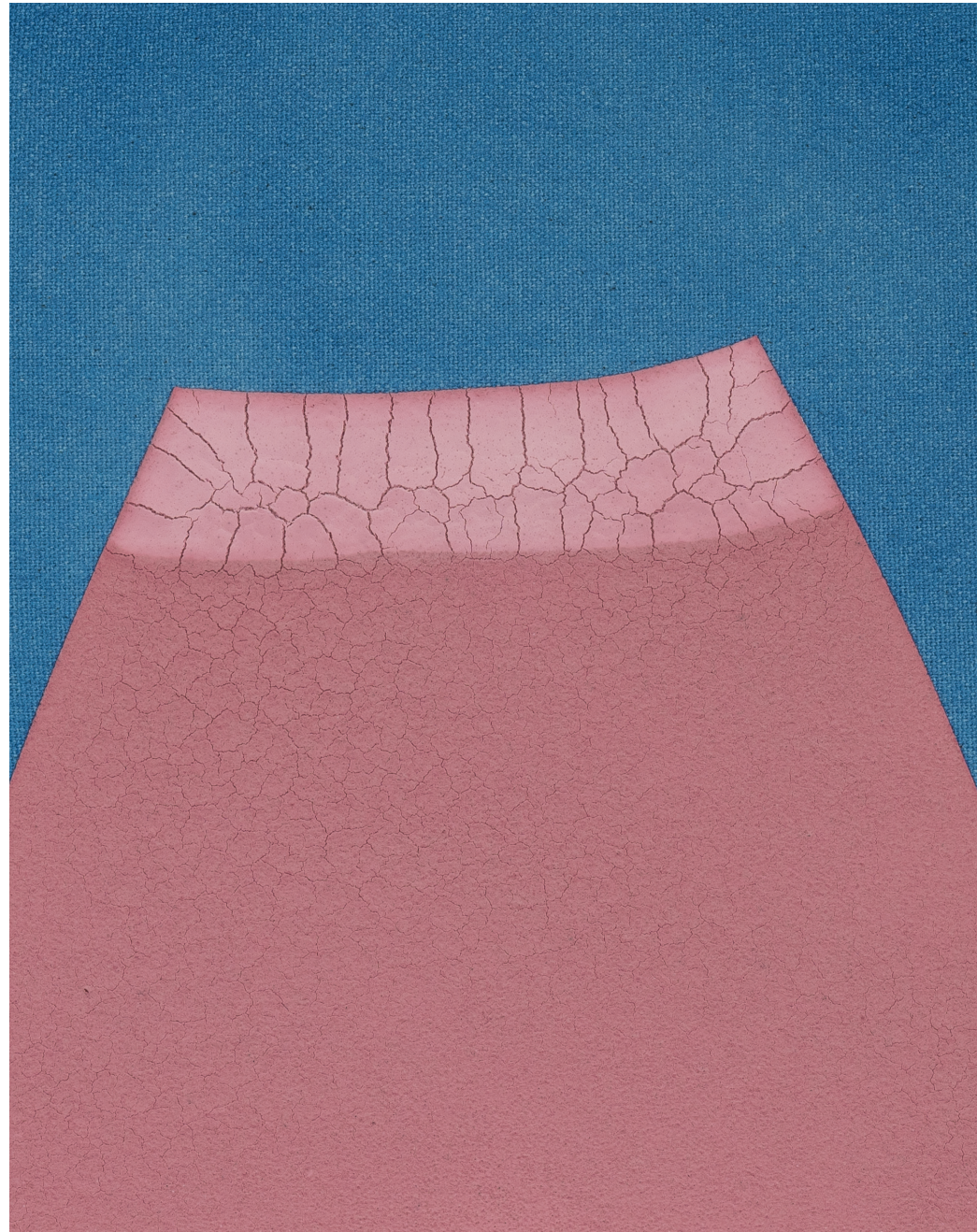

MAGDALENA SKUPINSKA keeps close ties to nature when creating her biomorphic compositions



Magdalena Skupinska
Pink mountain, 2022
Blue spirulina, beetroot,
arrowroot
34.3 x 34.7 cm

PLANT PAINTINGS

Writer
ALLIE BISWAS

Magdalena Skupinska
Tower of joy, 2022
Beetroot, arrowroot, turmeric,
chilli, blue spirulina, chestnut
54.6 x 54.6 cm



Magdalena Skupinska takes the natural world as her starting point, with materials such as clay, corn and banana flour forming the basis of her abstract paintings. As a student at Central Saint Martins, Skupinska, who grew up in Poland and has been based in London since 2012, experimented with organic substances, which she used to construct the pigment for her compositions. Curious about the possibilities of developing a painting practice that was multi-sensory, rather than merely visual in its objectives, the artist initially worked with spices, compelled by the scents that they would lend to her canvases.

Skupinska's experiments with colour, texture and form continued to evolve at the Royal College of Art, from where she graduated in 2017. Her works from this time incorporated pigment produced from flowers (rose petals, daffodils), fruit (bilberry, pomegranate) and

vegetables (taro root), resulting in paintings that exuded exquisitely robust hues alongside deeply textured surfaces.

Skupinska's most recent works, geometrically-focused images that are as candid as they are diaphanous, have expanded upon this vibrant visual language, which remains grounded by a research-focused approach. Playfulness, though, remains critical to the artist's trial-and-error investigations. For her exhibition at Maximillian William this summer, a new series of paintings will be presented, which only underline Skupinska's inventiveness as an artist. These vivid, multi-scaled compositions, which juxtapose streamlined forms against richly saturated backdrops, see Skupinska sourcing from previously unexplored plants and herbs, while also combining pigments for the first time, leading to a dazzling range of colours.

When did you first start working with natural materials, such as turmeric and peppermint, to create the pigment for your paintings? Was there a transition from using standard paint to favouring these other substances?

I first started experimenting with spices in my graduation year at Central Saint Martins. At the time, I was really fascinated by the human senses – especially the sense of smell. I wanted to make paintings that went beyond the visual. I did a lot of experiments, such as mixing my oil paints with essential oils, however the effect felt dull and quite artificial. This directed me towards trying out raw materials. Spices are available in abundance in London, so I started from there.

What appealed to you about producing your own paint in this way?

Initially, I was drawn towards the scents of these materials and that's what guided me through the work. However, with time, and after more experimentation, I started discovering other intriguing properties within these substances. Some materials would change colours, while others would remain the same. Each material would have its own consistency, drying process and pigment intensity, as well as possessing their own texture and tones. There was an element of chance and it was also a challenge. It involved a lot of experimentation. I quickly became devoted to this process of working.

How have you learned to manipulate these organic materials? Is it an ongoing process of experimentation in terms of reaching the correct texture and intensity, for instance, or is your approach more methodical?

It is definitely an ongoing process of experimentation. I am constantly learning as new ingredients enter my studio. The amount of plant material is boundless and so there is a huge spectrum of possibilities. I try not to work methodically in the studio, as I feel like chance and spontaneity are my best teachers, as well as the materials themselves. As I experiment, new things come up: new ideas and leads. So one thing takes me to another. It is a very playful process.

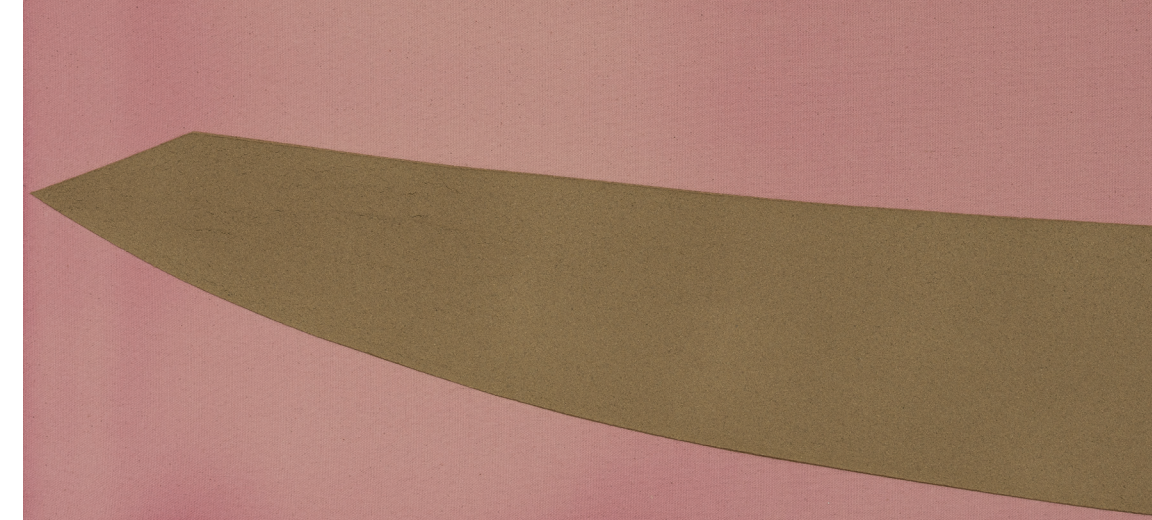


Magdalena Skupinska
Pollen, 2022
Indigo and pine pollen
55.2 x 45 cm



Magdalena Skupinska
Cake, 2022
Cinnamon, cloves, chestnut,
beetroot, turmeric, arrowroot
39.5 x 44.5 cm

Magdalena Skupinska
Long lasting peace, 2022
Pomegranate flower,
passion fruit flower
202.4 x 67 cm



As well as colour, texture plays an important role within each composition. You often leave the cotton canvas uncoated, or the jute weave is open and visible. You have also painted onto potatoes, which offers a much coarser background. How do you navigate the relationship between colour and texture?

It is often the material that navigates me. Indeed, the canvas is as important as the paint itself. It is a conversation between the two. Whenever I start working with a new fabric for my paintings, I need to undergo a series of experiments as to what will work and how. A very rough fabric will behave very differently to a fine cotton canvas, for instance. Once I find the formula, I move onto creating samples of different paints on that particular fabric. This allows me to see the full palette of colours and textures which are available to me.

I'm curious about the residencies you carried out in Dakar, Senegal (Selende Yoon, 2021) and Oaxaca, Mexico (Casa Wabi, 2018). How have other cultures informed your practice?

I consider travelling as a way of experiencing the habitats of different plants, and while London is a great place for sourcing a lot of different materials all at once, these materials are very much disconnected from their origins. The labour and the human-plant relationship is completely removed. For instance, when I was in Mexico, I was able to witness the everyday life of corn, chilly or agave. While visiting Dakar, I was exposed to the home of peanuts and sugarcane. These insights into the cultural and natural origins of these plants has given me a better understanding of the materials I work with, and this navigates me later when I'm working in the studio.

Let's talk about your forthcoming show at Maximillian William. These new works rely on a much brighter colour palette and there's a distinct variation in scale. I'm also interested in the development of your geometric shapes which feel starker, more pronounced, in this series, especially as many of the compositions consist of just one form. What have your objectives been with this new body of work?

This new work is my dive into the space of colour. Whereas before, I would only use one material at a time without interfering with its natural hue, this time I am mixing different pigments to create new shades in my palette. There are also a lot of new plants and herbs which I am working with. The process itself is still very much playful, as I am continuing to learn new tools with which to navigate colour-creating with these pigments. Moreover, I finally arrived at a formula where the whole painting process is non-toxic and plant-based. This is something that has become an important part of my work in the course of my practice.

Lastly, how does abstraction function in your work?

Each plant material has its own history and distinct relationship to humans, on a personal and collective level. Each one of them used to be a part of a living entity. Many of them have healing properties. My role as an artist, in this process, is to provide the space for the plant to meet the viewer without giving too much context. Abstraction allows me to give space for the plant to vocalise itself.

Magdalena Skupinska is on view at Maximillian William, London, until July 23, 2022
maximillianwilliam.com