

Squeak Carnwath: Life in Layers of Paint



COURTESY THE ARTIST

Squeak Carnwath's studio, February 2022

Contemporary American artist and educator Squeak Carnwath (<https://www.squeakcarnwath.com/>) (1947) creates imaginative, lush visual experiences combining texts, patterns, and images from daily life into vital, collage-like works full of color and nuance. Primarily focused on painting, Carnwath also prints, sculpts, and creates installations. Professor Emerita of Art at the University of California at Berkeley, Carnwath has received multiple grants and awards— including a Guggenheim fellowship in 1994. *Art & Object* spoke with the artist about her motivation and craft.

Megan D. Robinson: What got you into painting (<https://www.artandobject.com/news/history-painting-art-genre-or-manipulation-truth?>)

Squeak Carnwath: I always liked to make stuff. When I was four or five, I took out all the powdered things from the low kitchen cabinets. . . and drew in them, making patterns. I don't remember getting into trouble for it.



Portrait of Squeak Carnwath

Another beginning place was when a friend of mine told me about his kindergarten and how they had paint and clay (<https://www.artandobject.com/news/brie-ruais-inside-her-process-partnership-clay>) and naps and cookies– the whole thing. I was going to some academic kindergarten. It was awful. So, I told my mother and father I wanted to go to Christopher's kindergarten.

Then, when I was in fifth grade, I started painting in oils. There was an art class at night– mostly for retired people. This guy had a studio and a little art store. . . So, I've been painting since the fifth grade.



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Squeak Carnwath, *My Umwalt*, 2025, Oil and alkyd on canvas over panel, 65 x 65 inches

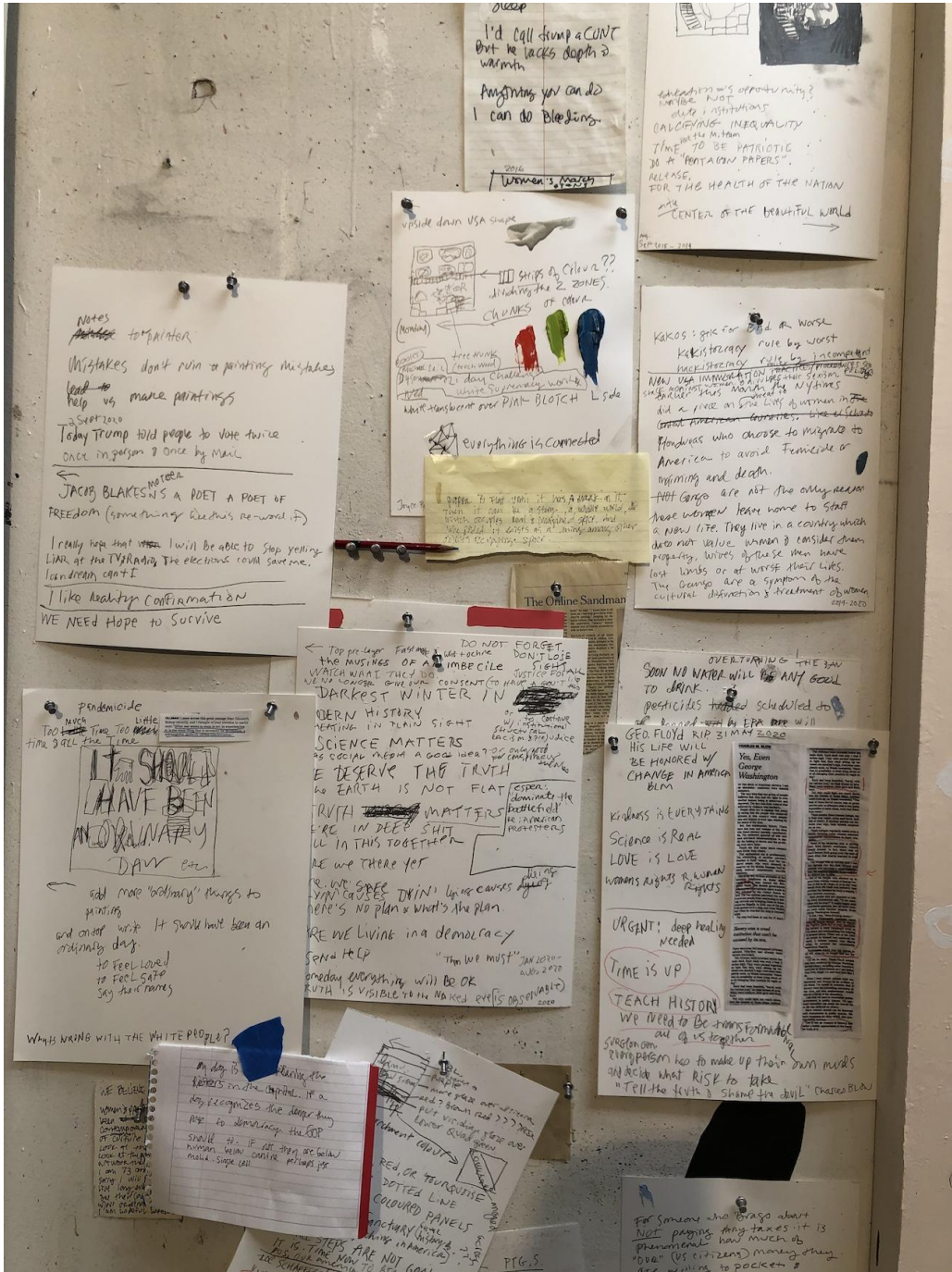
MDR: Your work sometimes has the appearance of collage (<https://www.artandobject.com/news/forgotten-collages-jeanne-coppel>), but you paint all your images. Why is it important to you that everything be painted?

SC: It's probably because I'm on some spectrum. I want it all to be oil paint. I want the pencil to be oil paint– there's a little bit of trompe l'oeil so it can look like a pencil. The lined paper (<https://www.artandobject.com/news/zeldas-paper-dolls-auction>) is just built up paint with lines on it. I just want it to be all paint– no wax, no paint stick, all oil paint. I like that.

I think we sort of live in a collage. In a way, our lives are made up of a lot of disparate things– related and unrelated. And, it appeals to my busy mind to have all these different things in a painting.

MDR: What do you feel your work gains from this level of painterly craft?

SC: I want the quality of the paint to be really fantastic. I like that challenge, and I want it to be really beautiful– to have a lot of subtlety and amazing layered colors. . . I work a long time on the paintings, and I want the labor to be an aspect of the content, or the subject matter (<https://www.artandobject.com/news/simone-leighs-monuments-subjectivity>).



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MDR: Why do you like to integrate words into your work?

SC: When I first started art school (<https://www.artandobject.com/slideshows/10-best-art-schools-us>), I tried to put words in, and I was always told "You can't do that." But, all my preparatory sketches (<https://www.artandobject.com/news/nerys-levys-sketches-climate-change-awareness>) had a lot of words about where something was going to go. . . I really earnestly started integrating language into work in grad school, when I made a piece called *Virginia Woolf's Last Letter*.

I made river rocks out of clay and wrote parts of Virginia's final letter (<https://www.artandobject.com/news/frick-sustains-its-oldest-affair-vermeers-love-letters>) on them- which she wrote to her husband before she walked into the river with rocks in her pockets. The gray river rocks looked like a gateway when viewed from above. Because the letter was so poetic, it inspired me to be looser and less literal about what I was doing.



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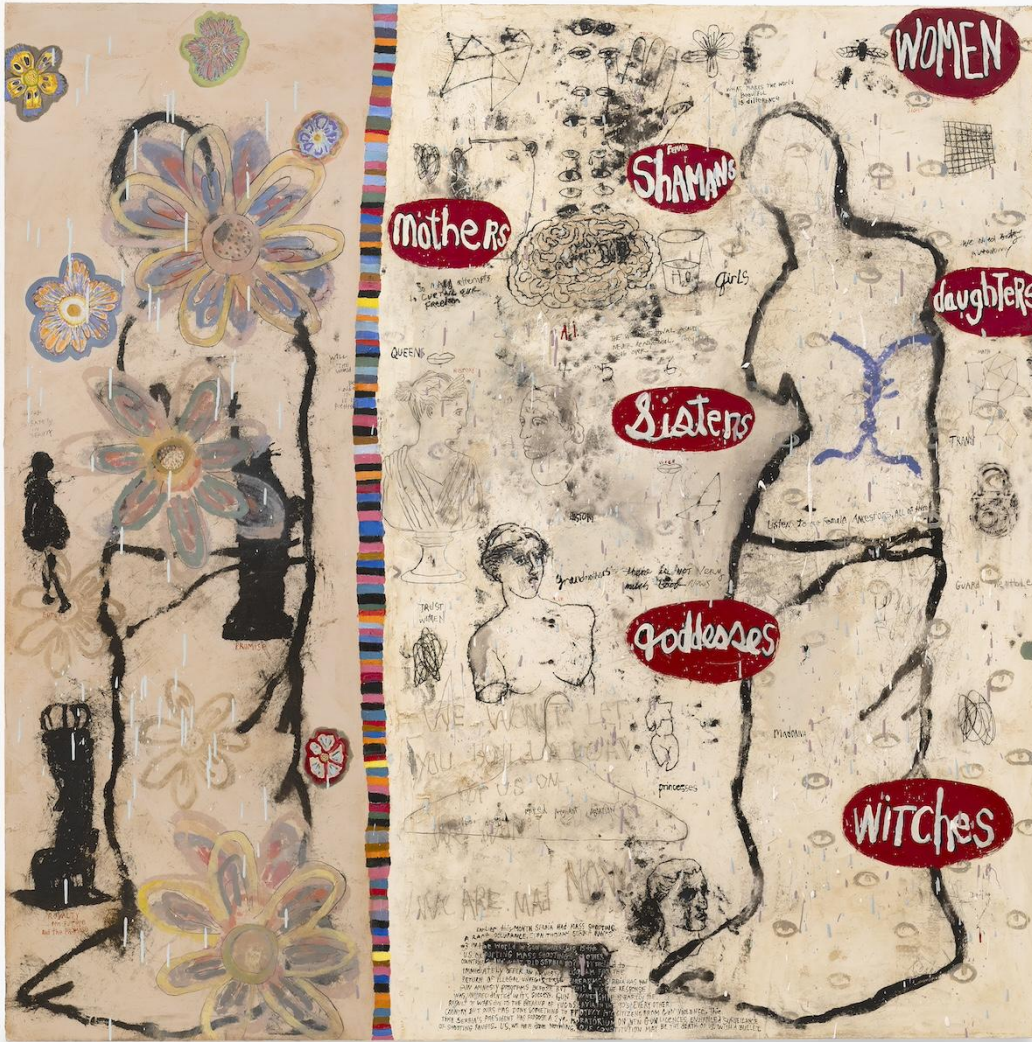
Squeak Carnwath, *Side One One Life*, 2025, Oil and alkyd on canvas over panel, 65 x 65 inches

MDR: Are there images you come back to?

SC: There are certain shapes that come up that often merge into something else, but they're really the same basic shapes. It could be rocks, which turn into polka dots. It just seems to me, I'm reusing the same thing over and over again. It either incarnates visually, really obviously, or it's an image (<https://www.artandobject.com/news/image-model-muse-explores-how-media-shapes-us>) of something that incarnates into a new meaning somehow. A cup can change— if it's upside down, it looks like a little mountain. The same images come up, but more elemental and different.

MDR: Is color important in your work?

SC: I love color because I think everybody responds differently to every color. I think it's really subjective. . . I'm very interested in letting my unconscious and intuitive nature figure out what colors (<https://www.artandobject.com/news/color-orange-cultural-history>) to use. I use colors that I respond to—they're very lush, and people want to touch them. . . I want people to want to touch them, because it brings them closer in some way— that means they're having an emotional response, even though they might not be able to articulate what it is.



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Squeak Carnwath, *Ancestors and Future Ghosts*, 2023, Oil and alkyd on canvas over panel, 65 x 65 inches

MDR: What do you hope viewers experience through your work?

I want them to feel like they're talking to themselves— to recognize themselves in the work. People have told me they feel like they're seeing themselves in my work, even though my work is not portraiture (<https://www.artandobject.com/articles/how-photography-can-reveal-personality-ancient-portraiture>). But, the feelings are familiar. I really want people to allow themselves to feel and see where it takes them.

MDR: You've said that paint is like skin, that your paintings have layers like a body does. Can you elaborate?

SC: Willem de Kooning said the reason oil paint was invented was to paint flesh. If you look at your own wrist, you can see that it's not just a flat color, it's layered with the blood, tissue, muscles, and veins. I want to make paintings that have that capacity. It's like skin, because you're layering it on. You can scrape it, you can bruise it, you can cover it over like you cover a wound— it's amazing. Oil paint is very sensual.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Megan D Robinson writes for *Art & Object* and the *Iowa Source*.

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