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MARY WEATHERFORD with "Blue Cut Fire," 2017, a fusion of abstract painting with bright neon, at the David Kordansky Gallery. KING & KOVY Los Angeles Times

Artist's noble pursuit

With bold brush strokes and luminous neon, L.A. painter Mary Weatherford comes into her own.

By CAROLINA A. MIRANDA

The turning point was a Bakersfield sky.

Roughly five years ago, artist Mary Weatherford was driving around the city at dusk, a time when the heavens frequently take on otherworldly tints of sapphire, pink and orange, and the neon signs click on, one by one, their insect hums buzzing above evening traffic.

The sight inspired Weatherford, a Los Angeles painter who was then on an artistic residency at Cal State Bakersfield, to create a series of abstracted landscapes that employed ordinary paint-on-canvas in combination with luminous bits of neon light. In works such as 2012's "Ruby II (Thrifty Mart)," overlapping pools of diaphanous blue and orange paint are divided by the brilliant line of red neon tube that hovers over the surface of the canvas.

The works, says Weatherford, are "about what's going in the peripheral vision. It's motion."

The pieces aren't so much literal portraits of place as they are broad evocations — a physical embodiment of the sensation one gets tooling along a broad avenue in the San Joaquin Valley as the sun dissolves into the horizon.

"I hold an experience in my head," she adds. "What's the experience? What's the experience? And I paint that experience."

Weatherford is tall and graceful, with a mane of red-brown hair that cascades below her shoulders. The Ojai-born artist is most delighted when she is talking about painting, that of others and her own: The works by Diego Velazquez she saw on a recent trip to Madrid. The Belgian linen she uses as canvas. The alchemical fusions of color, light and material that compose a piece.

"Purple is so hard," she says, as she places herself on a chair at the David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles, where she is currently showing more than a dozen new works. "[Mark] Rothko is the mastermind of purple."

The exhibition shows Weatherford pushing her technique in new directions: Letting her colorful forms dance in looser arrangements and working at a larger scale. A suite of four paintings in the north gallery extends to a length of almost 20 feet, some bearing pieces of neon so impossibly elongated, they take on a thread-like fragility.

"When you pick it up, it's like a piece of spaghetti," she says, gesturing toward a length of blue neon. "Glass bends. I can't even watch."

These pieces represent an important moment in her career.

'Nothing girly'

For all of her adult life, she has steadily made art, even as she took on various day jobs to support herself: working in a bookstore, an art gallery and for other artists. "Art has been my through line," she says. "I've never stopped painting no matter what was happening."

When she was starting out in the late 1980s, she tackled appropriation. In subsequent years, Weatherford turned her attention to landscape, both urban and wild, creating paintings that featured sky, caves and tangled vegetation. Throughout her career, her work has drawn critical notice. (In 1990, New York Times critic Roberta Smith reviewed an early show, describing her sense of color as "unusual and promising.")

But since 2012, when Weatherford began incorporating neon into her increasingly expressive canvases, her work has drawn a heightened level of interest from the art world.

The Bakersfield paintings were shown in art spaces in Los Angeles and New York. By 2013, she had signed on with Kordansky. The following year, the Museum of Modern Art in New York included a number of her works in the exhibition "The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World." The painting "the light in Lancaster," after the Mojave Desert town known for its blooms of wild poppies, was featured in the exhibition catalog.

"It's easy to make an abstract painting," says Laura Hoptman, the MoMA curator who organized the show. "It's very hard to make a very good abstract painting."

But when she saw Weatherford's neon-studded works at a small downtown Manhattan gallery in 2012, she says she was floored.

"They made an enormous impression," she says. "There is this strength and ambition. There is

nothing girly and pretty about it. There is a muscular and deliberate quality to the way that she is moving paint around."

In 2019, the artist will be the subject of her first retrospective at Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. Kordansky, who acquired one of the painter's works in 2012, before he represented her professionally, says Weatherford has traveled an intriguing arc.

"She didn't have a fixed way of working," he explains via email. "When you look back over the last 30 years, she's consistently defied expectations and pushed boundaries, which isn't easy to do in a discipline as practiced as painting."

A 'frightening' Van Gogh

A 'frightening' Van Gogh Weatherford, in the meantime, is more intrigued by discussions relating to painting than her career: The brush she purchased in Rome, the vinyl-based paint that leaves whorls of color on her canvases, the large-scale paintings she studied before she began to make large works of her own. (In addition to visiting works by Velazquez on her recent trip to Spain, she spent ample time dissecting Picasso's "Guernica" and El Greco's "The Burial of the Count of Orgaz.")

"I'm interested in the experiential quality of a large painting," she says. "Gigantic paintings that one can relate to with one's body rather than with one's eyes or mind."

Weatherford was born in Ojai, but when she was 3, her family relocated to Los Angeles

Baldwin Hills. Roughly seven years later, they moved to San Diego. Her father was an Episcopal priest; her mother, who studied history at Stanford, ran the household — no small job in a family with five children.

Art and artists, she says, were always part of the mix, even in her early childhood years in eccentric Ojai of the 1960s.

The first painting she remembers seeing was a piece by Franklin Fireshaker, an Ojai artist of Ponca heritage known for chronicling aspects of indigenous ritual.

"They were these great, swirling, peyote-inspired works," she recalls. "They were so magical to me."

From childhood visits back to Ojai, Weatherford has memories of a family that lived in a stone castle and another that inhabited a home designed by Lloyd Wright. "I think that's where I got my love of Modernism," she says.

During her family's Los Angeles years, there were regular visits to the rose garden at Exposition Park and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. During a Van Gogh exhibition, she remembers her father holding her up in front of the painter's "Wheatfield with Crows," from 1890, so she could examine it closely.

"He told me, 'This is the most frightening painting I've seen in my life,'" says Weatherford. "As a child, you say, 'I'm going to consider this and consider what's frightening about it.' I really looked. It's a very frightening painting."

She attended Princeton University as a way of getting out of California. "I loved seasons and



"ANIMALS" from 2017 is flashe and neon on linen. More than a dozen of her works are on display at the David Kordansky Gallery. The exhibition shows Weatherford pushing her technique in new directions. FREDRIK NILSEN

'Mary Weatherford: like the land loves the sea'

Where: David Kordansky Gallery, 5130 W. Edgewood Place, Mid-Wilshire, Los Angeles
When: Through May 6
Info: davidkordanskygallery.com

seeing snow and the East Coast and history," she says. "When I flew to New York City, I was like, 'Wow, this is cool!' I wanted to be near Broadway and the theater."

At Princeton, she was introduced to the work of conceptual artists who would make her rethink the nature of art — in particular, the photographer Sherrie Levine, an appropriation artist known for re-photographing famous works of art by figures such as Walker Evans. Weatherford says she was intrigued by the idea of authorship and how it could be claimed as an artistic gesture —

and the ways in which a woman, claiming a man's work, could resonate in poignant ways.

"I thought the [After] Walker Evans' series was end-game work," she says. "Really strong, feminist work."

After she graduated in 1984 with a degree in visual arts and art history, Weatherford settled in New York City, where she completed the Whitney Independent Study Program, and much later, a master of fine arts at Bard College. In a small apartment on the Upper West Side, she made art — in the early days, color experiments inspired by the works of Modernist Josef Albers — and worked a succession of day jobs.

Among the most intriguing: a gig at the Paula Cooper Gallery, where she helped organize the image archives.

"I saw every Elizabeth Murray ever made," she says. "Every Carl Andre ever made. Every Donald Judd ever made ... I met Elizabeth Murray, who was very supportive of my work. The roster was legendary. It was the height of awesome Paula Cooper-ness."

She returned to Los Angeles in 1999, where she continued to work and paint and show her work in galleries in Los Angeles, as well as in places such as Chicago and New York. In 2008, she was featured in the California Biennial at the Orange County Museum of Art.

Then came Bakersfield — and the moment in which Weatherford threw painterly caution to

Not a beer sign

the wind and had the audacity to place neon tubes, their artfully arranged electrical cords in full view, on top of her paintings.

"If the wires ran behind the painting, you'd have a beer sign, not a painting," she says. "Nothing is hidden."

The wires' looping forms, in fact, evoke the delicate, latex rope installations of Eva Hesse. "I was a sculptor when I was an undergraduate," says Weatherford with a wry smile, revealing that nothing in her work is unintentional.

Since 2012, the artist has created paint-and-neon works inspired

by the tones and light of New York City, as well the less conspicuous corners of Los Angeles: Pico Rivera, Artesia and Oxnard.

"I've never wanted to make paintings about Sunset Boulevard or the center of Los Angeles," she explains. "I was more interested in the edges of Los Angeles."

The new works at Kordansky feature a more indirect take on her experiences of her environment, but here and there, a title reveals a location — such as "Arroyo walk," from 2017, a vertical canvas that features the steely grey of L.A.'s concrete river banks and a slash of orange that hearkens to construction barricades. A single tube of white neon emerges from a pool of greenish blue.

"They're sublime explorations of atmosphere, ambience and light," says Kordansky. "They're also commitments of an emotional, subjective kind — physical reflections of moods and positions. They're diaristic indexes of life lived, personal but also political."

At the Marian Miner Cook Athenaeum at Claremont McKenna College hangs a large-scale

work from 2014 titled "From the mountain to the sea," which features a roiling mass of inky blues sliced by yellow and white neon lights — godly nature and human artifice on their endless collision course.

Weatherford says she is intrigued by the nature of an atmosphere at a given point in time.

"[Explorer Giovanni di] Verazzano's entry into New York Harbor and meeting the Native Americans — he writes about what a lovely day it was," she says. "I'm always interested in the weather, what the weather was at a certain time."

"The night the Watts Riots started, it was 8 o'clock and 71 degrees."

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