

ARTIST THÉRÈSE MURDZA'S QUEST TO
CHRONICLE AND LOVE THE WORLD

CONNECTION AND TRANSFORMATION

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Thérèse Murdza's work cannot be contained by a single canvas, and her personal workspace is proof. The presumably once-white walls of the celebrated visual artist's Southeast Portland studio are sprinkled with a confetti of kaleidoscopic paint droplets and drips. Deliciously vibrant slivers of fluorescent oranges and pinks peek through the swirling splotches of salmon, Turkish blue, and moss green of Murdza's paintings. Her creations—ranging in size from index cards to canvases that tower over her head—line the walls, taped closely to one another and stacked several deep. Splatters of paint decorate the studio floor and Murdza's work clothes.

Although 'messiness' may be part of any artist's process, this mess, in many ways, is treasured evidence of the magic Murdza seeks to make with her work. As an artist, she thrives on her exploration of single moments, documenting them with paint, pencils, photos, and videos. There's an air of divination in the words she uses to describe her work and a deep sense of appreciation for those who take the leap with her. In many ways, she considers herself a transcriber—a witness—for the beauty of the universe and the wild expanse of it all.

"There's something compelling about noticing what isn't immediately obvious or in noticing what's in between—the space around something rather than just the thing itself," Murdza says in reference to both the near-daily painting practice she shares on Instagram at @tmurdza.studioart

and the walking diary video series she posts at @tmurdza.walking. "Yes, there are the petals and leaves of the plants I film, but there is also the invisible wind that causes the movement, the flutter. The shapes I paint around the figures hold the space. Much like the music we hear or feel, or the energies between people, I like to make the moment of contact visible and tangible. Touchable."

Murdza's art studio is an unexpected respite in a maze of the hallways and winding cement staircases of the stately, historic Ford Building in the heart of a now-bustling southern stretch of SE Division Street. When I arrive to speak with her for *Artslandia*, she is deep in the middle of creation, right arm stretched high, stroking the upper-edge of a hand-stretched canvas. And yet when she hears my faint "hello," she turns with a wide grin, positivity radiating.

“THE STUDIO IS A PROTECTED BUT WELCOMING SPACE. I PAINT HERE FULL-TIME, YES, BUT IT'S ALSO A PLACE FOR CONVERSATION, FOR GATHERING AND BREAKING BREAD, FOR DISCOVERY AND LEARNING.”



She wipes her hands on her paint-speckled black apron and welcomes me in. We sit on stools around a metal table and thumb through a rainbow of paint swatches. There's a softness to every word. Most of all, there's deep gratitude—a recognition of the privilege to have a life propelled by art, even in the face of the inconsistent and often-challenging business of it.

Long before Murdza picked up a paintbrush and lived in Portland, Oregon, she studied music as a kid in a suburb near Baltimore, Maryland. Her father was a public high school music teacher, and his decision to go to college and then to study music was an act of rebellion during a time when his working-class upbringing saw college as a path to becoming a doctor or something else 'useful.' Music students cycled through her early childhood home for private lessons with her dad, visits with her mom, or to babysit Murdza and her younger sister. She remembers being inspired by these cool 'hippies' of the early '70s, with their nifty style and infectious sense of play and freedom.

Although she learned many instruments—accordion, piano, and woodwinds—Murdza's own act of rebellion came when she skipped an audition for an undergraduate music program. Instead, she auditioned for and was cast in the university's main stage theater

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production. This set her on the path of earning her BA in Theater Arts with a concentration in writing and directing from Towson University, which in turn, led to a series of creative endeavors in various mediums, each challenging and satisfying and building upon one another. Her performances in and out of school opened opportunities for playwriting and then for the artistic exploration of written and spoken word that she nurtured into her 30s.

In subsequent years, and with the determination to pursue her artistry, Murdza moved up and down the East Coast. From DC to NYC to the Delaware coast to North Carolina, she wrote and pursued social justice activism and other meaningful work in LGBTQ+ bookstores and community centers. Then, a temp office gig at Duke University evolved into a long-held job as a Policy Research Assistant for a national program focused on the impact of traumatic stress on children and families. For the next decade-plus, she spent her days researching and writing briefs for members of Congress. This advocacy work by day sustained her financially as she worked as an artist by night.

During this same time, Murdza went through her first major heartbreak. “I went through the kind of heartbreak where you think it's going to kill you,” she laughs. “And for the first time in my adult life, I couldn't really write.” She remembers having a recurring dream of a particular shade of green and felt the surprising impulse to draw and paint. She asked a painter friend to show her the ropes. Through trial and error, she found “something under the words,” using paint and pencils to write words at large scale, transforming the curves and shapes of the letters. It's this deconstruction and distillation that continues to inform her abstract visual work.

Murdza has lived in Portland since 2006. What began as a summer visit has stretched into over a decade of living, working, and growing as an artist. And while her work typically focuses on the use of color, her *Artslandia* cover art was borne of an artistic reset between the activity of commissions and other projects with more vibrant colors.

“This piece is part of a series called *untitled series 1.02 / so let the sky look at you*. There's a warm clarity to it—a bold graphic but then the invitation to play,” she says. “Mostly, I do color work, but I think in some ways, color (especially bright color) can be a lot. My black and white or 'limited palette' paintings are a special invitation to pause and then begin anew. The vibe is like resting in the quiet power of the evening after a long day.”

Misty Tompoles, *Artslandia* founder and publisher, took notice of Murdza's work years ago. “Her large-format paintings are hard to miss. At once stimulating and calming, their allure is irresistible. The sweeping movement calls to mind modern dance, and I find myself similarly engaged and hypnotized,” she says. “Though her work is mainly saturated in color, I was drawn to this series for the elegance of the metallic and black. It felt like an invitation to opening night—the perfect cover for our theme this year: A Night Out.”



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Like her cover art, Murdza's own ideation of the perfect night out is a respite. "The thing about being a studio artist is that I'm inside my studio most of the time! So, what is a night out? It's being outdoors; it's walking with a friend, wandering at the coast, in the forest, or the city," she says. "It's being anywhere the sky can get a good look at me."

With six years as a full-time studio artist under her belt, Murdza looks forward to continuing to find ways to take care of herself and the world around her through her work. Sometimes that means venturing out of her studio and into community spaces, and other times that means inviting others in—both to her studio and within greater art institutions. There's a guiding sense of hope and belief in her own strength and duty to amplify more voices and perspectives.

"The studio is a protected but welcoming space. I paint here full-time, yes, but it's also a place for conversation, for gathering and breaking bread, for discovery and learning," she says. "I offer one-on-one mentoring to emerging and established artists and makers, often at sliding scale. As a white, long-out queer person, I'm interested in how histories are written and by whom. How do we leverage our resources to change the systems that hinder access and our collective freedoms? Who is at the table? Is it a table worth sitting at? How do we encourage each other to keep our hearts strong?"

As Murdza reflects on her own journey, she's grateful for the community that has rallied to support her survival as an artist and to nourish her flourishing: "I'm part of a loyal and diverse network of support that sustains me financially and otherwise—People who are as committed as I am to getting art into the world, people who buy and commission paintings, find me beautiful projects and show my work, [and] people who cheer me on through thick and thin. Artists do vital cultural work, but we're not usually paid a living wage for it. You learn to ride that stress around cash flow. I know the sacrifices I've made in some areas of my life create incredible abundance and opportunity in other ways." ☺



Murdza has several upcoming Portland shows, including one September 1–30 at Luke's Frame Shop in Albina and another in December at pushdot studio. She'll share a playful new series of paintings inspired by knuckle tattoos and her hand-lettered collection of over 300 four-letter words. Her studio is open October 12–13 and 19–20 in celebration of the annual Portland Open Studio Tour, or you can make an appointment to see her work. Learn more at theresemurdza.com.

66 HOW DO WE LEVERAGE OUR RESOURCES TO CHANGE THE SYSTEMS THAT HINDER ACCESS AND OUR COLLECTIVE FREEDOMS? WHO IS AT THE TABLE? IS IT A TABLE WORTH SITTING AT? HOW DO WE ENCOURAGE EACH OTHER TO KEEP OUR HEARTS STRONG?"

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