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Grand Rapids native and renowned artist Jacqueline Gilmore is playing with fire. Literally.

For her ongoing series of lit matchsticks, *Playing with Fire*, she has been studying flames of varying shapes, sizes and intensities. It has garnered her critical and commercial success. While honoring the accuracy of Realism, the paintings also encourage one to think more critically about our current social climate. Titles such as “Flamer,” “Hottie,” and “Match.com” evoke, with wit, controversial topics that have, she says, ignited deep divisions in our society.

“We have to hold ourselves accountable for what we say,” she explains. “Our words can do real harm, and cause real hurt. If we aren’t critically thinking about what we say — at cocktail parties, on social media, wherever we are — we are playing with fire.”

The combination oil and mixed media paintings of flaming matchsticks have been pouring out of Gilmore for over a year. Admittedly, she’s kind of obsessed. When she digs her heels in, she’s committed to an idea.

She curls into herself in an oversized leather club chair in her graciously warm studio on her family’s forty acre property, just north of Grand Rapids. The vaulted walls are lined with knotty pine; full-height windows overlook the sylvan ravine and pond beyond. The air smells of sandalwood and fresh linen. It’s reminiscent of a mountain lodge interior, but without any forced effort to emulate authenticity. This is a space well curated, and deeply personal.

Her rich eyes sparkle simultaneously with the intensity of her creativity, and the kindness of her spirit. Instantly you comprehend her depth. It is refreshing that she is absolutely not a cliché; she does not slip into self deprecation or cynicism. For an artist, one might say, a rare quality. Her outlook is overwhelmingly compassionate and optimistic. Her sincerity is as striking as the bold style of her diverse body of work. Surrounded by her work, she recounts the beginnings of her artistic life.

AN ARTIST IS BORN ... (ARE THEY?)

Gilmore believes that her artistic nature is intrinsic. Growing up in Ada, she recounts the variety of handmade gifts she created for friends and family as a child:



custom holiday and birthday cards, t-shirts, ornaments, toss pillows, etc. A raw talent, for sure, she credits her parents for fostering her exploration, and giving her the tools and freedom to create — in her opinion, a dwindling concept in our society.

“A lot of people say you’re born with it. Probably some of that’s true,” she says. “But I think it’s what tools you give children. Think about how early in life we pull art class out of education. How many times do we see young parents handing tablets to little kids, instead of something to draw or color with? A lot more people could be more creative if given the tools.”

She is quick to note that her parents not only encouraged her talent, but also gave her the practical skills to transform it into a vocation. She recalls working in tandem with her father - when the “country” look was en vogue — to sand, paint and sell wooden ducks he would carve on his table saw.

“Both of my parents were entrepreneurial business people, so they taught me how to market, sell and

make a living with art,” she says. “I think that’s why I was able to represent my own work, and own my own gallery, rather than always need to look for another gallery to speak for me.”

HER FORMATIVE YEARS

She began more seriously painting and studying the masters when she was fourteen. After graduating high school in West Michigan, she set out for London, on a scholarship, to study at the American College of Art & Design. Traveling throughout Europe and immersing herself in the Masters, she also studied at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Perugia, Italy. Returning to the States, she landed in New York, where she had previously attended one year of high school. While there, she turned to waitressing and other odd jobs — what most eager young artists experience — to fund herself.

She was stopped on the street in the city one unsuspecting afternoon, and almost immediately signed with a major modeling agency. The schedule was grueling, juggling the demands of high fashion and working toward her degree, trying to find her way as a budding artist. While she was deeply interested in the creative side of

OPPOSITE PAGE:
Artist portrait
Hottie
Oil on canvas
48"x48"

ABOVE:
Playing with Fire collection
Oil on canvas

THIS PAGE:
Ashes to Ashes
Oil on canvas
180"x90"

Lessons of the Bamboo
Oil on canvas
180"x90"

OPPOSITE PAGE:
ART-ECTURE
Enamel on Steel
with digital media



ative side of the industry, the work exposed her to the more unpalatable aspects of its commercial appetites. Her personality and humanity, she recalls, took a back seat to her continually-critiqued physical appearance.

"I kept trying to talk to people, be funny and sell myself, as an artist. But it was not about what was inside. What I look like is the least important part of who I am. It does not define me."

HOME AGAIN AND NEW BEGINNINGS

After returning to Grand Rapids and completing her BFA in Sculpture at Kendall College of Art and Design, Gilmore set out to make a name for herself on her home turf. In 1997, she opened her own art gallery, Riley Galleries, with her then partner. They were met with almost immediate success, and focused on curating a different art viewing and buying experience.

"We wanted to create a gallery that was not the typical, intimidating four white walls, with an icy receptionist, and no prices anywhere," she recounts. "We wanted to breakdown that vibe of a pretentious, out-of-reach art world, and make it more comfortable."

They represented dozens of diverse artists from around the world, turning different solo shows virtually every thirty days. But the demands of the administrative, sales and inventory pressures usurped her personal creativity. For years, she sacrificed her own productivity to run the business, cultivating and mentoring artists at the cost of her own career. So when life gave her the opportunity to leave the business, enter into a new marriage and start a family, she knew it was the right time to make the change. For the last 17 years, she has been a full-time fine artist, living and working from her wooded sanctuary, creating the art that burns inside her.

BUILDING THE BRAND

Though Gilmore was very experienced in the art world, and well-connected through her gallery work, she recalls still having to pay her dues in her solo career, working her way up the ranks. Early on, the necessity to sell and build a personal brand forced her to act as a "painter for hire," which helped to establish her reputation and worth. In those early days, it was just about the fulfillment of painting and the joy of personal expression — even if it was at the whim of the buyer.

"You certainly don't graduate from art school with a demand higher than your worth. You really earn your reputation through your portfolio," she says. "My first paintings were very Impressionistic. I was influenced by my trip to Gervernes, Monet's garden. I would tweak colors to a client's palette with their designer. Concessions that I am grateful that I don't have to make now."

Admittedly, those early days could be rough. Though doors might have opened to her because of her position and reputation as a gallerist, she still faced harsh criticism from respected voices. These critiques, though difficult, only propelled her to re-examine her work, reform her strategy, and to leverage the feedback to her advantage as an entrepreneur.

"I've faced a lot of "no thank yous" and "you're not ready," she recalls. "You do what you have to do to climb the ladder. Just like any job, you earn your position. You get promoted by the world. Thank god artists keep going, despite the criticism."

These days, the wife and mother of four spends her time painting year round, to show annually at Art Basel, the Miami arm of the wildly successful International program exported to Miami from its home in Germany. Through accolades, awards and several high-profile shows, she has earned the ability to do this, not taking for granted how hard and long she has worked to achieve this goal. Her showings — often of a large scale, indicative of her ability to create large inventories and massive, intricate projects — draw celebrity admiration and critical acclaim (for the most part, she says). It is a testament to cutting her teeth in the traditional art world, bringing along the lessons instilled by her parents (work hard, keep an inventory, always look ahead).

"If you're fortunate enough to sell art that you believe expresses your message, and you've made no concessions to make it, it may be more profitable

at these shows,” she explains. “At this stage in the game, I want to paint what I believe in.”

She has also shown at SOFO Chicago, Art Aspen, and right here in her home town, at ArtPrize. She applauds the festival for engaging the public of West Michigan with artists and creators from all over the world. Her large scale, avant garde installations can often be seen at the B.O.B., incorporating a wide variety of media. Her goal is not to compete for the prize, now, as much as it is to expose new ideas and innovative techniques to the audience. It can be an expensive endeavor, and admittedly the prolific creator has a cadre of unrealized installations in her vault, still awaiting the financing and opportunity to be realized.

PROCESS, IDEAS

When asked about her process, Gilmore smirks and shifts in her seat. It isn't that it makes her uncomfortable; she is eager to share the inner workings of her mind, grateful to be asked — that people want to know and understand how a fine artist operates behind the scenes.

“When I sit in front of a blank white canvas, it is intimidating. I think, ‘Here we go again.’ Then I start with the idea, the research, the sketch, the underpainting. I hope that maybe it will come alive like it did before.”

More often than not, it does. But Gilmore still spends the requisite time on the fundamentals; scale, light, proportion, form, shape, and color. Allowing herself to explore in a structured way helps organize her schedule, and treat the process like any other occupation. This is also an intrinsic part of sourcing inspiration for her.

“My palate has changed so much. I hope you would never recognize a color out of the tube on any of my paintings,” she expounds. “They are all custom-mixed. I'll just spend a day mixing different colors sometimes. It might sound weird to outsiders, but I just see it and work through it, before I put anything to canvas.”

So where do her ideas originate? The sources, she says, can be as random as a color she notices outside her studio, or as intentional as the social and political issues about which she is intensely concerned. And sometimes those ideas imbue themselves with a life of their own, and become deeply embedded in Gilmore's psyche. This was the case with one of her recent successes, the large format forest fire painting entitled *Ashes to Ashes*. She recalls that every day, she could not wait to get into her studio to continue the journey.

“It is like reading a great book,” she says of the experience. “You can't wait to see what happens next. [That painting] happened so fast and furious. I saw it in my mind for so long. When I finally began, it came out in about two months which is very fast for a work of that scale.”

And when the painting — her statement on the astounding rate of deforestation of the rain forests



to meet the needs of human animal consumption (she is an avid vegetarian) — finally sold at Art Basel, she was thrilled, but understandably in tears. It was an honor, but a bittersweet realization that she would (likely) never see the work again. Thankfully, her husband consoled her in that moment. He helped her realize the inevitable for all artists; you paint to speak a message, and when it resonates with someone, hopefully they purchase your work. One cannot keep everything one creates.

Some paintings, she admits, have a much less sentimental pull; they go nowhere. She routinely trashes her share of bad ideas, and has no trouble admitting to it, despite her longevity and success. Self-representation, she notes, is a difficult position to be in. Without a gallery as a buffer and backer, Gilmore must make the tough decisions on what makes the cut, and what does not.

“There are years I do very well, even making my quota with one show,” she explains. “And then

there are years I do not sell a thing. That can be heavy — you take a dive and start to question your value. It can be hard on your soul.”

She relates the feeling to a recent vacation to Alaska where she and her husband leaped from a helicopter onto a mountain, to ski blindly down a treacherous pass, guided almost entirely by the voice of an instructor on the radio, somewhere in the white vastness below. Was she slightly terrified? Sure. Would she do it again? Absolutely, without hesitation.

Jacqueline Gilmore is a force. Her work and life are imbued with the powerful energy that fuels a lit flame. She has built a thick skin and successful brand in a challenging (to say the least) industry. This accomplished woman is certainly adept at navigating everything life throws at her. Rest assured, there is no chance of this bright beacon burning out anytime soon. 🌟