) is one of several pieces by Schwartz in his collection.

PHOTOGRAPH BY PHIL COHEN



Several years ago, in response to a breakup, Schwartz created a series of paintings of a single spoon, which she calls “Single Serving.” **Single Serving: 221017** (left; oil on board, 9x7) and **Single Serving: 081117** (right; oil on board, 9x12) are two examples. Feeling very much alone, the artist identified with a cast-off spoon she found in the street. Read writer Lawrence Weschler’s response to seeing the series, “The Art of Spooning,” which was published in *The Paris Review* at bit.ly/the-art-of-spooning.

PHOTOGRAPH BY CHELLO CRUZ

THE COLORS OF PARIS

Schwartz practices an elaborate daily routine meant to invite “as much enjoyment in my daily doings as possible,” she says. That includes hours of journaling, as well as yoga, swimming and cooking. “I carefully curate my experiences to be personally additive and externally contributory,” she says. The routine helps keep her synesthesia under control. The goal is to experience the miraculous part of how her senses work without sensory overload.

Recently, Schwartz moved to Paris, while still keeping her studio in New York. She describes the festive experience each morning as sunlight reveals the colors in her new neighborhood. “I wake up really early to watch the color commute—to watch them ride on the back of photons,” she says. “The colors in Paris puff out their chests like they’re in some kind of mating dance—like they’ve got a big plume of feathers. And they are very, very proud—and really full.”

The artist decided to move to Paris after an encounter in the city years ago. She remembers being overcome with emotion in

Luxembourg Gardens the first time she visited: “I began to cry because it was so touching,” Schwartz says. “It was so moving to me. I hadn’t experienced color on that level until that moment. I couldn’t move. I stopped in my tracks, head over heels, and thought, ‘This is possible?’”

It was a surprise to the artist to perceive even more color than she was used to. “I’ve had this relationship with colors all my life, and they’re my friends,” she says. “I’ve lived long passages in green, and I’ve spent years in orange. And I’ve been studying white since I was little. Colors come at me, and they inhabit me; they encompass me, and swallow me up.”

To discover that there was another aspect of color yet to be experienced was astounding to Schwartz. “It’s as if you have a very old friend, and then suddenly you see this new side of them that’s been there all along but for some reason you missed it,” she says. “And you think, ‘Oh, my God, I want to know everything about this!’” As a resident of Paris, the artist is now able to experience this burst of color daily.

WORKING IN MULTIPLES

The most surprising aspect of Schwartz’s work is how incredibly diverse it is. From drawings on tablecloths to land art to salvaged-object assemblages to oil paintings, she experiments with a range of forms and genres. Stylistically, her approach varies from the architectural precision seen in the aforementioned *Chopin Nocturnes* to the tempest of color and movement seen in *Clayfellow* (page 56), which Schwartz explains depicts the place where we exist between our body and our soul.

New series and formats keep appearing. Each medium brings its own agency, and the artist isn’t consciously directing how a piece gets made. She’s willing to allow the process to unfold. “A medium is a little bit like people,” she says. “You have a natural affinity with some. You’ll stay up all night just talking with them, and you have this wonderful conversation.” She doesn’t take credit for choosing her media, but rather credits the creative forces within her. “They’re doing it, and I’m just watching,” she says.

This idea of being an intermediary extends to the way the artist talks



MEET THE ARTIST

Jessica Anne Schwartz is a multi-disciplinary artist who lives and works in New York and Paris. She attributes the diversity of her artistic output to the “population of artists” who reside inside of her. Her various series of work are therefore ongoing and evolving. Her art is held and exhibited in private and public collections.

▶ TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE ARTIST, VISIT JESSICAANNESCHWARTZ.COM.



Hive (oil on canvas, 7x5 feet)

PHOTOGRAPH BY CHELLO CRUZ

about finished work, too. Schwartz often begins in the first person only to correct herself and switch to the third: The bees “land” in her paintings, the sound portraits “assemble themselves.” A series of monochrome blue paintings called “EllaLouise” came “barreling through,” wanting to be created, as Schwartz was riding the subway one day. “I couldn’t stop seeing her everywhere I was going,” she says. It’s as though her art has a life of its own. Her series are all ongoing and advance of their own accord.

INTO THE HIVE

Recently, Schwartz completed a new bee painting. In the midst of it, she explains, “These bees flew me into an area I’d never been. I thought, ‘Where are we going?’ And I was just watching them.” The artist has been painting bees since she was a little girl, but this was different. “I was watching these bees emerge from the canvas, when it hit me that, for the first time ever, these bees had taken me *into* their hive.” Schwartz felt like something extraordinary had happened in the

making of *Hive* (above). “I have goosebumps talking about it,” she says. The work sold quickly to a return collector.

Schwartz experiences no creative blocks, she says. Instead, she feels an “ever-sustaining flow” of creativity and uses her various media as “a vessel for its outpourings.” Her approach to art-making demonstrates where an artist can go if she trusts her inner experience and conveys it fully. ♡

Ani Kodjabasheva is a writer living in Sofia, Bulgaria.