

## Set from Behind

Interview between artist Georgia McGovern and Tessa Granowski

Tessa Granowski: I'm here with Georgia McGovern. We're sitting in her show Set from Behind. It is August 24, 2021. Today, we want to talk about her practice and process and get to know Georgia a little better. And not embarrass her too much... So I wrote out some questions...

Georgia McGovern: Do you want the plates or the candlesticks?

TG: Yes, which do you like for a future apartment?

GM: A Room with a View.

TG: A window. So, the print that you did kind of resembles a window in your apartment, which is nice. When I came to meet you today, I looked up and saw, you know, [the window in print], although it's not the same.

GM: It's a version of it.



Georgia McGovern, Set from Behind, 2021, 6 color silkscreen, 44 x 30.5", edition of 15

TG: And this print is based on a painting that we showed in Montana, right?

GM: Yeah. The window is an invention inspired by other windows I've seen in the neighborhood, but certainly the one in my apartment, which is in an attic. I used to have an attic studio that was the studio of the painter Philip Guston. For that painting, I tried to kind of emanate that experience by using similar colors, similar Guston colors, so there's a muted, faded pink.

TG: Pepto Bismol-ish

GM: Yeah, whited down, chalked up.



Georgia McGovern, Guston Window, 2020, oil and chalk on canvas, 40x30”

TG: Yeah. And then, so there's another window in your neighborhood that we walked by. It's a former church, and I've now seen this a couple of times. In the Lower East Side, another church, now an apartment building. So do you want to speak to that [modification of space]?

GM: Yeah. Well, my neighborhood has a lot of churches. It seems to be one on almost every block. I live in Clinton Hill/Fort Greene, Brooklyn. And yeah, I'm curious about how these spaces are used, how they transform. Some are still places of worship, while others have been converted into luxury condos, and some are abandoned. And yeah, I guess I'm kind of fascinated by, or just noticing the city that's always in flux and taking note of that and rendering that in an image.

TG: Yeah, I was thinking about this the other day about walking by these windows at night. It reminded me of that Hopper painting, the one where the people are sitting at the counter, and you're looking into this divided sphere.

GM: Yeah, windows are kind of like the classic threshold, between an interior and exterior. A private space and a public one. But then also a built environment versus a natural environment. And then there's this status thing. \* I guess I made the joke earlier... A window with a view. Like, when you're searching for an apartment.

TG: The ideal situation, you know, might be like, a room with a view of a plant. Or some sky...

GM: Yeah, there's a painting that I made that references Casper David Friedrich, who is an early 19th-century romantic painter, and I don't even know that much about him. I certainly love his paintings, but he's not someone I reference or look at a lot. But when I started making these windows paintings, I remembered this lecture in grad school about 19th-century interior paintings and how he popularized the subject matter. It's interesting because that whole period is very much about the individual and the beauty of nature, and in a lot of ways, it's kind of superficial. And even these interiors are kind of showing off the artist's studio and wealth.

TG: I think his famous one is the woman gazing out the window?



Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840), View from the window of the artist's studio, right window, 1805-1806, sepia on paper, 12.2 inx9.3 in, Collection Belvedere  
Image courtesy of Wikicommons

GM: Yeah. So, I guess I wanted to study that painting. And I made a version, an homage, a study or transcription, whatever you want to call it, but I changed the view to be the view of the buildings outside of my window here in Brooklyn. In his painting, there's a seascape with some sailboats, etc. And then, in my painting, there is a wall of brick buildings.

Caspar Window, 2021 oil on linen, 16x12"  
Georgia McGovern, Caspar Window, 2021, oil on linen, 16x12"

Also, it's just sort of interesting, from spending a lot of time in Joshua Tree in the desert. And coming back to the city, I notice the lack of sky. The farthest you can see here is like 100 feet in front of you.

TG: Maybe even 2 feet in front of you... the sweaty back in front of you.

GM: Haha, yeah, I think that's why New Yorkers get obsessed with rooftops. Because they can finally have that. The space, the openness.

TG: Yeah, their tiny portion of sky real estate. Or even getting out of town! That seems to be another obsession of New Yorkers. They love to get out of town, and they love to come back to their city.

GM: Yeah, you need the break, but then you also need the energy and the hustle. Otherwise, you wouldn't get anything done.

TG: Exactly. So, you go up to Vermont a lot. And you've been to Joshua Tree now a couple of times.

GM: Yeah, been going twice a year for the last four years.

TG: When you've been in those places, it seems like you are almost making materials from plants growing around there and figuring out new ways to incorporate the environment into your practice. Would you want to talk a bit about that?

GM: Yeah, so I became interested in making my own materials to collaborate with my immediate environment while traveling or spending time in more remote natural areas. And then I continued doing that in the city as I started learning about making pigments. I realized that I could also use debris, like copper pipes and rusty nails, and even drywall, which is a newer discovery. The drywall material is made from gypsum, a mineral composed of calcium, which is what chalk is. Yeah, so I've been using chalk a lot.

TG: Oh, so the chalk is not store-bought.

GM: Right, like on the Guston window, it's drywall chalk.

Also, my former teacher, John Lees, a terrific painter, introduced me to walnut ink, which began my love affair with the material. And then I guess other artists who have used unusual mediums. Like James Castle used soots. And Albert Pinkham Ryder used shoe polish. But I don't know if that's true. But it's an exciting idea. But yeah, I like these muted palettes and these textures. And I love Roman wall paintings, like frescoes... the buildup of the surfaces.

TG: How many layers are some of those frescoes?

GM: I don't know, it's kind of embarrassing, because I went to Italy on this travel grant and did this fresco restoration project. And I don't even remember the order in which we tried to revive or remake some of those frescoes. It was ten years ago. \*laughs\*

TG: I think that's something that translates in your paintings, a kind of softness that some of these frescoes have. You're able to work on your painting and call it back towards a fresco. Although it's not, it's not the same process. But color-wise, I feel like they evoke that feeling.



Georgia McGovern, Excelsior 2, 2021, oil on canvas 21 x 11”



GM: Yeah, because I'm using natural pigments that have earth tones most of the time. They're almost alien to us at this point. All that kind of gives the painting more presence.

TG: So, this walnut ink, is that something that was that more from Vermont?

GM: I started making the walnut ink in Vermont. There are a lot of black walnut trees behind my parent's house. My mom is sweet--she collects them and saves them in the freezer if I'm not around.

TG: Her walnut Georgia bucket that she keeps.

Do you use the actual walnut, or do you use the shell?

GM: The whole fruit. The tannins come more from the fruit than the actual nut. But I just throw in the entire green ball in a hot pot of water, and after cooking it down for a couple of days, it starts to break down into an inky brown.

TG: Do you ever sketch with that kind of ink? Is that sometimes how you make drawings, right?

GM: Yeah. I usually start with a drawing. It's just a form of thinking for me, a very immediate process. People talk about this hand-mind connection. And so yeah, it's the quickest way to get an image, impression, or an idea down.

TG: Yeah. Kind of the opposite, it seems of maybe what you're doing with some mirror gilding. Like, once you put something down on that surface, it better be perfect, right?

GM: Yeah. And it's all reversed. So, in that way, it's like printmaking.

TG: Because you're painting basically on the mirror? Or on glass?

GM: Sometimes. Usually, you gild a piece of glass with metal first. Then, if you use a weak liquor, you use less gelatin, making the metal softer. Then you can remove or etch the metal and shade it, and then you can add pigment to that, and the color will come through the metal.

TG: Got it. Mirror gilding seems to be the opposite of drawing, the most final product.

GM: Yeah, and you have to be precise because the materials are so expensive and rare and precious.

TG: Sorry, I just threw that piece of information in there. So, you worked for a bit in a mirror gilding studio.

GM: Yeah, the fancy term is called Verre églomisé which means glass of Glomy.

TG: Glass of Glomy? What is Glomy?

GM: Glomy is the last name of a designer. Jean-Baptiste Glomy. He popularized this mirror technique in the 18th-century. It's a craft that's used in interior design. And it's how mirrors were made initially. So, by using a gilder's liquor, which is gelatin and water, you can adhere precious metals like gold leaf and palladium onto a sheet of glass. And once the gelatin mixture dries, the metal tightens and expands onto the glass, and then it becomes reflective, which is really cool. And then, as I said earlier, depending on your liquor mixture, you can make the metal softer or harder and draw into the metal—it just kind of ends up being an expensive piece of paper.

But yeah, I worked in a gilding studio. I did a four-year apprenticeship with one of the foremost contemporary gilders who only practices this glass method. At that time, I was interested in going into conservation. I worked on many architectural projects, making giant ceiling panels and doors and really elaborate decorative imagery that resembles, you know, stuff you would see in a museum and 17th-century French interiors.



Commission for a spa in Switzerland that Georgia worked on with Miriam Ellner Studio

TG: Like Versailles?

GM: Yeah, like the Palace of Versailles.

TG: And did that affect some of the paintings that you're making now? Or was that always in your practice?

GM: Yeah, I think that experience made me more aware of surface quality, material, and a specific time in art history. I work slower in the studio. I've always drawn a lot, but now I use my drawings as plans or diagrams for paintings. I think in Fresco painting, it is called a cartoon, not like the funnies but the full-scale preparatory drawing for the picture. I like that it's called a cartoon.

TG: You became more of a draughtsman?

GM: Yes, I guess so. I commit to making a painting once the image is finalized. Although, I am not sure if that's always an excellent way to work. I think painting is about leaving things up to chance and being open to change as you do the work. Time plays a huge part.

TG: Do you work in a way in the studio, where you're kind of working on multiple paintings at a time, and you kind of have to put some away at a time?

GM: Yeah, I always work on multiple paintings at a time. It's a way for me to not stay super focused on one painting because sometimes I'll get too obsessed.

TG: Sort of tunnel vision?

GM: Yeah. And then I kind of forget what it's about, or I can overwork it or lose the spontaneity. And being in a city where we are constantly stimulated and taking so much in, it can be hard to focus. I always discover something new, and then I want to go back to the studio and start a new painting. I'll usually stretch or prepare about ten surfaces, and then I'll just have a grab bag of different sizes. I'll spend like a month just preparing multiple panels.

TG: Yesterday, you were talking about reading about a moon-eyed horse. In that situation, you can be like, I want to make a painting of that. You already have a canvas. Or even the proportions in mind?

GM: Yeah. Not yet for that particular one. But, yeah.

TG: I'm still thinking about how to paint the horse's body. Horses are tough!

So, how has Montana influenced you in any sort of way?

GM: Right, so going back to the horse story. Whenever I go to a new place, especially one that I'm excited about, I want to learn about the history of that place. I've been picking up books about the Montana area and the West. The history of the colonization, the natives, and the local geology and ecology. There are two books that I am excited about that I read recently about the West. The one with the story about the horse is in *Desert Solitaire* by Edward Abbey; another artist, Wally Whitehurst, left it behind at Brackett Creek. And the other book is called *Young Men and Fire* by Norman Mclean (laughs). It's kind of a funny title.

TG: That was a site which you tried to visit?

GM: Yeah, failed disaster tourism.

TG: From an angry family feud or something, it seemed!

GM: Yeah, so here's the thing. I tried to do some disaster tourism. The Man Gulch Fire was significant in Montana. It happened in this pretty remote place near Helena. And now there's a memorial on the mountain, but you can only access the mountain by boat.

TG: There's only one boat keeper...

GM: Yeah, apparently, there's only one boat keeper. Or you can hike the backside of the mountain that is maybe 25 miles or so. So, it would either have to be an overnight trip, or you have to take a boat. I tried to hire a guide, and it was too last minute, so he sent his son without asking for his son's permission... but told me it was okay. And I brought out two friends to Helena, which is a two-hour drive from Brackett Creek. And when we arrived, the son was in a bad mood, and we were 15 minutes late, so he did not take us out.

TG: Is it something you can kind of see from a distance, though?

GM: No. I'm just going to try to go back again. And seeing it from a distance would not be the same as the experience of being at the site. And it's recommended not to go in the summer anyway, as the weather's extreme there. It's at least 20 degrees warmer than the Bozeman area.

TG: Yeah, even Livingston, about 25 miles from Bozeman, is the windiest place. And then Bozeman is more nestled in the mountains. Totally different.

And what was the other book you had been inspired by?

GM: Shout out to Wally; thanks for the book! Desert Solitaire by Edward Abbey. It takes place in Utah. It's about Edward Abbey's experience working as a park ranger in Moab. There's a story about a horse that has escaped his ranch because his owner was beating him. He lives alone, which is apparently unusual for horses. And his name is Moon-Eye; when his owner hit him, he caused him to lose his eyesight resulting in a cloudy eye. Moon-eye lives in solitude in the wilderness. Edward tries to find him to make him his horse, but Moon-eye is stubborn, never gives in, and remains alone in the desert.

TG: In Montana, which horse did you ride? You got to ride Azul?



Georgia riding Azul in Brackett Creek, Montana / July 2021

GM: Yeah, Azul. And Azul kind of reminds me of Moon-Eye. Azul was kind of stubborn and the younger of the Montana horses. Moon-Eye was described as one of the younger horses on the ranch he runs away from.

TG: Kind of the runt of the litter.

GM: Yeah, and he wasn't good at behaving or taking orders, and I saw that in Azul a little bit when we took them out on that ride.

TG: Definitely doesn't really follow orders...

GM: Yeah, Azul was more interested in just eating grass.

TG: But it's so good!

GM: Yeah, it's really healthy grass. Also, beautiful names for horses-- Azul and Moon-Eye. But I'm not a good horse drawer.



TG: Not yet! You don't have the practice.

GM: So yeah, I'm going to make some horse drawings.

TG: They have very strange proportions! Like a huge head, huge neck, tiny little ankles.

GM: I know! How do those ankles hold them up?

TG: They have like, I don't know. Cuz they have like two ankles. Basically. You know, like the bottom part of the leg, like bends twice. Fascinating.

GM: They have club feet. They have a concrete platform. Right? Plus the mobility of two ankles. Haha.

TG: What concrete platform?

GM: Those hooves!

TG: Oh, yeah, basically concrete. Hooves weird me out, man. The fact that they are like really long toenails. And they have to get clipped.

GM: Oh, I didn't even know that. See, I need to learn more about horses before I make a picture of a horse.

TG: They move a lot, though. You may have to sneakily draw them from the forest.

GM: Definitely, or I could study those Muybridge photographs. Eadweard Muybridge. That photographer who made all those photos of horses. He kind of helped develop the film camera. He was one of the first people to prove that all the legs come off the ground when a horse is galloping. And he proved that by capturing it in a photograph.



Eadweard Muybridge: photographic study of a man jumping a horse Eadweard Muybridge's photographic study of a man jumping a horse, from *Animal Locomotion: An Electro-Photographic Investigation of Consecutive Phases of Animal Movements*. Commenced 1872–Completed 1885. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, transferred from the Library (1991.1135.9), [www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org)

TG: And do you think it was a bet?

GM: It was a bet! There's a really good book by Rebecca Solnit about that. Yeah, it was a bet against Stanford, the guy who started Stanford University.

TG: The namesake! And Stanford lost [the bet]! Is that why he went all the way out to California?

GM: I think he went out to California because it was the Wild, Wild West. You could do whatever you wanted to. And there were a lot of abundant natural resources that people were mining. Striking gold, literally!

TG: That's why their mascot is not the horse; it's the tree.

GM: Yeah, I didn't even know that.

TG: Yeah, I made that up, but their mascot is a tree.

GM: Damn loggers!

TG: Yeah, I think for sporting events they have people who would dance around in tree costumes. A wild bunch!

So that was a nice chat. We talked about Montana; we talked about your work; we talked about it all!

GM: Oh, another thing I want to mention in regards to the material thing. My mom! I want to shout out to my mom!

TG: Shout out to Patoufa!

GM: Yeah, shout out to Patoufa, who will always and forever pick things (trash) up off the street. She's so resourceful.

TG: There's so much of it out there.

Okay, that's a wrap! Thank you, Georgia.